

Re-enchanting the World

Feminism and the Politics
of the Commons

Silvia Federici



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On Primitive Accumulation, Globalization, and Reproduction

Rethinking Primitive Accumulation

Starting with the 1990 issue of *Midnight Notes* on the “new enclosures,”¹ followed by David Harvey’s theory of “accumulation by dispossession”² and by the many essays on primitive accumulation that have been published in the *Commoner*,³ an extensive body of literature has explored the political meaning of this concept and applied it to an analysis of ‘globalization.’ Artists have contributed to this process. An outstanding example is the 2010 Potosí Principle exhibit presented by German, Bolivian, and Spanish artists and curators,⁴ who worked to demonstrate the continuity between the imagery found in several sixteenth-century colonial paintings produced in the Andean region at the peak of primitive accumulation in the ‘New World’ and the imagery coming from the ‘new enclosures’ that have been central to the globalization program. The work of feminist writers like Maria Mies, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Claudia von Werlhof, who recognized “the extent to which [the] modern political economy, up to the present, builds upon the producers’, men’s, and even more so women’s, permanent worldwide expropriation and deprivation of power” has also been very important in this context.⁵

Thanks to these studies and artistic contributions we now recognize that primitive accumulation is not a one-time historical event confined to the origins of capitalism, as the point of departure of ‘accumulation proper.’ It is a phenomenon constitutive of capitalist relations at all times, eternally recurrent, “part of the continuous process of capitalist accumulation”⁶ and “always contemporaneous with its expansion.”⁷ This does not mean that primitive accumulation can be ‘normalized’ or that we should

underplay the importance of those moments in history—the times of clearances, wars, imperial drives “when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence and hurled onto the labor market as free, unprotected and right-less proletarians.”⁸

It means, however, that we should conceive the ‘separation of the producer from the means of production’—for Marx the essence of primitive accumulation—as something that has to be continuously reenacted, especially in times of capitalist crisis, when class relations are challenged and have to be given new foundations. Contrary to Marx’s view that with the development of capitalism a working class comes into existence that views capitalist relations as “self-evident natural laws,”⁹ violence—the secret of primitive accumulation in Marx¹⁰—is always necessary to establish and maintain the capitalist work discipline. Not surprisingly, in response to the culmination of an unprecedented cycle of struggle—anticolonial, blue-collar, feminist—in the 1960s and 1970s, primitive accumulation became a global and seemingly permanent process,¹¹ with economic crises, wars, and massive expropriations now appearing in every part of the planet as the preconditions for the organization of production and accumulation on a world scale. It is a merit of the political debates that I have mentioned that we can now better understand the “nature of the enclosing force that we are facing,”¹² the logic by which it is driven, and its consequences for us. For to think of the world political economy through the prism of primitive accumulation is to place ourselves immediately on a battlefield.

But to fully comprehend the political implications of this development we must expand the concept of primitive accumulation beyond Marx’s description in more than one way. We must first acknowledge that the history of primitive accumulation cannot be understood from the viewpoint of an abstract universal subject. For an essential aspect of the capitalist project has been the disarticulation of the social body, through the imposition of different disciplinary regimes producing an accumulation of ‘differences’ and hierarchies that profoundly affect how capitalist relations are experienced. We, therefore, have different histories of primitive accumulation, each providing a particular perspective on capitalist relations necessary to reconstruct their totality and unmask the mechanisms by which capitalism has maintained its power. This means that the history of primitive accumulation past and present cannot be fully comprehended until it is written not only from the viewpoint of the future or former waged workers, but from the viewpoint of the enslaved,

the colonized, the indigenous people whose lands continue to be the main target of the enclosures, and the many social subjects whose place in the history of capitalist society cannot be assimilated into the history of the waged.

This was the methodology that I used in *Caliban and the Witch* to analyze primitive accumulation from the viewpoint of its effects on 'women,' the 'body,' and the production of labor power, arguing that this approach gives us a much broader understanding of the historical processes that have shaped the rise of capitalism than we gain from Marx's work, where the discussion of primitive accumulation centers on preconditions for the formation of waged labor.¹³

Two processes in particular have been most essential from a historical and methodological viewpoint: (a) the constitution of reproduction work—that is the work of reproducing individuals and labor power—as 'women's labor' and as a separate social sphere, seemingly located outside the sphere of economic relations and, as such, devalued from a capitalist viewpoint, a development coeval with the separation of the peasantry from the land and the formation of a commodity market; (b) the institutionalization of the state's control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacity, through the criminalization of abortion and the introduction of a system of surveillance and punishment that literally expropriates women's bodies.

Both these developments, which have been characteristic of the extension of capitalist relations in every historical period, have had crucial social consequences. The expulsion of reproductive work from the spheres of economic relations and its deceptive relegation to the sphere of the 'private,' the 'personal,' 'outside' of capital accumulation, and, above all, 'feminine' has made it invisible as work and has naturalized its exploitation.¹⁴ It has also been the basis for the institution of a new sexual division of labor and a new family organization, subordinating women to men and further socially and psychologically differentiating women and men. At the same time, the state's appropriation of women's bodies and their reproductive capacity was the beginning of its regulation of 'human resources,' its first 'biopolitical' intervention, in the Foucauldian sense of the word,¹⁵ and its contribution to the accumulation of capital insofar as this is essentially the multiplication of the proletariat.¹⁶

As I have shown, the witch hunts that took place in many countries of Europe and the Andean regions in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries, leading to the execution of hundreds of thousands of women, were fundamental to this process. None of the historic changes in the organization of reproductive work that I have outlined would have been possible or would be possible today without a major attack on the social power of women, in the same way as capitalist development could not have succeeded without the slave trade or the conquest of the Americas without a relentless imperial drive continuing to this day and the construction of a web of racial hierarchies that have effectively divided the world proletariat.

Primitive Accumulation and the Restructuring of Social Reproduction in the Global Economy

It is with these assumptions and this theoretical framework in mind that, in this essay, I analyze 'globalization' as a process of primitive accumulation, this time imposed on a global scale. This view undoubtedly is at odds with the neoliberal theory that celebrates the expansion of capitalist relations as evidence of a 'democratization' of social life. But it is also in contrast to the Marxist autonomists' view of the restructuring of the global economy, which, focusing on the computer and information revolution and the rise of cognitive capitalism, describes this phase of capitalist development as a step toward the autonomization of labor.¹⁷ I propose, instead, that the pillar of this restructuring has been a concerted attack on our most basic means of reproduction, the land, the house, and the wage, aiming to expand the global workforce and drastically reduce the cost of labor.¹⁸ Structural adjustment, the dismantling of the welfare state, the financialization of reproduction, leading to the debt and mortgage crisis, and war: different policies have been required to activate the new accumulation drive. But in each case it has entailed the destruction of our 'common wealth,' and it has made no difference that over the years its architects have multiplied with the arrival of China and other emerging capitalist powers, joining the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the governments that support these institutions as competitors at the feast. Behind the nationalist appearances and particularities, there is only one logic driving the new forms of primitive accumulation: to form a labor force reduced to abstract labor, pure labor power, with no guarantees, no protections, ready to be moved from place to place and job to job, employed mostly through short-term contracts and at the lowest possible wage.

What is the political meaning of this development? Even if we accept that primitive accumulation is an endemic part of life and work in capitalism (as Massimo De Angelis, among others, has insisted),¹⁹ how can we account for the fact that after five hundred years of relentless exploitation of workers across the planet, the capitalist class in its different embodiments still needs to pauperize multitudes of people worldwide?

There is no obvious answer to this question. But if we consider how 'globalization' is changing the organization of social reproduction we can reach some preliminary conclusions. We can see that capitalism can only provide pockets of prosperity to limited populations of workers for limited amounts of time, ready to destroy them (as it has done during the last several decades through the globalization process) as soon as their needs and desires exceed the limits which the quest for profitability imposes. We can see, in particular, that the limited prosperity that waged workers in industrial countries were able to achieve in the post-World War II period was never intended to be generalized. As revolt spread from the colonial plantations of Africa and Asia to the ghettos, the factories, the schools, the kitchens, and even the war front, undermining both the Fordist exchange between higher wages and higher productivity and the use of the colonies (external and internal) as reservoirs of cheap and unpaid labor, the capitalist class resorted to the strategy it has always used to confront its crises: violence, expropriation, and the expansion of the world labor market.

A Marx would be needed to describe the destructive social forces that have been mobilized for this task. Never have so many people been attacked and on so many fronts at once. We must return to the slave trade to find forms of exploitation as brutal as those that globalization has generated in many parts of the world. Not only is slavery reappearing in many forms, but famines have returned, and cannibalistic forms of exploitation unimaginable in the 1960s and 1970s have emerged, including human organ trafficking. In some countries, even the sale of hair, reminiscent of nineteenth-century novels, has been revived. More commonly, in the more than eighty countries affected, globalization has been a story of untreated illnesses, malnourished children, lost lives, and desperation. Impoverishment in much of the world has reached a magnitude never seen before, now affecting up to 70 percent of the population. Just in sub-Saharan Africa the number of those living in poverty and chronic hunger and malnutrition by 2010 had reached 239 million,²⁰ while across

the continent immense amounts of money were obscenely siphoned off to the banks of London, Paris, and New York.

As in the first phase of capitalist development, those most directly affected by these policies have been women, especially low-income women and women of color who in communities across the world today lack the means to reproduce themselves and their families or can do so only by selling their labor on the world labor market and reproducing other families and other children than their own in conditions that separate them from their communities and make their reproductive work more abstract and subject to multiple forms of restriction and surveillance. As an alternative, many give up their children for adoption, work as surrogate mothers, or (in a more recent development) sell their eggs to medical labs for stem cell research. They are also having fewer children, as the need to secure some income has a sterilizing effect. But everywhere their capacity to control their own reproduction is under attack. Paradoxically—and again recapitulating the very conditions that shaped women's entrance in capitalist society and instigated two centuries of witch hunts—the same political class that makes it almost impossible for women to provide for themselves and their families criminalizes them for trying to obtain an abortion. In the U.S. just being pregnant places poor women, particularly black women, in constant danger of arrest.²¹

Women are also targeted because of their subsistence activities, especially their involvement—in Africa, above all—in subsistence farming, which stands in the way of the World Bank's attempt to create land markets and place all natural resources in the hands of commercial enterprises. As I have written elsewhere,²² the World Bank has adopted the creed that only money is productive, while land is sterile and a cause of poverty if 'only' used for subsistence. Thus, not only has the bank campaigned against subsistence farming, through land law reform, individual titling, and the abolition of customary land tenure, it has also spared no effort to bring women under the control of monetary relations, for example, through the promotion of microfinance, a policy that has already turned millions into indentured servants to the banks and the NGOs that manage the loans.²³ Thus, after years promoting population control through massive sales of contraceptives, the bank now obtains the same result by preventing women from eking out a living by subsistence farming, which (contrary to its claims) is for millions the difference between life and death.²⁴ It is important to add that the institutional violence against women and the

devaluation of the activities around which their lives have been constructed have as their counterpart a documented increase of violence against them by the men in their communities. For, in the face of diminishing wages and diminishing access to land many see women's labor and bodies, and in many cases women's lives and labors, as their bridge to the world market, as is the case with trafficking and dowry murders. Witch-hunting too has returned with globalization, and in many regions of the world—Africa and India, in particular—is generally carried out by young, unemployed men eager to acquire the land of the women they accuse of being witches.²⁵

Examples could be multiplied of the ways in which globalization process recapitulates older forms of primitive accumulation. My immediate concern, however, is not to describe the specific forms this return of primitive accumulation has taken but to understand what it reveals about the nature of the capitalist system and what it projects for the future.

The first certainty delivered by this approach is that capitalist accumulation continues to be the accumulation of labor, and as such it continues to require the production of misery and scarcity on a world scale. It continues to require the degradation of human life and the reconstruction of social hierarchies and divisions on the basis of gender, race, and age. Most important, by persisting after five hundred years of capitalist development, these 'original sins' prove to be structural aspects of the capitalist system, precluding any possibility of reform. Indeed, the economic and social programs that international capital has put into place to defeat the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s by themselves guarantee that dispossession (from lands and all acquired rights), precarity of access to monetary income and employment, a life under the sign of uncertainty and insecurity, and the deepening of racial and sexual hierarchies will be the conditions of production for generations to come. It is evident, for instance, that by undermining the self-sufficiency of every region and creating a total economic interdependence, even among distant countries, globalization generates not only recurrent food crises but a need for an unlimited exploitation of labor and the natural environment.

As in the past, the foundation of this process is the enclosure of land. This is currently so extensive that even areas of agricultural life that in the past had remained untouched, enabling peasant communities to reproduce themselves, are now privatized, taken over by governments and companies for mineral extraction and other commercial schemes. As

‘extractivism’²⁶ triumphs in many regions, compounded by land grabbing for biofuel, communal landownership is legally terminated, and dispossession is so massive that we are fast approaching the stage described by Marx where “One section of society here demands a tribute from the other for the very right to live on the earth, just as landed property in general involves the right of the proprietors to exploit the earth’s surface, the bowels of the earth, the air and thereby the maintenance and development of life.”²⁷

In Africa, in particular, it is calculated that if the present trends continue, by the middle of the century 50 percent of the population of the continent will live outside of it. This, however, may not be an exceptional situation. Everywhere, because of the impoverishment and displacement globalization has produced, the figure of the worker has become that of the migrant, the itinerant,²⁸ the refugee. The speed at which capital can travel, destroying in its wake local economies and struggles, and the relentless drive to squeeze out every drop of oil and every mineral that the earth holds in its bowels accelerates this process.

It is not surprising, then, that under these circumstances life expectancy for the working class is diminishing even in ‘rich countries’ like Germany and the U.S., with the ‘poor’ expected to live several years less than their parents for the first time since World War II.²⁹ Meanwhile, some ‘Third World’ countries are approximating a situation similar to that which prevailed between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, that of a working class hardly capable of reproducing itself. Indeed, Marx’s argument in *The Communist Manifesto* that capitalist development produces the absolute impoverishment of the working class is now empirically verified. Witness the incessant migration from the ‘South’ to the ‘North’ since the late 1980s, mostly motivated by economic need and the many wars that the corporate lust for mineral resources is generating. We are told that there is no remedy to this immiseration. Plausibly assured by virtue of its military arsenals that, like it or not, the ‘99%’ have no alternatives to life under capitalism and confident that its global reach will provide large markets and ample supplies of labor, the capitalist class now makes little pretense of progress, declaring crises and catastrophes inevitable aspects of economic life, while rushing to remove the guarantees that more than a century of workers’ struggles had obtained.

I would argue, however, that this confidence is misplaced. Without indulging in any optimism, which would be irresponsible given the

unspeakable devastation unfolding under our eyes, I would affirm that worldwide a consciousness is taking shape—more and more translated into action—that capitalism is ‘unsustainable’ and creating a different social economic system is the most urgent task for most of the world population. For any system that is unable to reproduce its workforce and has nothing to offer to it except more crises is doomed. If after exploiting every part of the planet for centuries capitalism cannot provide even the minimal conditions of reproduction to all and must continue to plunge millions into miserable living conditions, then this system is bankrupt and has to be replaced. No political system, moreover, can sustain itself in the long term purely by force. Yet it is clear that force is all that the capitalist system has left at its disposal and can now prevail only because of the violence it mobilizes against its opponents.

Notes

- 1 Midnight Notes Collective, *The New Enclosures*, *Midnight Notes* no. 10 (1990).
- 2 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 3 See *The Commoner* no. 2 (September 2001), accessed June 2, 2018, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=5>.
- 4 Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer, and Andreas Siekmann, ed., *The Potosí Principle: Colonial Image Production in the Global Economy* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010).
- 5 See Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “Capitalism and Reproduction,” in *Open Marxism*, Vol. 3: *Emancipating Marx*, ed. Werner Bonefeld, John Holloway, and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 7–16; Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Claudia von Werlhof, “Globalization and the ‘Permanent’ Process of ‘Primitive Accumulation’: The Example of the MAI, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 6, no. 3 (2000): 731, accessed June 11, 2018, <http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/article/view/199/211>.
- 6 von Werlhof, “Globalization and the ‘Permanent’ Process of ‘Primitive Accumulation,’” 142.
- 7 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series no. 13 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 44.
- 8 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990, 876).
- 9 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 899.
- 10 I am quoting von Werlhof, “Globalization and the ‘Permanent’ Process of ‘Primitive Accumulation,’” 733.
- 11 See von Werlhof, “Globalization and the ‘Permanent’ Process,” 728–47.
- 12 Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 134.

- 13 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).
- 14 See *Caliban and the Witch*, especially Chapter 2; Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Hillary Creek (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995).
- 15 Foucault used the concept of 'biopolitics' to describe a new form of power that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century and was exercised through the regulation of life processes, such as health, disease, and procreation.
- 16 Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1, 764.
- 17 I refer here to the argument developed by Hardt and Negri in several works, from *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) to *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) that in the present phase of capitalist development, presumably characterized by the tendential dominance of immaterial labor, the capitalists withdraw from the organization of the labor process, so that workers achieve a higher degree of autonomy and control over the conditions of their work. This theory follows Marx in accentuating the progressive character of capitalist development, seen as the (forced) actualization of the objectives expressed by workers' struggles, which capitalism, against its own interest, must incorporate to reactivate the accumulation process. For a critique of this theory and in particular of the concept of cognitive capitalism, see George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, "Notes on Edu-factory and Cognitive Capitalism," in *Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory*, eds. the Edu-factory Collective (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009), 119–24; Federici, "On Affective Labor," in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor*, eds. Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 57–74.
- 18 Federici, "The Reproduction of Labor-Power in the Global Economy," in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).
- 19 De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, 136–41.
- 20 According to statistics issued by the FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organization), which also calculates that almost a billion people today suffer poverty and hunger worldwide; see "Africa Hunger Facts," *Hunger Notes*, accessed June 2, 2018, <https://www.worldhunger.org/africa-hunger-poverty-facts/>.
- 21 See Lynn M. Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin, "Arrests of and Forced Interventions on Pregnant Women in the United States, 1973–2005: Implications for Women's Legal Status and Public Health," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 38, no. 2 (April 2013); Lynn M. Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin, "New Study Shows Anti-Choice Policies Leading to Widespread Arrests of and Forced Interventions on Pregnant Women," *Rewire News*, January 14, 2013, accessed June 2, 2018, <https://rewire.news/article/2013/01/14/new-study-reveals-impact-post-roe-v-wade-anti-abortion-measures-on-women/>.
- 22 Federici, "Witch-Hunting, Globalization and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008): 21–35;

- reprinted in Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 60–86.
- 23 See Lamia Karim, *Microfinance and Its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 24 Sharon Hostetler et al., ‘Extractivism’: *A Heavy Price to Pay* (Washington, DC: Witness for Peace, 1995), 3.
- 25 Hostetler et al., ‘Extractivism,’ 3.
- 26 Extractivism is the policy by which governments finance their economic and political programs by exporting their countries’ mineral resources, a practice that, according to critics, produces poverty and a process of internal colonization. This term has been especially used by social theorists in Latin America (e.g., Alberto Acosta, Louis Tapia, Raúl Zibechi, Maristella Svampa) to describe and criticize the economic policies of the presumably progressive governments of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Brazil.
- 27 Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1993), 908–9.
- 28 This is the term Randy Martin used to describe this process, in *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
- 29 As reported by Maurizio Lazzarato, in Germany life expectancy for low-income earners has dropped from 77.5 years old in 2001 to 75.6 in 2011, while in East Germany it has gone from 77.9 to 74.1. Lazzarato comments that at this pace, with twenty more years of cuts and “efforts to ‘save’ Social Security,” the retirement age will finally coincide with the death age; *The Making of the Indebted Man*, 177. In the U.S., as well, the ‘poor’ are living shorter lives. According to the August issue of the *Journal of Health Affairs*, from 1990 to 2008 there was an actual decline in life expectancy among blacks and among white women and men who did not complete high school. The study found that white men with 16 years or more of education live 14 years longer than black men with less than 12 years of education, and the disparities are widening. In 1990, the most educated men and women lived 13.4 years and 7.7 years longer, respectively, than the least educated. The most shocking finding of this study is the speed at which this gap has widened. For example, “In 1990 the gap in life expectancy between the most and least educated white females was 1.9 years; now it’s 10.4 years.” Deirdre Griswold, “Racism, Schooling Gap Cuts Years from Life,” *Workers World*, September 27, 2012, accessed June 2, 2018, <https://www.workers.org/2012/09/27/racism-schooling-gap-cut-years-from-life/>. On the decline of life expectancy among whites in the U.S., see Linda Tavernese, *New York Times*, September 20, 2012. Tavernese writes that among the least educated whites life expectancy has fallen by four years between 1990 and 2012. The decline of life expectancy in the U.S. has accelerated in recent years also due to the opioid epidemic. See Olga Kazan, “A Shocking Decline in American Life Expectancy,” *Atlantic*, December 21, 2017, accessed June 21, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/12/life-expectancy/548981/>.

Introduction to the New Enclosures

(Midnight Notes Collective)

The historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears on the one hand as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But on the other hand these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.

—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1

The docile Sambo could and did become the revolutionary Nat Turner overnight. The slaves, under the leadership of those from the more complex African societies, fought and ran away, stole and feigned innocence, malingered on the job while seeming to work as hard as possible. And they lived to fight another day.

—George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1973)

Glasnost; End of the Cold War; United Europe; We Are the World; Save the Amazon Rain Forest.

These are typical slogans of the day. They suggest an age of historic openness, globalism, and the breakdown of political and economic barriers. Yet the last decade has seen the largest enclosure of the worldly commons in history. This introduction explains the meaning

and importance of the enclosures, old and new, in the planetary class struggle.

The old enclosures were a counterrevolutionary process whereby, after a century of high wages and breakdown of feudal authority, beginning in the late 1400s, farmers in England had their land and commons expropriated by state officials and landlords. They were turned into paupers, vagabonds, and beggars, and later waged workers, while the land was put to work to feed the incipient international market for agricultural commodities.

According to the Marxist tradition, the enclosures were the starting point of capitalist society;¹ They were the basic device of 'original accumulation,' which created a population of workers 'free' from any means of reproduction and thus compelled (in time) to work for a wage. The enclosures, however, are not a one-time process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism. They are a regular reoccurrence on the path of capitalist accumulation and a structural component of class struggle.

The End of All Deals

Today, once again, the enclosures are a common denominator of proletarian experience across the globe. In the biggest diaspora of the century, on every continent millions are uprooted from their land, their jobs, their homes through wars, famines, plagues, and IMF-ordered devaluations (the four knights of the modern apocalypse) and are scattered to the four corners of the globe.

In Nigeria people are thrown off communally owned land by the military, to make way for plantations owned and managed by the World Bank. The government justifies these measures in the name of the 'debt crisis' and the 'structural adjustment program' allegedly devised to solve it. The SAP for Nigeria is similar to those implemented in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It includes the commercialization of agriculture and the demonetization of the economy by means of massive devaluations, reducing money wages to their paper value. The result is the destruction of village communities and emigration.

In the United States too, millions are homeless and on the move. The immediate causes are highly publicized: the farm crisis, the steep rise of rental and mortgage payments relative to wages, the warehousing of apartments and the gentrification process, the collapse of the social safety net, and union busting. Behind these factors, however, there is a common

reality. The post-World War II interclass deal that guaranteed real wage increases—in exchange for increases in productivity—is over, and even those who have escaped its collapse suffer the loss of the natural commons, due to the vanishing ozone layer and the burning of forests. In China too we have new enclosures. The transition to a ‘free market economy’ has led to the displacement of one hundred million people from their communally operated lands. Meanwhile, their urban counterparts face the loss of guaranteed jobs in factories and offices and must migrate from one city to another to look for a wage. The ‘iron rice bowl’ is to be smashed, and a similar scenario is developing in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The ‘debt crisis,’ ‘homelessness,’ and ‘the collapse of socialism’ are frequently treated as different phenomena by the media and the left. But they are aspects of a single unified process that operates across the planet in different but totally interdependent ways. Under the logic of capitalist accumulation in this period, for every factory in a free-trade zone in China privatized and sold to a New York commercial bank or for every acre of land enclosed by a World Bank development project in Africa or Asia as part of a ‘debt for equity’ swap, a corresponding enclosure must occur in the U.S. and Western Europe. With each contraction of ‘communal rights’ in the Third World or of ‘socialist rights’ in the Soviet Union and China comes a subtraction of our seemingly sacred ‘social rights’ in the U.S. This subtraction is so thorough that even the definition of what it means to be a human is being revised.

The new enclosures stand for a large-scale reorganization of the accumulation process that has been underway since the mid-1970s, and whose main objective is to uproot workers from the terrain on which their organizational power has been built, so that, like the African slaves transplanted to the Americas, they are forced to work and fight in a strange environment where the forms of resistance possible at home are no longer available. *Thus, once again, as at the dawn of capitalism, the physiognomy of the world proletariat is that of the pauper, the vagabond, the criminal, the panhandler, the street peddler, the refugee sweatshop worker, the mercenary, the rioter.*

Methods and Consequences of the New Enclosures

How do the new enclosures work? As in the case of the old enclosures, it is by ending the communal control over the means of subsistence. There are very few populations today who can still directly provide for their needs with their land and work. The last ‘aboriginal’ populations from

Indonesia to the Amazonas are being violently enclosed in governmental reservations. More commonly, 'peasants' in the Third World today are persons who survive thanks to remittances from brothers or sisters who have emigrated to New York or by working under the most dangerous conditions, growing poppies or coca leaves for export, prostituting to the carriers of hard currency (the greatest and perhaps only aphrodisiac of the age), or migrating to nearby cities or abroad, to join the swelling ranks of day laborers, street peddlers, or 'free enterprise zone' workers, whose conditions are often more dangerous than in the poppy fields back at home.

As in the past, a common method for carrying out the new enclosures is the seizure of land as payment for debt. Just as the Tudor court sold off huge tracts of communal land to its creditors, today's African and Asian governments capitalize and 'rationalize' agricultural land to satisfy the IMF's auditors, who only 'forgive' foreign loans under these conditions. Just as the heads of clans in the Scottish Highlands of the eighteenth century connived with local merchants and bankers, to whom they were indebted, to 'clear the land' of their own clansmen and clanswomen, local chiefs in Africa and Asia exchange communal land rights for unredeemed loans. The result, now as then, is the destruction of customary rights and forms of subsistence. This is the secret of the 'debt crisis.'

The new enclosures make mobile and migrant labor the dominant form of labor. We are now the most geographically mobile labor force since the advent of capitalism. Capital keeps us constantly on the move, separating us from our countries, farms, gardens, homes, and workplaces, because this guarantees cheap wages, communal disorganization, and a maximum vulnerability in front of the law, the courts, and the police. Another consequence of the new enclosures is a dramatic increase in the international competition among workers and an enormous expansion of the world labor market. Socialist workers—one third of the world labor force—will now be forced to compete with the rest of the world proletariat, in exchange for a long forbidden access to the world commodity market.

Another aspect of the new enclosures is the attack on our reproduction that makes us mutants as well as migrants. The disappearance of the rain forest, the hole in the ozone layer, the pollution of the air, the seas, and the beaches, along with the obvious shrinking of our living spaces, all combine to destroy our earthly commons. Even the high seas were enclosed in the 1980s with the dramatic extension of the traditional territorial limits. It is not science fiction to imagine that we are guinea pigs

in a capitalist experiment in nonevolutionary species change. We are not alone in this process. Animals, from protozoa to cows, are being engineered and patented to eat oil spills, produce more eggs per hour, secrete more hormones. Increasingly, the land is no longer valued for how much food it can grow or what kind of buildings it can support but for how much radioactive waste it can 'safely' store. *Thus tired earthly commons, the gift of billions of years of laborless transformation, meet tired human bodies.*

Capital has long dreamed of sending us to work in space, where nothing would be left to us except our work machines and rarified and repressive work relations. But the fact is that the earth is becoming a space station where millions are already living in space colony conditions: no oxygen to breathe, limited social and physical contact, a desexualized life, difficulty of communication, lack of sun and green . . . even the voices of migrating birds are missing. Our own bodies are being enclosed. Appearance and attitude are now closely monitored in jobs in the 'service industries,' from restaurants to hospitals. Those who 'work with the public' have their bodies—from their urine to their sweat glands to their brains—constantly checked. Capital treats us today as did the inquisitors of old, looking for the devil's marks of the class struggle on our bodies and demanding that we open them up for inspection. The duty to look pleasant and acceptable explains workers' increasing recourse to reconstructive surgery. The much-publicized silicone breasts of the recent Miss America are an example of this trend. Not only must beauty queens and male leads buy and rebuild their bodies piece by piece, reconstructive surgery is now a must for many jobs in the service economy, further revealing the commodity nature of capitalist relations.

The Spiral of Struggle

The new enclosures are being fiercely fought, however. The planet is reverberating with anti-IMF demonstrations, riots, and rebellions. In 1989 alone, the streets and campuses of Venezuela, Burma, Zaire, Nigeria, and Argentina saw confrontations between armed troops and students and workers chanting "Death to the IMF," looting foreign commodities markets, decarcerating prisoners, and burning banks. Not only is the money form resisted. From the Andes to Central America and Mexico there is now a war over control of the land. In West Africa there are farmers' struggles against land seizures by the state and the development banks, misrepresented in the United States as 'tribal wars.' In southern Africa, the battle

over land, both in town and country, is part of the struggle against apartheid. The struggle for the land is the core of the 'Palestinian issue.' And in Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia, proletarians are in up arms against the new enclosures. This is not only a Third World phenomenon. From West Berlin to Zurich, Amsterdam, London, and New York, squatters and homeless people have battled the police, the arsonists in the pay of real estate developers, and other agents of 'spatial deconcentration,' demanding not only 'housing' but land with all that it means.

The new enclosures have also had unintended consequences. They have led to an enormous increase of proletarian knowledge. West African proletarians in the 1980s know what deals can be made in Brooklyn, London, or Venice. Never have proletarians been so compelled to overcome regionalism and nationalism. The very intensity of the debt crisis has forced workers to develop new forms of autonomy and organize reproduction outside the money relation and the standard operating procedures of capitalist society.

The Marxist Ghost at Midnight

It is ironic that at the very time when socialism is collapsing, Marx's predictions concerning the development of capitalism are being verified. Though 'postist' intellectuals are now dancing on Marx's grave and 'Marxists' are desperately trying to revise their curriculum vitae, Marx's theory has never seemed so true. What are we seeing now but the famous "immiseration of the working class," "the expansion of the world market," the "universal competition among workers,"² and "rising organic composition of capital"? How can we understand anything about this world without using the axioms of Marx's theory of work, money, and profit?

Theoretically, then, Marx's ghost still speaks to us at midnight. Strategically, however, Marx and Engels fail at this moment of the new enclosures. The Marx of *Capital* would understand the new enclosures as he did the old, as a stage in the 'progressive nature' of capitalist development preparing the material conditions for a communist society. The two decisive achievements in this development according to Marx are: the breaking down of local barriers and the unification of the international working class, producing a truly universal human being capable of benefiting from the worldwide production of cultural and material wealth and recognizing a common interest. Indeed, for all the 'blood and fire' they caused, the enclosures were for Marx a historically positive event,

for they brought about “the dissolution of private property based on the labor of its owner.”

According to Marx, by destroying a mode of production “in which the laborer is the private owner of his means of labor set in action by himself: the peasant of the land which he cultivates, the artisan of the tool which he handles as a virtuoso,”³ the enclosures have set the stage for the creation of capitalist private property resting on socialized production. The enclosures, therefore, are for Marx the “protracted, violent, and difficult” transformation that makes possible the easier “expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of people” in the communist revolution.⁴

The problem with this analysis is simple: the new enclosures (and many of the old) are not aimed at petty private producers and their property. They aim to destroy communal lands and spaces that are the basis of proletarian power. A Quiche Indian village in the Guatemalan hills, a tract of communally cultivated land in the Niger Delta, an urban neighborhood like Tepito in Mexico City, or a town surrounding a paper mill controlled by striking paper workers like Jay, Maine, do not fit into Marx’s concept of the target of the enclosures. It would be absurd in fact to view the demise of such villages, tracts of land, and neighborhoods as necessary, ultimately positive sacrifices to the development of a truly ‘universal’ proletariat. Living proletarians must put their feet some place, must strike from some place, must rest some place, must retreat to some place. Class war does not happen on an abstract board toting up profits and losses, it needs a terrain.

In 1867, Marx did not see the power emerging from the communal organization of life of millions in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. This failure remains a key element of Marxist thought to this day. “Third World” Marxists still speak of the progressive character of original accumulation. Thus, though they officially fight against capital’s new enclosures, they envision a time when their party and state will carry out enclosures of their own, even more efficiently than the capitalists. They too believe that communal ownership of land and local markets has no place in a revolutionary society. Their aim is to nationalize land and wipe out local markets, as well as to expel the IMF and the ‘*compradora*’ bourgeoisie from their countries. Consequently, they clash with many of the people who fight against the new enclosures. The confusion escalates at victory time, when there is a tendency to create state plantations (as in Mozambique) and capitalist farms (as in Zimbabwe) at the expense of communal possibilities and actualities. Inevitably, the conditions for counterrevolution ripen,

while carrying out autarkic economic measures becomes impossible, as the structures that might have sustained self-sufficiency and denied land to ‘contras’ are destroyed by the revolutionary forces themselves. Hence the crisis of the Third Worldist left is rooted not only in the maneuvers of the CIA but in the failure of the Marxist view of the enclosures. In contrast, capital’s reading of the new enclosures in the face of the collapse of the socialist model and the crisis of the “Third World” revolution is “the End of History”—that is, the triumph of the world market as the mark of a planetary commodification glorified as “Westernization” and “democratization.”

How seriously we should take this product of State Department post-modernism is moot, but the scenario it suggests is simple. It brings back the class struggle to its pre-World War I situation, offering two choices to OECD workers: ‘liberalism’ or ‘imperialism.’ The liberal option accepts the ‘market mechanism,’ where we meet as functions of the work process in a triage-like environment, such that upgrading our ‘survival skills’ becomes the only goal in life. The imperialist one promotes the internationalization of conquest and plunder whereby we become accomplices of our bosses in the exploitation of other proletarians, so that victory means a South African deal: better wages and a home protected by martial law, torture cells at home and abroad, and a gun in the handbag. More probably we’ll get a pernicious mix of the two!

Notes

- 1 For Marx’s analysis of the enclosure process in the development of capitalism, see *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), Part 8, Chap. 26: “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation.”
- 2 The ‘immiseration of the working class,’ the ‘expansion of the world market,’ and the ‘universal competition among workers’ are the tendencies in capitalist development anticipated by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel More (New York: Penguin, 1967 [1848]) and *The German Ideology*, Part 1, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970 [1847]).
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Part 8, Chap. 32, “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation.”
- 4 The reference is to Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Part 8, Chap. 32, “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation,” p. 930, where Marx writes that while capitalist development was based upon “the expropriation of the mass of people by a few usurpers,” in the case of the communist revolution “we have the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people.”