

The Planet Consumed by Primitive Accumulation

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The development of capitalism is a story wrought with turmoil, violence and oppression. Despite the capitalist doctrine that Adam Smith bit into the apple of the *Wealth of Nations* and thus, capitalism entered the world, the primitive accumulation of capital that developed the economic system involved a multi-century transition from feudalism to capitalism that employed violence and force to give rise to the modern world (Marx 1867, 873). In *Capital*, Karl Marx exposes this transformation and provides examples of change in fourteenth to nineteenth century Europe. This portrayal, however, can reduce the significance of its message for a modern audience. Through an analysis of Marx's primitive accumulation combined with examples from Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums*, one will find primitive accumulation more applicable to the modern world.

Marx first acknowledges that capital does not naturally originate in human society, instead "money and commodities are no more capital than the means of production and subsistence are. They need to be transformed into capital" (Marx 1867, 874). This transformation from product to capital involves a process of creating buyers and sellers of labour and a market for such an exchange to exist. In order to create this world of capital, the state must go through a process that is termed "primitive accumulation." "So-called primitive accumulation [...] is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx 1867, 875). While Adam Smith portrayed primitive accumulation to be a passive

transition as those who are ambitious and hard-working attain managerial status and those who are lazy miss out on their opportunity and are forced to sell their labour to the industrious population, Marx believes that the process exudes an entirely different nature. Instead, capitalism traces its origins to a violent beginning in which peasants are supplanted from their land and turned into wage-labourers exploited by the capitalist (Marx 1867, 875-876), "a history written in the annals of mankind in the letters of blood and fire" (Marx 1867, 875).

Marx's narrative of primitive accumulation begins with the end of the feudal era. At this time, as the definition of power transformed from the number of subjects one possessed to the amount of wealth one could accumulate, "Transformation of arable land into sheep-walks" (Marx 1867, 879) became the norm – arable land that was inhabited by the poor farmer pursuing personal subsistence (Marx 1867, 879). In addition, as the ultimate authority of the Catholic Church was greatly reduced (and in some states eliminated), the land originally owned by the institution was essentially auctioned off to bourgeois buyers (Marx 1867, 881-882). This land was, during the time of religious occupation, worked by peasants similarly to the case with the domains of the feudal lords. As this land was sold to agricultural magnates, the peasants were forced off of the soil in order that it could be "used properly." This process was then adopted into law, specifically in England with the adoption of the "Bills for the Inclosure of Commons" and solidified in the early 1800s with the passage of the Inclosure Act that successfully converted these lands into the private property of the bourgeoisie (Marx 1867, 885-887). In creating private property, the ability of

the peasants to farm the soil for their own survival was eliminated. The removal of the poor farmers from their means of survival creates what Marx terms “free labour,” which is the group of people that “neither form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case with slaves, serfs, etc., nor do they own the means of production, as would be the case with self-employed peasant proprietors” (Marx 1867, 874). The creation of this class of workers is important to capitalist development in that without its inception, wage labour cannot exist. This is because the would-be labourers could find their own self-subsistence in their own work rather than being forced to work for individuals who possess the means of production to ensure their survival. In order to find work, these wage-labourers must move to the cities to be employed in factories for minimal payment.

The concept of primitive accumulation may, in fact, seem primitive and no longer relevant to the modern era; however, this most definitely is not the case. As portrayed in *Planet of Slums*, primitive accumulation and its reapplication is prevalent in the developing post-colonial world through the process that is referred to as “urbanisation”. Davis explains that throughout the third world, the unprecedented expansion of cities has become the norm. In China, for example, “250 or 300 million people – the next ‘peasant flood’ – are expected to [move from rural areas to cities] in the coming decades” (Davis 2007, 11). “Driven toward cities by brutal and irresistible forces,” these peasants, rather than relocating for personal betterment, “eagerly asserted their ‘right to the city,’ even if that meant only a hovel on its periphery” (Davis 2007, 55). This great exodus to the cities is the result of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank agricultural deregulation and elimination of social safety nets. Both policies eradicate the ability of peasants to compete in the world market with their products, in order to create a more economically neo-liberal environment (Davis 2007, 15). This clearly reflects the processes involved in the primitive accumulation of capital that Marx presents in fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. Instead of the dissolution of feudalism and local legislation, modern accumulation of capital involves

international economic regulatory institutions destroying social services in the name of transnational capitalism and the expansion of the global economy. As these people are expropriated from the land that they once inhabited, they are added to the surplus labour that makes market exchanges possible and transforms products and money into capital.

As Marx continues in his narrative concerning primitive accumulation and capitalist development, he explains the role of the state and political legislation involved in the processes. Marx explains that assisting in the development of the capitalist system is in the state’s best interest as creating legislation that ensures a surplus amount of labour keeps Adam Smith’s law of supply and demand to maximize profits for corporations and, therefore, increase the *Wealth of Nations* (Marx 1867, 899). Beginning in 1349 in England, anti-labour regulation established maximum wage limits, extended the work day, and pushed their economic game into the side favouring the bourgeois factory managers, a position that the emerging capitalist class could not attain unaided (Marx 1867, 899-900).

While Marx explains that the pro-capitalist laws that enslaved the labour class were eliminated when they became unnecessary in the 1800s (Marx 1867, 902-903), one can see a restoration of laws against labour in the modern era in the developing world. As the Global South begins to integrate the capitalist system, they too must restrain the proletariat in wage-labour if they are to imitate the West. However, instead of the individual states enforcing such occurrences, this exploitation is facilitated by the IMF and the World Bank. With the end of colonialism, many governments emerged that pledged to support the lower classes in the area of social welfare, especially regarding housing (Davis 2007, 61-62). Nevertheless, these states required monetary assistance from the IMF and the World Bank, and with their contributions came the global capitalist leash. The organizations implemented Structural Adjustment Programs that forced post-colonial governments to establish neo-liberal capitalist policies, thus creating an unregulated state (Davis 2007, 62). This ensures that wage laws, progressive taxes, housing policies

and other social programmes that grant rights to the working class cannot exist in the developing world and, thus, keeping a surplus of labour and enabling capitalist powers to profit from the proletariat as they see fit.

State involvement does, however, assist the capitalist as in previous historical cases. Davis explains that “since the 1970s it has become commonplace for governments everywhere to justify slum clearance as an indispensable means of fighting crime. While it is true that slum poverty can lead to crime, slums, moreover, are frequently seen as threats simply because they are invisible to state surveillance and, effectively, “off-Panopticon” (Davis 2007, 111). Not only does the state assist in this capitalist exploitation through such actions, but it also increases their biopolitical power over the lives of their people by keeping this “non-life” under their watchful eye, stripped of their semi-sheltering “housing.”

Following the exploitation of the proletariat by the state, Marx goes further to examine, what he portrays as, the even more disgusting group of individuals from among the proletariat at the time of their agricultural residence, the capitalist farmers. The class of agricultural capitalists reached their position from acquiring the means of production and seeking excess profit from them (Marx 1867, 905). With this profit, the capitalist farmer employed wage-labourers to create further profits from the generosity of the surplus labour created by evictions and the Inclosure Acts (Marx 1867, 905). Further, the agricultural revolution exponentially expanded earnings by allowing increased productivity with less labour (Marx 1867, 908). This cutthroat class empowered by favour and luck truly exemplifies the dichotomous effects that capitalist development produces. However, this division is not only a result of the initial capitalist foundation, but rather it also continues throughout capitalist history. In the modern developing world, “Landlordism is in fact a fundamental and divisive social relation in slum life worldwide. It is the principle way in which urban poor people can monetize their equity (formal or informal), but often in an exploitative relationship to even poorer people” (Davis 2007, 42). As was the case in early

capitalist development, the alienation of the proletariat not only assists capitalist profits in their competition, but it also secures the bourgeoisie by keeping the working class divided and, therefore, unable to form together to empower themselves. Throughout capitalist development, this alienation is held as one of the primary weapons in the arsenal of the bourgeois population of the capitalist state and enables the inequality gaps to become as large as they are, not only in the Third World, but also the First and Second making the alienation of the proletariat relevant for all peoples in the modern world.

In addition to those exploiting the proletariat from the rural environment, there are also those investors and industrial bourgeoisie and by the state itself. Marx explains that the “Middle Ages had handed down two distinct forms of capital, [...] usurer’s capital and merchant’s capital” (Marx 1867, 914). These forms of capital are employed by the investor and industrial bourgeoisie to maximize profits for the class and horde the wealth from the proletariat. The exploitation by the state is exhibited most profoundly in *Capital* in the form of public debt. “[...]It endows unproductive money with the power of creation and thus turns it into capital, without forcing it to expose itself to the troubles and risks inseparable from its employment in industry or even in usury” (Marx 1867, 919). Through the use of public debt, capitalist profits are increased due to the ability to jump-start bourgeois production.

Usury and merchant’s capital are, of course, still utilized by the bourgeoisie as they are essential to capitalist production and maintenance. Public debt, however, has taken on an entirely new meaning, especially in the developing world. As governments of the Third World accumulate debt, they fall under the jurisdiction of the IMF and World Bank. The enactment of “the 1985 Baker Plan[...] bluntly required the 15 largest Third World debtors to abandon state-led development strategies in return for new loan facilities and continued membership in the world economy” (Davis 2007, 153). Public debt has taken a new role in the exploitation of the proletariat and promotion of neo-liberal capitalism in the developing world.

Marx underlines a root cause of the exploitative practices of the bourgeoisie. “Private property [...] exists only where the means of labour and the external conditions of labour belong to private individuals” (Marx 1867, 927). Private property enables the bourgeoisie to hold the proletariat on their leash. As the proletariat do not have access to the means of production except through the capitalists, they are thus forced to become wage-labour and enable the capitalist system. Marx believes that if the means of production become public where all people have equal access to such means, then the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will be on the same level and, therefore, create a classless state where all people can live free and equally (Marx 1867, 927).

Despite the fact that *Capital* was written in 1867, a time nearly forgotten by the modern age, the theories of primitive accumulation and the development of capitalism are still very prevalent in the world at the present. As the Third World enters the global capitalist market, one can examine a new era of primitive accumulation on a massive scale. The exploitation of post-colonial peoples clearly mirrors the exploitation of the proletariat at the time of original capitalist development. Perhaps in the reproduction of this process, those concerned with the exploitative aspects of capitalism should learn from Marx’s analysis and attempt to eliminate a *Planet of Slums*.

REFERENCES

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