

Primitive Accumulation

It is fairly simple to understand the accumulation of capital under the current context of modern-day capitalist production. The capitalist uses its wealth to invest in capital, both constant capital (machinery, etc.) and variable capital (wage laborers), and combines these to create surplus value for the company. The surplus value is later invested into more capital and this begins a cycle of ever-increasing capital accumulation. Although what Marx examines with his concept of “Primitive Accumulation” is how capital was accumulated prior to surplus value and capitalist production. What this does is pose the question of how there came to be a dynamic where the majority of the wealth is in the hands of few and there is a mass of people desperate for job opportunities in order to survive. Marx makes a theological comparison to original sin explaining the way in which many see the “original sin” of capitalism: “there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance” (Marx 873). Consequently, “the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins” (873). Marx sees this as a nursery tale because it posits capital accumulation as something that occurred naturally as a part of human nature. It also makes the primitive or original accumulation a development of the past that just happened and now we must deal with the consequences. The reason Marx disagrees with this notion is that it ignores all the “conquest, enslavement, robbery, and murder” that brutally detached workers from the means of production, leaving them in a helpless state (874). Marx recognizes that this capitalist myth of hard work and meritocracy dates back to pre-capitalist society and has mainly existed so proponents of capitalism can continually defend the system, ignoring the brutal oppression it is fueled by. Marx looks at not only the obvious colonialism and

slave trade carried out in the Americas, but the expropriation of the English peasantry which came before.

Around the late 14th century, English serfdom came to an end and most of the population were “free peasant proprietors” (877). These peasants were mostly farmers who worked their own land for subsistence, and to pay their land rent. During this time period there was also a shared common land enjoyed by the peasants “which gave pasture to their cattle, and furnished them with timber, fire-wood, turf, etc” (877). Then late 15th century and early 16th century bands of feudal retainers dissolved, peasants were driven off the land, and sheep farms covered this stolen land for wool manufacturing. Along with this, the common land was also taken over by the feudal lords, and the lords shifted into capitalist owners of these agribusiness wool manufacturing businesses. The reformation in the 16th century brought internal conflict leading to the catholic church property being broken up and either given to royals or sold to the wealthy for low prices. Marx explains how this early expropriation of the land was carried out through “individual acts of violence” in opposition to the law (885). Although he explains later the expropriation was carried out both through private interests and through the law with the ‘Bills for Inclosure of Commons’. This marked a new era in which land theft could be carried out in many different fashions whether formally or informally. Throughout this process, we have peasants being driven off the land and forced into cities and villages where they must sell their bodies for wages since they are no longer connected to the means of production. As Marx tells it, all of these developments “created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians” (895). Ultimately the land theft had a direct impact on the emergence of urban industry and the modern industrial working class. Marx builds on this historical context to explain the origins of the “free worker” in a double sense (876). On one side you have a worker

who is “part of the means of production themselves” [slaves, serfs, etc.] (874). Although the negative aspect is that the worker also is separated completely from the means of production and does not have any ownership. This creates a “free” worker who is only necessarily free in the sense that they can choose which capitalist they sell their bodies and labor to.

Marx also sees the conquest in the Americas as paramount to the primitive accumulation of capital, concentrated into the hands of a few at the expense of the masses. He mentions the exploitation of the indigenous population in the search for gold and silver, the plunder of India, and the conquest and enslavement of Africans as all being “the dawn of the era of capitalist production” (915). These were all instances in which vulnerable populations were forced into labor or enslavement, while the perpetrators came away with all the wealth. During this time, government trade protections and the use of national debt were both working as state operated tools of primitive accumulation. These fast-tracked the process and cemented the origins of the capitalist mode of production and its ties to the state. When the brutal acts of slavery and violence were being carried out in the colonies, over in England you had great impoverishment of the workers and their own form of slavery in the form of wage labor (including child slavery). Marx explains how this rise of child slavery in the wake of the booming cotton industry essentially incited the transition into using slavery as a “system of commercial exploitation” (925). Furthermore, the “veiled slavery” in the form of wage labor in England actually needed the more animalistic and “unqualified slavery” as a platform to thrive (925). Wage labor could be seen as an upgrade to the former system of chattel slavery, therefore seen as the new normal and laying the foundation for the new capitalist mode of production. Colonial slavery along with the plundering and brutalization of vulnerable populations really show the more outwardly oppressive origins of primitive accumulation and how human bodies were turned to property and

capital, creating wealth for a minority group of capitalists. The separation of the workers from the land in England may mark the origins of primitive accumulation, but the brutal nature of the New World exploitation showed how these early quests for capital were no mere incident of one group of hard working and frugal individuals earning their wealth at the expense of the lazy masses, but rather one group forcefully exploiting the masses for their labor, property, and their livelihoods.

While historically analyzing this process of primitive accumulation and the rise of capital, Marx made some key observations regarding the future of the capitalist mode of production. Following the early stages of primitive accumulation where the theft of the masses occurs and the proletariat class is created, another process occurs due to the nature of the capitalist mode of production. Capital is constantly centralizing to keep the system afloat, and we see a sort of monopolization as large capital pushes out small capital from the market. Marx explains how this creates a paradox where you have capital being in fewer and fewer hands, and the working class is constantly growing while still facing “the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation” (929). Marx believed this inevitably leads to a final revolt against capital as the workers unite and grow in numbers. This can also be seen as the “second negation” to the first negation which is when capital originally expropriated peasant private property. Marx is referencing the Hegel dialectic of negation to show how capitalism essentially contains and produces the mechanisms for its own destruction. More specifically “capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation” (929). Marx is saying that this is a natural process within the capitalist mode of production, as it is a system which necessitates constant growth and centralization at the expense of the masses. The first negation is created through the beginnings of capital accumulation and the second negation,

rather than being created through outside forces, is given the platform by the new mode of production itself. Marx sees this final revolt as the expropriators being expropriated in the sense that the conflict and class struggle has been flipped in terms of power dynamics, as the masses turn on the monopolizers.

In his work on the primitive accumulation of capital, Marx pushes back on most mainstream pro-capitalist accounts of the origins of capitalism by putting a focus on the brutal methods in which property and lives were forcefully taken to jumpstart the accumulation of capital, eventually evolving into the capitalist mode of production. Many of these acts were just seen as something of the past, and also not often tied to the origins of capital accumulation. Although we are still seeing not just the veiled wage labor, but brutal acts of oppression like slavery in the Congo in the quest for obtaining cobalt. Although Marx uses primitive to describe that these events marked the origins of capital accumulation, some of these original acts of conquest and slavery which can be seen as primitive in the literal sense, are still plaguing us in the modern day capitalist society.

Works Cited

Marx K. Engels F. Mandel E. & Fowkes B. (1990). *Capital. Volume One : A Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin in association with New Left Review.