

The Meaning of ‘So-Called Primitive Accumulation’

Ian Angus

In part 8 of *Capital*, titled “So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” Karl Marx describes the brutal processes that separated working people from the means of subsistence and concentrated wealth in the hands of landlords and capitalists. It is one of the most dramatic and readable parts of the book.

It is also a continuing source of confusion and debate. Literally hundreds of articles have tried to explain what “primitive accumulation” really meant. Did it occur only in the distant past, or does it continue today? Was “primitive” a mistranslation? Should the name be changed? What exactly was “Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation”?

Here, I argue that Marx thought “primitive accumulation” was a misleading and erroneous concept. Understanding what he actually wrote shines light on two essential Marxist concepts: exploitation and expropriation.

On June 20 and 27, 1865, Karl Marx gave a two-part lecture to members of the International Workingmen’s Association (the First International) in London. In clear and direct English, he drew on insights that would appear in the nearly finished first volume of *Capital*, to explain the labor theory of value, surplus value, class struggle, and the importance of trade unions as “centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital.” Since an English translation



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of Capital was not published until after his death, those talks were the only opportunity that English-speaking workers had to learn those ideas directly from their author.¹

While explaining how workers sell their ability to work, Marx asked rhetorically how it came about that there are two types of people in the market—capitalists who own the means of production, and workers who must sell their labor-power in order to survive.

How does this strange phenomenon arise, that we find on the market a set of buyers, possessed of land, machinery, raw material, and the means of subsistence, all of them, save land in its crude state, the products of labour, and on the other hand, a set of sellers who have nothing to sell except their labouring power, their working arms and brains? That the one set buys continually in order to make a profit and enrich themselves, while the other set continually sells in order to earn their livelihood?²

A full answer was outside the scope of his lecture, he said, but “the inquiry into this question would be an inquiry into what the economists call ‘Previous, or Original Accumulation,’ but which ought to be called Original Expropriation.”

We should find that this so-called Original Accumulation means nothing but a series of historical processes, resulting in a Decomposition of the Original Union existing between the Labouring Man and his Instruments of Labour... The Separation between the Man of Labour and the Instruments of Labour once established, such a state of things will maintain itself and reproduce itself upon a constantly increasing scale, until a new and fundamental revolution in the mode of production should again overturn it, and restore the original union in a new historical form.³

Marx was always very careful in his use of words. He did not replace accumulation with expropriation lightly. The switch is particularly important because this was the only time he discussed the issue in English—it was not filtered through a translation.⁴

In *Capital*, the subject occupies eight chapters in the part titled “Die sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation”—later rendered in English translations as “So-Called Primitive Accumulation.” Once again, Marx’s careful use of words is important—he added “so-called” to make a point, that the historical processes were not primitive and not accumulation. Much of the confusion about Marx’s meaning reflects failure to understand his ironic intent, here and elsewhere.

In the first paragraph he tells us that “ursprüngliche” Akkumulation is his translation of Adam Smith’s words “previous accumulation.” He put the word ursprüngliche (previous) in scare quotes, signalling that the word is inappropriate. For some reason the quote marks are omitted in the English translations, so his irony is lost.

¹ ↪ Karl Marx, “Value, Price and Profit,” *Collected Works*, vol. 20 (New York: International Publishers, 1975–2004), 149.

² ↪ Marx, “Value, Price and Profit,” 128.

³ ↪ Marx, “Value, Price and Profit,” 128–29.

⁴ ↪ Except where noted, the following quotations are from Karl Marx, “So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976), 873–940.

In the 1800s, primitive was a synonym for original—for example, the Primitive Methodist Church claimed to follow the original teachings of Methodism. As a result, the French edition of *Capital*, which Marx edited in the 1870s, translated *ursprungliche* as primitive, which carried over to the 1887 English translation, and we have been stuck with primitive accumulation ever since, even though the word’s meaning has changed.

Marx explains why he used “so-called” and scare quotes by comparing the idea of previous accumulation to the Christian doctrine that we all suffer because Adam and Eve sinned in a distant mythical past. Proponents of previous accumulation tell an equivalent nursery tale:

Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living.... Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work.

“Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in defence of property,” but when we consider actual history, “it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part.” The chapters on “So-Called Primitive Accumulation” describe the actual processes by which “great masses of men [were] suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labor-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians.”

These newly freed men 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 this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.

Marx’s account focuses on expropriation in England, because the dispossession of working people was most complete there, but he also refers to the mass murder of Indigenous people in the Americas, the plundering of India, and the trade in African slaves—“these idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.” That sentence, and others like it, illustrate Marx’s consistently sarcastic take on primitive accumulation. He is not describing primitive accumulation, he is condemning those who use the concept to conceal the brutal reality of expropriation.

Failure to understand that Marx was polemicising against the concept of “primitive accumulation” has led to another misconception—that Marx thought it occurred only in the distant past, when capitalism was being born. That was what procapitalist writers meant by previous accumulation, and as we have seen, Marx compared that view to the Garden of Eden myth. Marx’s chapters on so-called primitive accumulation emphasised the violent expropriations that laid the basis for early capitalism because he was responding to the claim that capitalism evolved peacefully. But his account also includes the Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1850s, the Highland Clearances in capitalist Scotland, the colonial-created famine that killed a million people in Orissa in India in 1866, and plans for enclosing and privatising land in

Australia. All of these took place during Marx’s lifetime and while he was writing *Capital*. None of them were part of capitalism’s prehistory.

The expropriations that occurred in capitalism’s first centuries were devastating, but far from complete. In Marx’s view, capital could not rest there. Its ultimate goal was “to expropriate all individuals from the means of production.”⁵

Elsewhere he wrote of big capitalists “dispossessing the smaller capitalists and expropriating the final residue of direct producers who still have something left to expropriate.”⁶ In other words, expropriation continues well after capitalism matures.

We often use the word accumulation loosely, for gathering up or hoarding, but for Marx it had a specific meaning, the increase of capital by the addition of surplus value, a continuous process that results from the exploitation of wage-labor.⁷ The examples he describes in “So-Called Primitive Accumulation” all refer to robbery, dispossession, and expropriation—discrete

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In the history of capitalism, we see a constant, dialectical interplay between the two forms of class robbery that Peter Linebaugh has dubbed X2—expropriation and exploitation. “Expropriation is prior to exploitation, yet the two are interdependent. Expropriation not only prepares the ground, so to speak, it intensifies exploitation.”⁸

Expropriation is open robbery. It includes forced enclosure, dispossession, slavery, and other forms of theft, without equivalent exchange. Exploitation is concealed robbery. Workers appear to receive full payment for their labor in the form of wages, but in fact the employer receives more value than he pays for.

What political economists described as a gradual buildup of wealth by men who were more industrious and frugal than others was actually violent, forcible expropriation that created the original context for exploitation and has continued to expand it ever since. As John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark write in *The Robbery of Nature*:

*Like any complex, dynamic system, capitalism has both an inner force that propels it and objective conditions outside itself that set its boundaries, the relations to which are forever changing. The inner dynamic of the system is governed by the process of exploitation of labor power, under the guise of equal exchange, while its primary relation to its external environment is one of expropriation.*⁹

⁵ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (New York: Penguin, 1981), 571.

⁶ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 349.

⁷ ↪ See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapters 24 and 25.

⁸ ↪ Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures and Resistance* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2014), 73.

⁹ ↪ John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 36.

In short, Marx did not have a “theory of primitive accumulation.” He devoted eight chapters of *Capital* to demonstrating that the political economists who promoted such a theory were wrong, that it was a “nursery tale” invented to whitewash capital’s real history. That is why he preceded the words “primitive accumulation” by “so-called.”

Marx’s preference for “original expropriation” was not just playing with words. That expression captured his view that “the expropriation from the land of the direct producers—private ownership for some, involving non-ownership of the land for others—is the basis of the capitalist mode of production.”¹⁰

The continuing separation of humanity from our direct relationship with the earth was not and is not a peaceful process: it is written in letters of blood and fire.

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¹⁰ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 948. Emphasis added.

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