

Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by 'extra-economic' means

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Abstract: David Harvey's adaptation and redeployment of Marx's notion of 'primitive accumulation' – under the heading of 'accumulation by dispossession' – has reignited interest in the concept among geographers. This adaptation of the concept of primitive accumulation to different contexts than those Marx analyzed raises a variety of theoretical and practical issues. In this paper, I review recent uses and transformations of the notion of primitive accumulation that focus on its persistence within the Global North, addressing especially the political implications that attend different readings of primitive accumulation in the era of neoliberal globalization.

Key words: neoliberal globalization, primitive accumulation, transnational social movements.

I Introduction

David Harvey's adaptation and redeployment of Marx's notion of 'primitive accumulation' – under the heading of 'accumulation by dispossession' (2003) – has reignited interest in the concept among geographers and others (eg, RETORT, 2005; Welford, 2005; Buck, 2006; Hart, 2006; Sneddon, 2006). Primitive accumulation – and, the process of proletarianization that lies at its core – has long been central to discussions in development studies, so, even given the new wrinkles added by Harvey, this renewed interest might seem surprising. What lends novelty to Harvey's discussion, though, is that unlike the ongoing use of the concept in development studies Harvey and others are

now deploying it to describe processes that are occurring within capitalist countries of the Global North.

This adaptation of the concept of primitive accumulation to different contexts than those Marx analyzed raises a variety of theoretical and practical issues. Since not only Harvey's work but also earlier writings on primitive accumulation in contemporary contexts have by now received significant attention, I do not wish to canvass all these issues here. Instead, I focus quite narrowly on the matter of the political implications – and especially the spatiality of the political implications – that attend different readings of primitive accumulation. These political implications, in turn, imply differing kinds of research agendas for

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scholars interested in the geography and politics of primitive accumulation.

In the next section of the paper, I briefly note why the historical debate within Marxism regarding primitive accumulation ought to be of broader interest to geographers and other social scientists, including those whose theoretical orientation is not Marxist. In the third section, I review some of Marx's basic claims regarding primitive accumulation and note in particular what kinds of political implications he drew from this reading. In the fourth section, I construct differing readings of primitive accumulation as the crux of strategic political differences between twentieth-century Marxist and neo-Marxist analysts – in particular, differences between those Marxists in the Global North who hewed closest to Marx's political analysis and neo-Marxists in the Global South who offered a different reading of proletarianization and political struggle. I also note some of the political challenges posed for both Marxism and neo-Marxism by the geographies of post-cold war, postcolonial, neoliberal globalization. In the fifth section, I note how primitive accumulation has been theorized by those who consider it a continuous phenomenon. In the sixth section, I review three applications of the concept of primitive accumulation in recent work by geographers, noting their general implications for understanding contemporary neoliberal globalization and the political struggles it generates. Finally, in concluding, I note how contemporary activists and public intellectuals are attempting to chart paths through some of the socio-spatial messiness that ensues when one takes the broadest implications of contemporary and continuous primitive accumulation seriously.

II Preamble: the contemporary relevance of a long-standing Marxist debate

Though the reasons that primitive accumulation is of renewed interest may seem self-evident to those geographers involved in revisiting the concept, it is worth noting at the outset why examination of a long-standing

debate within Marxism – extending over the course of a century – should be of significance for a broad range of scholars, irrespective of their political and theoretical commitments. I suggest at least two reasons.

First, both the older and the renewed discussions of primitive accumulation directly address issues of extraordinary salience for understanding transformations in the contemporary world. For example, removal of agricultural producers from the countryside and consolidation of more privatized control over resources – both central to primitive accumulation – remain hugely important processes today, effecting literally billions of people. Thus, any discussions that purport to make sense of such processes are worthy of attention, even from those who disagree with the theoretical perspectives that frame the discussion. Marxist analyses provide theoretically charged interpretations of primitive accumulation, rather than just descriptive glosses, and in my view this is a strength rather than a weakness. But even those who disagree with the theoretical interpretations given to primitive accumulation within Marxist debates can certainly find arguments that contribute to an understanding of transformations that are integral to global capitalist development.

Second, and more specific to the discussion of primitive accumulation in the Global North, much contemporary work in geography – especially within feminist theory, political ecology, and post-Marxism – has addressed the complexity and heterogeneity of capitalist societies, indeed within 'capitalist' economic processes themselves. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to note all of these attempts to introduce complexity into social theory befitting the complexity of capitalist societies, a review of debates surrounding primitive accumulation shows that such issues have long been important within Marxist theory, whether or not they have always been dealt with adequately. My own contention is that non-orthodox, neo-Marxist positions on primitive accumulation – and, for that matter, other issues – have in fact presaged

many features of contemporary anti-essentialist discourse, albeit without adhering to the same sorts of epistemological and ontological positions. Whether the theoretical differences between non-orthodox, neo-Marxist approaches and post-prefixed, anti-essentialist approaches redound to the favor of the former or the latter is not of concern to me here, but I do believe that proponents of anti-essentialist readings of economy, class, and the like can benefit from revisiting the rich – and too often neglected – debates that were conducted within twentieth-century Marxism. It is to those debates that I turn first.

III Marx on primitive accumulation

In certain respects, Marx came to the issue of primitive accumulation late in the day. At the end of *Capital* volume I, after having spent hundreds of pages analyzing the labor process through which commodities and surplus value are produced within capitalist society, the process of 'expanded reproduction', he backtracks to consider the origins of the surplus that made the first process of capitalist accumulation possible – the 'so-called primitive accumulation'. As with his earlier analysis of the commodity, Marx analyzes this phenomenon as a transformation of social relations. Primitive accumulation is for Marx, first and foremost, the 'historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production', transforming 'the social means of subsistence and of production into capital' and 'the immediate producers into wage laborers' (1967: 714). The means of this divorce are varied, and include the 'forcible usurpation' of common property through 'individual acts of violence' and eventually the 'parliamentary form of robbery', the Acts for enclosures of the Commons, through which 'the landlords grant themselves the people's land as private property' (1967: 724), this happening in England concomitantly with 'the theft of the State domains' which allowed the development of large commercial farms and "'set free" the agricultural population as proletarians for manufacturing industry' (1967: 725). Along

with this expropriation of self-supporting English peasants went 'the destruction of rural domestic industry, the process of separation between manufacturing and agriculture' (1967: 748). Elsewhere, as Marx ironically notes, 'The discovery of gold and silver in the Americas, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production' (1967: 751). Through such varied forms of violent expropriation, capitalism was born, 'dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (1967: 760), but having achieved the consolidation of 'the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few' (1967: 762).

In discussing primitive accumulation, Marx is always both ironic and dialectical, ironic in his deconstruction of bourgeois mythologies about capital being generated through the frugality of the elite, dialectical in his unstinting view of this violent expropriation as necessary for the furthering of human possibilities. As in his notes on India for the *New York Herald* (1977b), Marx recognizes and exposes the hypocrisy of capitalist rhetoric about human rights and equality, but is equally insistent that, in spite of this hypocrisy, the processes that capitalism sets in motion bring new possibilities that should preclude any romanticism for the past. The common property regimes, peasant production, and artisanal labor that capitalism replaces 'exclude the concentration of these means of production' and so also exclude 'co-operation, division of labour within each separate process of production, the control over, and the productive application of the forces of Nature by society, and the free development of the social productive powers'. They thus 'decree universal mediocrity' (1967: 762). In contrast to this, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, capitalism creates the first society based on scientific control of nature – thus, the end of all 'nature idolatry' – and the systematic development of both new productive

capacities and 'expansion of needs' (1973: 409–10). In sum, for Marx, primitive accumulation, however loathsome in its violence and hypocrisy, is a necessary step in the direction of fuller human development.

Within Marx's historically 'progressive' vision of the process, primitive accumulation has varied dimensions, including the proletarianization it generates, the changes in property relations and consolidation of capital it affects, and the transformations in human-environment relations that are its byproduct. In spite of mentioning its multidimensional character, however, Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation focuses largely on proletarianization, since he is pre-eminently concerned with the formation of what he takes to be the most revolutionary subjects and the central issues over which they struggle. For Marx, these subjects are urban-industrial workers, and their struggles are most fundamentally those connected to expanded reproduction – for example, factory wages and working conditions, and control over the industrial production process. This strategic political perspective helps push primitive accumulation towards the theoretical background, even as its historical significance is being articulated.

Reinforcing this framing, primitive accumulation sometimes appears in Marx's writing as a process confined to a particular (if indefinite) period – one already largely passed in England but still under way in the colonies at the time Marx wrote. In these passages, it appears as if for Marx primitive accumulation will eventually be supplanted everywhere by a more normalized process of expanded reproduction, wherein the already achieved separation of the producer from the means of subsistence allows the exercise of violence and open expropriation to recede into the background, replaced by 'the dull compulsion of economic relations' which 'completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist' (1967: 737). As Marx and Engels put it in 'The communist manifesto', 'National differences and antagonisms between peoples are

daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world-market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto' (1977: 235).

Where Marx presents such a 'historical stage' view of the process of primitive accumulation, it appears directly connected to a particular political conclusion – namely that the natural agents of revolutionary social struggle are those representatives of capitalism's future, the industrial working classes of the most 'advanced' countries (1977b: 335; Marx and Engels 1977: 228–29, 236). Other struggles against capital, and particularly those of the groups being expropriated through primitive accumulation, are anachronistic insofar as they look to capitalism's pre-history rather than to the possibilities capitalism creates for a particular kind of postcapitalist world. This view is not an unconsidered prejudice, nor is it based merely on Marx's desire for realization of the aforementioned material, intellectual, and social possibilities created by capitalist development. It is a view with a specific geography. Marx was (in)famously unsympathetic to what he saw as the stereotypical political consciousness of the European peasantry, and despite the consideration he was willing to give to Russian populism late in his life (1977c), was also generally skeptical about the practical possibility of spatially scattered independent producers developing a progressive, cohesive, class-conscious, political project. As he bitingly said of French peasants, they form a group 'much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes' (1977a: 317). In contrast, urban-industrial workers, for Marx, present political possibilities built not only out of their cosmopolitanism and many-sided development of needs but out of their physical proximity to one another. The clustering of many workers in one location, as the end result of primitive accumulation, facilitates communication and organization (Marx and Engels, 1977: 228).

Marx sometimes – and somewhat surprisingly – presents this development of urban proletarian political struggle in *national* terms. As he and Engels put it in ‘The communist manifesto’, ‘The proletariat of each country must, of course, first settle matters with its own bourgeoisie’ (1977: 230). Yet Marx’s vision was also, from the outset, *internationalist*, in that he expected and promoted collaboration of these national working-class organizations. The form of internationalism, however, was heavily circumscribed by the geography of nineteenth-century industrial capitalist development: it was an internationalism primarily of European workers, those who had already been proletarianized in the process of primitive accumulation. For those workers in the rest of the world who were not as yet fully proletarianized, the practical politics of the European Left consigned them to a holding pattern, or to implicit dependence upon nationalist movements. As Marx put it in the notes on India, ‘The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether’ (1977b: 335).

IV Neo-Marxists on primitive accumulation

Throughout much of the twentieth century, debates within Marxism and leftist social movements over primitive accumulation, like the related debate over whether or not it was necessary to have the full development of capitalism before there could be a socialist revolution, were transparently debates over the potential agents of radical social change. Without rehearsing these debates, it is worth recalling both the disappointment of the European Left at the willing participation of European workers in the first world war and the Zapatista and Maoist innovation of championing peasants as agents of either reform or revolutionary change (Tutino, 1986; Meisner,

1999). Collectively, these and other developments through the first half of the twentieth century seemed to push the focus of radical social movements away from industrial workers in the Global North and towards more heterogeneous – ie, popular-nationalist – social movements in the Global South (Stavrianos, 1981), and also forced the Communist Party to reconsider the importance of struggles in the colonies (de Janvry, 1981: 11–12).

In the early post-second world war period, a number of neo-Marxist perspectives came to the fore summarizing the implications of these early twentieth-century practical-political contests over the agents of revolutionary change. Among those frequently cited in Anglophone social science are Paul Baran’s key text on the political economy of growth (1957), Andre Gunder Frank’s radical dependency arguments (1967; 1979), Immanuel Wallerstein’s development of a world systems approach (1974; 1979), Samir Amin’s writings on global accumulation (1974; 1976; 1977), and the development of debates over ‘articulation of modes of production’ (eg, Foster-Carter, 1978; Wolpe, 1980). The central, shared point of many neo-Marxist positions, often lost in overly formal and schematic exchanges, was that since revolution had not occurred in the global core, while capitalism had not ‘fully’ developed in most of the global periphery, it was necessary to examine the interaction of numerous complex class groupings in order to understand both how capitalism functioned in the global periphery and how social change might be achieved there.

In such neo-Marxist perspectives, the owners of the ‘pigmy property’ that Marx in some contexts seemed to present as not long for this (capitalist) world came to have a different political bearing than under classical Marxism. Rather than being the dying representatives of the premodern (Marx and Engels, 1977: 229), they might well form segments of progressive coalitions – though much time and energy was always spent in debate over issues such as which groups of

peasants could be expected to favor progressive causes, whether or not various business owners could be expected to support the 'patriotic' national cause, and the like (see, eg, Sunkel, 1973; Spence, 1990: 372–76). In many respects, contemporary 'new social movement' approaches are heir to this tradition of regarding subsistence producers and the owners of small property as potentially progressive social actors rather than, as Marx sometimes characterized them, representatives of the dead weight of the past. Thus, discussions of 'new social movement' responses to ongoing primitive accumulation have considerable resonance with a long tradition of neo-Marxist theorizing and popular struggle.

Connected with the debates between Marxists and neo-Marxists over the agents of revolutionary change has been a basic empirical, demographic question. Over the past century and a half, the complete and final expropriation of the immediate producer that Marx sometimes seems to have anticipated has never taken place, and political struggles against capitalism have – for better or worse – been at least as much the preserve of peasants and artisans, especially from the Global South, as of industrial workers from the Global North. At present, the question can be raised as to whether such a prolonged process of primitive accumulation is finally drawing to a close, ushering in the final stage of fully global capitalist development that will enable the sorts of struggles Marx envisioned. Yet, for reasons that will be discussed below, there is no compelling reason to expect the complete and final expropriation of small or common property any time soon.

One version of the debate over primitive accumulation in the 1970s that brought out this point focused on the 'conservation-dissolution' dialectic. Marx himself recognized that 'the manufacture, properly so called, conquers but partially the domain of national production, and always rests on the handicrafts of the town and the domestic industry of the rural districts as its ultimate basis'.

Thus, even where capitalist development destroyed one or another of these 'in one form, in particular branches, at certain points, it calls them up again elsewhere, because it needs them for the preparation of raw material up to a certain point' (1967: 748). Rosa Luxemburg had furthered this idea, offering an argument for the permanent necessity of primitive accumulation by suggesting that the crisis tendencies of capitalism identified by Marx made the constant conquest of non-capitalist territories for the expropriation of raw materials and the reinvestment of surplus a requirement for capitalist stability (Luxemburg, 1951; cf. Bradby, 1975). Luxemburg's arguments were debated and, for many orthodox Marxists, largely discredited (Brewer, 1990), but a more modest proposition was put forward by subsequent analysts of imperialism. As Amin put the matter, imperialism and the conquest of non-capitalist territories may not be technically necessary for the maintenance of capitalist accumulation, but the imperial option has been available and capitalists in the Global North have seized it – with positive effects for the development of capitalism in the core of the global economy and negative effects in the periphery (1976; 1977).

Marxist and neo-Marxist authors elaborated these issues in the 1970s by noting that in certain contexts capitalists seemed to prefer – and benefit from – measures that prevented full proletarianization of the labor force, since this prevented capitalists from having to pay for the full costs of the social reproduction of labor (Wallerstein, 1979: 147–48; 2000: 247, 350). Indeed, Wallerstein, summarizing one version of the neo-Marxist argument, suggested that the total percentage of the labor force that has been proletarianized worldwide has always remained fairly small, and that capitalism is therefore based as much on the maintenance of *non-proletarian* and *semi-proletarian* labor as on the production of proletarian labor (1979: 275–78; 2000: 142–43, 240, 363).

Given this incomplete process of proletarianization, for neo-Marxists any revolutionary subjects that can be constituted do not

necessarily have to await some fuller development of capitalism, even though they might await some appropriate historical conjuncture, while for Marxists the most likely revolutionary subjects in the Global South are still in formation as a result of the uneven and still incomplete development of capitalism. Up to the present, this debate has often taken the form of an insistence by neo-Marxists that Marxists are too narrow and doctrinaire in their conception of revolutionary subjects and an insistence by Marxists that neo-Marxists are often backward-looking or even reactionary in their choice of revolutionary actors and social projects. This debate, moreover, has often centered on whether or not nationalism in the Global South can be seen as having progressive dimensions or is merely the last stronghold of domestic bourgeoisies of the Global South (see, eg, Emmanuel, 1972; Bettelheim, 1972; Warren, 1973; Amin, 1977; Brenner, 1977).

In assessing this debate, there can be little doubt that the industrial working classes of the Global North have not as yet performed the revolutionary tasks that Marx set for them. The spatiality of early industrial capitalism, as Marx correctly observed, made industrial workers a potent force for progressive social change, and such changes occurred – unevenly – in much of Europe and the ‘neoEuropes’ throughout the twentieth century. But outside of the Soviet Union (not itself part of Marx’s vision of the most ‘advanced’ capitalist countries) such changes were reformist (preserving capitalism) rather than revolutionary, and the global spatiality of capitalist development enabled these reforms in ways that contributed to ‘social imperialism’ and ‘hyper-exploitation’ of workers and peasants in the Global South (Taylor and Flint, 2000: 137–39).

In certain respects, the neo-Marxist assertion of popular-national movements in the Global South providing the greatest critical mass of revolutionary actors has proven accurate: the major revolutions of the twentieth century (eg, Russia, China, Cuba), did not

occur in the most fully capitalist countries of the Global North. Yet, in many respects, neo-Marxist visions of revolutionary change have proven as wanting as more orthodox Marxist visions. First, such revolutions as have occurred on the periphery have rarely lived up to expectations, even if not all have been failures. Second, nowhere today do such revolutions as occurred in the twentieth century seem at all likely. Third, the national form that such revolutionary struggles maintained, in large part a product of the colonial contexts in which most of them developed, seems increasingly anachronistic.

Wallerstein has long emphasized that all the ‘counter-systemic’ movements of the twentieth century – social democratic reformism in the capitalist core, actually existing state socialism in the Eastern bloc, and revolutionary nationalism in the periphery – were inherently limited by their spatial forms (2000: 358–60). While each, in their own way, achieved the conquest of state power within a national-territorial framework, capitalist power was and is transnational, enacted through forms such as global commodity chains that cannot be completely controlled by a given state (2000: 367–73). Both Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars have addressed this problem, and both European labor/leftist parties and anti-colonial/third-world nationalist movements have attempted to build outward from national bases to broader international forms of power – eg, the Internationals and international labor organizations, the non-aligned movement. Yet it is precisely in their international projects that these kinds of movements have experienced some of their greatest limits.

Problems faced by revolutionary projects in the Global South have been underwritten by two interconnected phenomena within postcolonial countries – the rise of often successful and internationalized capitalist classes, and the increasingly uneven internal geography of development within postcolonial countries. The latter phenomena is associated with the linking of national metropolitan centers

into global city networks, networks within which dominant and internationalized classes (capitalists, well-paid urban professionals) are able to realize many of their interests, including the appropriation of surplus from the 'national' countryside (Friedmann, 1996; Taylor, 2004). This manifests the rise of socio-spatial 'cores' within the global periphery (Jones, 1998; Glassman, 2003) and effectively undermines the kinds of popular-national movements which many neo-Marxists had seen as a way station to socialism. In this context, even if the persistence of primitive accumulation as a central feature of capitalist development in the Global South still commends trans-class struggles involving non-proletarian workers, the specific forms that such struggles should take and the possibilities they may bequeath are by no means entirely clear.

V Theorizing ongoing primitive accumulation under neoliberal globalization

In a reinterpretation of Marx's writings, Massimo De Angelis constructs compelling evidence for the claim that while Marx did in part see primitive accumulation as a historical phase of capitalist development he also saw it as a process that formed a basic ontological *condition* for capitalist production, rather than just a historical precondition (1999: section 3.4; cf. De Angelis, 2001). The aspect of De Angelis's argument that I wish to emphasize here is his focus on the basic ontological connection between primitive accumulation and expanded reproduction. As he puts the matter, 'the *separation* of producers and means of production is a common character of *both* accumulation and primitive accumulation'. and indeed for Marx accumulation proper is nothing other than primitive accumulation 'raised to a higher power' (De Angelis, 1999: sections 3.1 and 3.2). Moreover, this basic ontological connection points to the fact that, following Luxemburg, 'the extra-economic prerequisite to capitalist production – what we shall call primitive accumulation – is an inherent and

continuous element of modern societies and its range of action extends to the entire world' (De Angelis, 1999: section 2).

This basic conceptual point helps ground some of the foregoing observations about the continuous, contemporary, and global character of primitive accumulation. However much the language of historical phases may have infused Marx's work, and however problematic some of the specific phase-oriented political conclusions he chose to draw, his basic ontology of *alienation* (see Ollman, 1971) links primitive accumulation and expanded reproduction and provides a basis for understanding primitive accumulation as more than merely historical (cf. Bonefield, 2001). Crucially, De Angelis focuses on the role of class struggles in the process of separation, and I want to investigate further some of the possibilities bequeathed by these class struggles, both to further clarify how and why primitive accumulation can be seen as continuous, rather than a historical phase, and to inform the reassessment of what Harvey calls 'Marx's reticence' regarding endorsement of struggles over primitive accumulation (Harvey, 2003: 143–44).

Primitive accumulation may be useful for capitalists and may thus discourage them from intentionally promoting full proletarianization (Wallerstein, 1979: 277–78, 290), but this does not resolve the issue of whether or not primitive accumulation is likely to be an enduring feature of capitalist development. I suggest that the contours of class struggle are indeterminate in this regard. Moreover, precisely in the indeterminacy of these contours resides one basis for the likelihood – never the inevitable necessity – of primitive accumulation remaining a fixture within capitalist development. Workers may struggle, as Wallerstein suggests, to gain employment as wage laborers, as well as to gain access to the forms of social expenditure that have often accompanied full proletarianization (cf. O'Connor, 1973). But there is also a long history of workers resisting their full proletarianization – primarily because of the loss of

independence entailed and the undesirability of working conditions in the waged jobs available to workers removed from agriculture, petty commodity production, and the like (Scott, 1976; 1985; Perelman, 2000).

Given these complexities, the process of proletarianization seems much more a contingent outcome of specific class struggles than a predetermined trajectory of capitalist development. Forces exist that both accelerate and retard proletarianization, and neither kind of force is the exclusive preserve of one or another social group. In some contexts, capitalists can benefit not only from garnering cheap resources but from turning precapitalist workers into wage laborers in the process. In such contexts, however, workers themselves may struggle against this process of proletarianization with greater or lesser effect. In other contexts capitalists can benefit from maintaining a large non-proletarianized labor force that contributes indirectly to capitalists' ability to formally exploit wage labor, a project that may confront the attempts of workers to gain greater access to paid, proletarianized labor (Wolpe, 1980; Perelman, 2000). While no formula can determine in advance whether or not, empirically speaking, primitive accumulation is likely to be a passing phase or instead a permanent feature of capitalist development, the fact that proletarianization-retarding forces emanating from class struggle will always likely be present, implies that primitive accumulation is a more enduring process than Marx suggested in the moments where he discusses it as a historical phase.

While Marx laid crucial foundations for analyzing the complex, transnational geography of class struggles within capitalism, he also chose to place special emphasis on the struggles by already proletarianized workers over the conditions of expanded reproduction. Various contemporary commentators note reasons for this, beyond the geographical-political considerations I have already mentioned. Michael Perelman, for example, argues that Marx 'would not have wished his

readers to believe that measures to eliminate "unjust" instances of primitive accumulation might suffice to bring about a good society' or 'that the ills of society resulted from unjust actions that were unrelated to the essence of the market' (cited in De Angelis, 1999: section 5.1). Harvey, drawing Marx's reticence through a range of contemporary concerns, notes both that struggles over primitive accumulation can often be anti-socialist or lacking in progressive characteristics (2003: 162–63, 166, 169), and are moreover extremely heterogeneous and difficult to bring together both thematically and geographically (2003: 166, 173–74).

These were certainly concerns for Marx, and they have considerable justification. Yet they are also one-sided. Anti-socialist and non-progressive politics are scarcely the sole preserve of groups struggling over primitive accumulation, as evidenced by the long history of support for imperialism by organized labor within countries of the Global North (Glassman, 2004). More pertinent to my present argument, if actually existing capitalist development simply *is* many-sided and complex, mobilizing a whole range of actors against the varied aspects of alienation that are integral to capitalism, then there is no way around the activist challenges of building alliances among disparate actors – as Harvey rightly notes (2003: 176–77) – or the scholarly challenges of seeing and effectively analyzing the connections between these disparate faces of capitalist alienation. This, as I will note below in addressing Harvey's work more directly, is precisely why anti-capitalist struggles have increasingly come to be associated – rightly or wrongly – with the so-called 'new social movements', such as environmental and livelihood struggles in the Global South and struggles against environmental and other forms of racism in the Global North.

In elaborating this matter, moreover, it is important to note the various forms of social labor that are not paid for totally by capital but are required by capital – from publicly funded infrastructure provision, subsidies to

research and development, and publicly funded training and education of workers, to gendered and often racialized household labor, and policing and other activities connected to maintenance of capitalist property relations. These forms of labor are always central to capitalism, even in its most 'mature' forms. Within the autonomist Marxist tradition, recognition of the breadth and depth of these social reproductive activities and the ways they are integral to formally capitalist accumulation has led to the assertion that capitalism has reached a stage in which all activities are subsumed within what Mario Tronti calls the 'social factory' (Tronti, 1973). That is, all social activities are subsumed within processes that lead to the production and appropriation of surplus value by capitalists (cf. Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Bell, 1978; Cleaver, 1979; Negri, 1991).

Seen in this way, the production of value that enters into the circuits of capitalist accumulation through the parasitization of formally non-capitalist processes is a deeply embedded feature of capitalism, going beyond the imperialist appropriation identified in earlier Marxist debates. Moreover, there is little reason to suppose that capitalists would wish to dispose of all formally non-capitalist processes of production and social reproduction (ie, directly commodify everything), since to do so would require capitalists to pay all the costs of reproducing capitalist social relations, including the requirements for developing an exploitable labor force.

Indeed, to complicate this picture further, it is crucial to note that one central aspect of primitive accumulation that is scarcely analyzed within many of the resurgent discussions of primitive accumulation is capitalist appropriation of the value produced through the gendered labor of social reproduction (Dalla Costa, 2004; 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2004). Yet some of the most important contributions to late twentieth-century leftist debates have been feminist analyses of ways in which household labor (productive and reproductive) and subsistence production

have undergirded and made possible the accumulation of capital in the money economy, particularly through the role of this labor in social reproduction of a labor force that can be directly exploited by capital (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Deere, 1976; Beneria, 1979; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Cravey, 1998; Katz, 2001a; 2001b; Dalla Costa, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, the patriarchal control of women's bodies that enables this gender division of labor has been directly analyzed as an instance of primitive accumulation (Mies, 1986; Dalla Costa, 2004).

Expanding on this argument, Katharyne Mitchell, Sallie Marston, and Cindi Katz in fact argue against the very notion of a separation between the work of production and social reproduction (2004). From this perspective, gendered and racialized forms of household labor that have been conceived as part of the process of social reproduction are in fact integral to the overall process of production and accumulation. This makes alienation and appropriation of surplus value central to an even wider range of activities than those typically discussed under the heading of primitive accumulation.

I follow the tradition of referring to the entire panoply of forms of accumulation by means other than expanded reproduction – the primitive accumulation discussed by Marx, new or ongoing forms of accumulation by dispossession, and the gendered and racialized forms of accumulation within social reproduction noted here – as 'accumulation by extra-economic means'. Adding to the picture the extra-economic accumulation of (mainly) women's unpaid social reproductive labor – including the varied forms of subjugation and social struggle that enable this – makes the geography of struggle against global capitalism appear yet more complicated. The geography of global capitalism embraces all scales and spaces, in complex ways, and this inherently makes both understanding and struggling to overcome capitalist alienation deeply complicated. What should one do about the challenges of this complexity?

I do not propose a direct answer to the political question, but in the final section I will note possible responses to the challenge for scholarship on the politics of primitive accumulation, responses enabled in part by the 'return' of primitive accumulation to the Global North.

VI Primitive accumulation returns to the core: recent work in geography

The foregoing thematic-historical discussion makes it easier to appreciate the significance for political debates of recent work that has emphasized the process of primitive accumulation within core areas of global capitalism. Such work has gone on for some time outside of geography, but here I focus on three important invocations of ideas about primitive accumulation in writings by geographers – Richard Walker's use of the notion in explaining particularities of California agriculture, James McCarthy's adaptation of the term in explaining the environmental politics of current trade agreements, and Harvey's updating of the term in his discussion of US imperialism.

Walker's book on California agriculture, *The conquest of bread* (2004), invokes primitive accumulation to explain the continuously weak position of agricultural labor, even in a context of robust agricultural growth and Herculean organizing efforts. After noting that 'the commodification of labor is the most basic element of primitive accumulation', Walker explains how California agricultural employers 'used one group after another, in a vast, repetitive cycle of recruitment, employment, exploitation, and expulsion', thus making the commodification of labor a seemingly permanent, ongoing aspect of agricultural development (2004: 66). This constant destabilization of any permanent agricultural labor force, which effectively prevented workers from making strong claims for better wages and more rights, was accomplished through a combination of imperial and racial practices, enacted through varied forms of legislation and repressive force.

Walker notes that the post-Civil War agrarian labor force was comprised of US-born whites and immigrant Irish, Germans, Chinese, and Portuguese, with the Chinese playing an especially important role. This began to change by the end of the nineteenth century, however, due to the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, 1892, and 1902, leading to increased recruitment of Japanese workers by the 1890s (2004: 68). By the 1910s, increased racism towards Japanese workers and international hostility towards Japanese imperialism led to a reduction in the numbers of Japanese in the farm labor force, at which point growers began to recruit Filipinos in large numbers, along with new immigrants from Italy and Portugal (2004: 69). After the first world war, the federal government made special provisions to the 1917 Immigration Act, allowing more recruitment of Mexican labor. Racism again emerged to transform the emerging labor force, however, with hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Filipinos being deported in the early 1930s, their places taken temporarily by poor white transplants (the 'Okies') from the Dust Bowls of the south-central United States (2004: 71). During the second world war, with many of the 'Okies' drawn into industrial employment, growers procured government help in recruiting convicts, prisoners of war, and interned Japanese Americans, but most importantly they procured implementation of the *bracero* program, which allowed increased recruitment of agricultural workers from Mexico (2004: 72). Meant originally as a wartime measure, the *bracero* program proved so beneficial for the growers that it was kept in place for 23 years. When the program was terminated in 1964, growers turned to cross-border 'commuters', allowed under the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, but more importantly came to rely on a steady flow of undocumented workers, whose numbers have reached 80% of the California agrarian labor force at present (2004: 73–74).

Walker notes that this ongoing process of primitive accumulation has enabled enormous profits. For example, the *bracero* program's

abnormally low wages likely 'helped underwrite the postwar spurt in profits and accumulation, including the rise in land prices and land concentration, and investment in machinery, irrigation, and petrochemicals' (2004: 73). More generally, the condition of 'the endless recommodification of labor and of labor market oversupply has never allowed any group to secure enough of a foothold to stake a claim to fairer distribution of the immense value produced' (2004: 74–75). Crucially, this has not been merely an inevitable outcome of abstract 'market forces' but is clearly a manifestation of primitive accumulation in that labor has consistently been made available under conditions of insecurity and overabundance through 'extra-economic' means. These include numerous political and military events in the origin countries of the migrants (eg, the breakdown of the late Q'ing era regime in China, the possibilities for Filipino migration opened by US colonization, and the dislocations caused by the Mexican Revolution) along with constant, ongoing 'market interventions' and exercises of political clout and repressive force by the growers (cf. Mitchell, 1998; Henderson, 1999). As Walker aptly summarises the matter, the lack of worker rights and ability to participate in the abundance of California agriculture 'is hardly accidental, since it is systematically maintained by agro-capitalists through labor recruitment, union busting, and lobbying in the halls of government'. In sum, cheap agrarian labor has been procured 'through class struggle that the workers have repeatedly lost' (2004: 75) – notwithstanding the tremendous efforts of Cesar Chavez and other agrarian labor organizers that Walker goes on to outline.

Walker's work emphasizes the importance of primitive accumulation in a fairly classical Marxist sense, ie, proletarianization, but within an 'advanced' capitalist context. It also does so – though Walker comments little on this – by showing the importance of the internationalization of capital. In a sense, the revolving door of migrant labor into and out

of California agriculture is the other side of processes by which capitalism has expanded from Global North to Global South – eg, British railroads into China and US railroads into Mexico, destabilizing both countries, US colonization of the Philippines – affecting a primitive accumulation in the latter areas that rebounds to the former. This demonstrates one dimension of the complex spatiality of primitive accumulation.

McCarthy, in a recent paper on the environmental politics of neoliberal trade agreements (2004), adapts the notion of primitive accumulation by emphasizing Marx's understanding that the process involves not only accumulation of proletarian labor but the consolidation of the 'pigmy property of the many'. In a creative synthesis of Marx's conceptualization and James O'Connor's notion of capitalism's destruction of its own natural 'conditions of production'. McCarthy updates discussion of this aspect of primitive accumulation by elaborating on how trade regimes such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) inscribe private rights to the surplus value made possible by these conditions of production. Thus, capitalists today do not merely directly privatize common property resources but, through specific legislation, the right to profit from use of such resources irrespective the effects (externalities) this use generates (McCarthy, 2004: 337).

One specific form of this private appropriation is the development of mechanisms forcing governments to reimburse capitalists for various costs that result from environmental legislation. Neoliberal trade agreements have made implementation of environmental regulations difficult in any case, since they can easily be construed as 'barriers to trade' and thus punished or struck down under the terms of the agreements (McCarthy, 2004: 330). But, should environmental legislation be maintained and be construed by individual investors as diminishing their profits, additional legal mechanisms have been created to aid investors. Building from basic restrictions on direct expropriation of investors' property,

NAFTA texts also define forms of 'indirect expropriation' and assert that 'any regulatory action by a government that reduces the maximum conceivable value of an investor's property is a form of expropriation and that the government must pay the investor for the property it has "taken"' (McCarthy, 2004: 331). This approach represents an updated version of the 'regulatory takings' argument promoted in the United States by the Reagan administration, an approach which ran aground on its legally dubious and politically unpopular assumption 'that completely unencumbered, asocial private property is the norm and that the state must pay its citizens for any exercise of its governance powers' (McCarthy, 2004: 332).

McCarthy's paper contains many other detailed examples of how neoliberal trade agreements impose an environmental governance model that attempts to expand private property rights claims while shrinking the public sphere. The foregoing, however, serves to adequately highlight several central conceptual points that emerge from the discussion. First, this is again truly a process of primitive accumulation, not the result of 'naturally' functioning market forces. The world of trade and trade agreements that McCarthy analyzes is a world in which the kinds of market forces that will be mobilized are clearly produced in part through 'extra-economic' political 'interventions' – namely, through the construction of a quite particular, and often intuitively unnatural, international legal order in which specific rights to trade and invest are made to trump all other rights.

Second, as with the case of contemporary proletarianization described by Walker, this is a contemporary variant on the process Marx described, and one taking root within the Global North, thus illustrating the continuing salience of primitive accumulation. Third, as with the process Walker describes, there is an important international dimension. Neoliberal environmental governance has not just been promoted within the global core or North America but has become a global project of

neoliberal and capitalist elites. Indeed, as McCarthy notes, 'regulatory takings' doctrine was challenged in the United States under the Reagan administration, and so its promoters built it into NAFTA in order to secure its pre-emption of national environmental regulations. This is a case of 'neoliberal rescaling of governance to escape national-scale environmental constraints' (2004: 332).

Harvey's many-faceted discussion of primitive accumulation, under the updated and expanded heading of accumulation by dispossession, is part of his broader discussion of US foreign policy in *The new imperialism* (2003). The analysis is sweeping and has already generated substantial discussion, so here I want only to focus on a few of its specific features. While much of Harvey's analysis, rather like Luxemburg's, emphasizes the global expansion of capitalism into the periphery and the processes of primitive accumulation taking place there, one specific dimension of the discussion links this to similar processes in the global core. Pointing to the crucial role of the global neoliberal project, Harvey emphasizes privatization, calling it 'the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession' (2003: 157), and paying special attention to activities such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed privatization of state enterprises. Privatization, in myriad forms, is one of the crucial ways in which capitalists have been able to 'actively manufacture' new realms for proletarianization and private appropriation of public property, even within the global core (2003: 141). The kinds of entities being privatized range from educational institutions to public utilities, health care, social housing, and a whole range of state enterprises involved in commodity production (2003: 148–49). The neoliberal movement towards these forms of privatization began with special aggressiveness in Thatcher's England, and subsequently spread not only to Reagan's United States but throughout much of the world, generally imposed through organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and (more recently) the World Trade Organization (Harvey, 2003: 158–59).

For Harvey, neoliberal accumulation by dispossession represents a specific kind of attempt to overcome the structural problems of overaccumulation, problems that have always been central to the exercise of imperialism (2003: 140–42, 149–50). He asserts, moreover, that while accumulation by dispossession has always been an aspect of the broader process of capital accumulation – notwithstanding Marx’s emphasis on expanded reproduction within societies in which substantial proletarianization has already occurred – in the neoliberal era it has moved from background to become the dominant form of accumulation (2003: 153, 172). The question is why this should be the case, and for Harvey the answer is primarily that accumulation by dispossession represents one intensive means to try to overcome the over-accumulation crisis tendencies that have been building since the end of the Fordist era (2003: 149–50, 158).

In discussing privatization in the global core as an aspect of accumulation by dispossession, Harvey notes the importance of historical struggles through which workers, especially in the Global North, obtained some degree of protection from the depredations of capitalism (2003: 148). This is one half of what Karl Polanyi referred to as the ‘double movement’ – ie, the growth in the market orientation of society and the simultaneous growth in popular social movement reactions against market society’s untoward effects. McCarthy also highlights the double movement in explaining the development of environmental protection (2004: 335), and it is precisely the weakness of the social reaction within this double movement that Walker analyzes in relation to California agriculture. This double movement, in its varied forms and intensities, illustrates – and, here, within the global core – the active presence of the ‘conservation-dissolution’ dialectic. Throughout his discussion, Harvey’s reason for analyzing these kinds of phenomena is not only to spell out their relationship to the new imperialism but to highlight the possibilities for bringing

together struggles in the Global North and Global South, as well as struggles over expanded reproduction and accumulation by dispossession (2003: 169–80).

This brings Harvey’s analysis to the terrain of the ‘new social movements’. Harvey suggests that, while many of these movements lack progressive political agendas, it is nonetheless inappropriate to maintain Marx’s reticence in its original form. The task today is to develop links between progressive struggles over accumulation by dispossession and struggles over expanded reproduction. This is necessary, in the first instance, because ‘the two forms of struggle are organically linked within the historical geography of capitalism’, and so in neglecting one or the other the Left disempowers itself and limits its ‘analytical and programmatic powers’ (2003: 171). Moreover, in Harvey’s view, the crisis of declining profitability that marks post-1970s capitalism has increased the intensity of accumulation by dispossession as a strategy, and thus ‘the balance of interest within the anti-and alternative globalization movement must acknowledge accumulation by dispossession as the primary contradiction to be confronted’ (2003: 177). Finally, Harvey argues that the neoliberal agenda promoted by organizations like the IMF makes the connections between accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction increasingly clear, thus enabling higher levels of collaboration between groups like those in the Global North and the Global South that simultaneously suffer from the privatization process (2003: 157–61; 179–80).

To summarize some general contentions about primitive accumulation, based both on a long history of analysis and on these more recent works addressing its resurgent importance, we can say the following.

- 1) Though primitive accumulation is a process that some have considered a historical phase through which societies pass on the way to more fully proletarianized social structures based on expanded reproduction, the current state of global affairs

makes it evident that primitive accumulation has maintained or even increased its salience, meaning either that it is in fact central to capitalist accumulation in general or else has a much longer period of historical 'dissolution' than previously imagined.

- 2) Primitive accumulation has myriad forms, virtually all of which Marx had already identified in his writings on the topic, but each of these forms also has new twists, as with the development of new forms of environmental governance that allow private appropriation of the conditions of production or privatization of public goods produced through previous rounds of social struggle.
- 3) Primitive accumulation has always been, and continues to be, especially important within the Global South, but its highly visible re-emergence within the Global North suggests that it needs to be viewed as integral to global capitalist development everywhere, not just in particular locations. Indeed, if we recognize among the 'extra-economic' conditions of accumulation the gendered labor of social reproduction, we can say that the accumulation process has both an *extensive* (geographical) and an *intensive* (social) frontier, and thus primitive accumulation encompasses an enormous socio-spatial range of activities.
- 4) The heterogeneity and geographical-historical complexity that ongoing primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, and accumulation by extra-economic means lend to social struggles over capitalist development seem to pose severe challenges for social movements. As Harvey puts it, 'the variety of such struggles was and is simply stunning', so much so that it is often 'hard to even imagine connections between them' (2003: 166).

Against the backdrop of these kinds of considerations I want to note, in concluding, some of the political and theoretical challenges posed by transnational activism that incorporates concerns over primitive accu-

mulation, accumulation by dispossession, and accumulation by extra-economic means.

VII Conclusion: trans-class struggles in an era of transnationalism

The notion that 'primitive accumulation' represents a specific phase of capitalist development exercised a somewhat divisive influence on the politics of anti-capitalist struggle for a century or more. The historical phase concept implied, for more traditional Marxists, that the most historically progressive struggles against capitalism were those of industrial wage laborers in the Global North and *not* those of non-proletarian workers struggling to maintain autonomy from capital. For neo-Marxists in the Global South, on the other hand, the ongoing character of primitive accumulation outside the global core implied that popular-national and third-world struggles against imperialism would provide the main axis of progressive social action for the indefinite future. Without simply eradicating past residues of uneven development, contemporary postcolonial, neoliberal globalization is reconfiguring the global political economy in ways that call both these positions into question and tentatively create new grounds for broad-based solidarities across North-South – and other – divides. The newly evolving commonalities are not merely those of a revived, and modified, global primitive accumulation, but nonetheless primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, and accumulation by extra-economic means provide useful rubrics under which the continuous character of capital's extra-economic production of alienation can be linked conceptually to struggles over ongoing expanded reproduction. This creates new, interesting, and potentially fecund solidarities.

There are many examples of such newly forming solidarities, including intensified efforts at creating an international social movement unionism (*Antipode*, 2001; Waterman, 2003), transnational anti-neoliberal environmental activism (*Geoforum*, 2004; Welford, 2005), transnational feminist

activism (Eschle, 2001), and the emergence of an anti-corporate globalization movement, with important manifestations such as the so-called 'movement of movements', the World Social Forum (Leite, 2003; Fisher and Ponniah, 2004; Mertes, 2004). These varied efforts do not by themselves resolve the practical problems in making common cause that Harvey emphasizes, but the participants in these efforts are in most cases keenly aware of the issues and as such the main problems are less those of finding areas of overlap and agreement than finding practical and effective ways to forward material agendas that can build sustainable and effective social changes.

Cindi Katz's invocation of topography as connecting struggles across different transnational spaces in an era of neoliberal globalization has proven an especially attractive image for geographers addressing these issues (Katz, 2001a; 2001b) – all the more so given that it is directly based in concerns over neoliberal capital's extra-economic accumulation of the surplus embedded in gendered social reproductive practices. That neoliberal globalization is providing new opportunities for transnational social struggles across the North–South divide – and that such struggles increasingly focus accumulation by extra-economic means as much as expanded reproduction – seems abundantly clear.

Yet the challenges of making practical headway through such transnationalization of struggle remain considerable, even when the possible linkages between struggles in different locations are recognized. Limits on the ability of relatively disempowered people to travel and/or to directly participate in an announced 'global civil society' pose ongoing challenges to idealized notions of inclusiveness through transnational activism. Indeed, a very real problem confronting the new transnational activism is that – its pretensions to overcoming Leninist vanguardism notwithstanding – it may well be accused of representing a new form of elitism in which those with the most geographical mobility play privileged roles and even dominate the formation

of political agendas (Routledge, 2004; Nagar and The Sangtin Writers' Collective, 2006). These problems of the new geographies of anti-capitalist activism cannot be resolved in theory before they are resolved in practice, if the latter is indeed possible. But this means that issues like the geographies of transnational activism in contexts of uneven development will be central to both political strategy and social theorizing. The 'return' of primitive accumulation to the core – or, better to the core of concerns among theorists in the Global North – thus manifests one dimension of an evolving geographical research agenda that will be central to struggles over neoliberal globalization.

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