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PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

(*DIE SOGENANNT E URSPRÜNGLICHE AKKUMULATION*)

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Ever since its rise, capitalism has manifested itself as a highly mutable yet sustainable economic system. It has maintained itself despite several crises (according to Marx stemming immanently from the system itself) and outlived numerous forms of resistance. Today, capitalism equals the global economy. In order to protect this status quo, it constantly has to pretend that no alternative system is possible and therefore tries to absorb the attacks of its aggressors into new mutant versions of itself. But no matter in what disguise it appears, capitalism's internal logic forces a division of labour on the society that leads to the situation in which the majority of the people have to sell their labour-power (as their only natural property) on the market. Meanwhile, the means of production remains in the hands of a small minority of private owners and power is increasingly centralized.

If we examine its origin, it turns out that the capitalist mode of production is rooted in very specific historical circumstances. According to Marx, there can be no capitalist mode of production without the preceding act of primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation consists in disappropriating the means of production from the direct producers and thereby

forcing them to become wage-labourers who have no choice but to sell their only remaining property, namely labour-power, to the capitalist in order to sustain themselves. Marx introduces the term while explicitly referring to Adam Smith's notion of 'previous accumulation', which stated that 'the accumulation of stock [i.e. capital] must, in the nature of things, be previous to the division of labour.' (175). Thus the specific division of labour that characterizes the capitalist mode of production is to be seen as the result of primitive accumulation. It is therefore curious that the correct translation of Marx's 'ursprünglich' as 'previous' is falsely translated as 'primitive' in the English translation of *Capital*, for the term 'primitive accumulation' suggests two things about the nature of the capitalist mode of production that are untrue. In the first place, the process seemingly gains a self-referential character by suggesting that it is a primary stage of the capitalist mode of production itself; and in the second place, the term 'primitive' has the effect of causing one to believe that whatever is at stake definitively took place in the past and has, as a historical moment, passed. But in both cases, the opposite is true: Primitive accumulation forms a hinge between the feudal system and the rise of the capitalist mode of production, and it necessarily has to take place on a constant scale in order to ascertain the prevalence of capitalism.

Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt speak in their *Geschichte und Eigensinn* of a certain 'societal discipline' that is inherent to the capitalist system and determines its internal labour-capacity (*Arbeitsvermögen*). This observation could have been a direct reference to Marx himself, who summarizes the process of primitive accumulation as 'the bloody discipline that turned them (the labourers) into wage-labourers' (905). Marx describes primitive accumulation in the first place as a historical narrative that is 'written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire' (875) and does not leave much to the imagination of the reader while telling the story. Without eschewing the use of strong rhetoric and lively forms of plasticity, he adds up the consecutive steps that primitive accumulation undertook to make way for the capitalist mode of production:

'The spoliation of the Church's property, the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property

under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation.’ (895).

Capitalism could only plant its flag in society after multitudinous acts of force and violence, while enforcing radical systemic changes in the division of labour and introducing a new set of rules in the economic house-keeping of society, governed by the state. Society entered a new era wherein it was disciplined by the norms that were conducted by the capitalist mode of production. Marx studied these rudimentary societal developments meticulously and in this respect, one is tempted to say that his methodological approach is similar to the method applied by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Therein, a genealogical study of the history of punishment in Western society reveals hidden motives of a state that gradually succeeded in enforcing various forms of discipline on the society, while claiming that it was doing the opposite. The same tactics were applied during the rise of the capitalist mode of production and the binding of the labourer to the free market. While proclaiming ‘freedom, equality, property and Bentham’ on an ideological level, capitalism in reality enforced the masses to be ‘suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free (*vogel-frei*), unprotected and rightless proletarians.’ (876). The labourers were ‘freed’ in a double sense: they did not form a part of the means of production any longer, let alone did they possess them. This double ‘emancipation’ left the labourer with nothing to sell but his labour-power. Note that the commodification of labour-power - which, as Marx effectively shows, has a violent prologue - has to be seen as the result of primitive accumulation¹. But who or what is it exactly that performs this act of violence?

Of course, Adam Smith had to abstract from the constitutive role of the state in his account of capitalism, for he claimed that the ‘invisible hand’ of the market was primary. Marx demonstrated that the opposite was true: while discussing the rise of the bourgeoisie, he discusses ‘the identity between the wealth of the nation and the poverty of the common’, thereby inevitably referring to the state as the major legislator that stood behind the ‘setting free’ of ‘the agricultural population as a proletariat for the needs of industry.’ (886). He even explicitly mentions the necessary dependence of the bourgeoisie on the state in the context of optimizing

the circumstances to the benefit of the ruling class in order to make profit. The monopoly of the state on violence in order to maintain political stability is crucial in this respect; labourers became subordinated to capital while the state decreed ‘disgraceful proceedings... which employed police methods to accelerate the accumulation of capital by increasing the degree of exploitation of labour’ (905). These concrete historical state procedures created an everlasting struggle between capital and labour and consequentially enforced a hegemonic relation between the state and the working class.

But the hidden tragedy of these enactments is only revealed by Marx when he evaluates the ideological impact of capitalism on the proletariat: ‘The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.’ It is precisely this belief that characterizes the formation of the capitalist mode of production as a ‘phantom-like objectivity’² and reveals the secret of primitive accumulation on a day-to-day level: That we take the system that controls our lives for granted, treating it either as a Moloch or a holy blessing, but either way neglecting the facts that its objective form is not necessary, and that the division of labour as it appears today could have been, and still can be, otherwise.

In order to understand the concept of primitive accumulation as being not only a historical, but also a philosophical category, we should examine Marx’s elaboration of primitive accumulation at the beginning of the chapter more closely. He starts his brief subchapter on ‘the secret’ of primitive accumulation by stating that until this very moment the capitalist mode of production has been caught in what he defines as ‘a vicious circle’: The different moments in the cycle of capitalist production are connected to each other as consecutive loops of a chain, wherein each loop presupposes the previous loop in an interdependent way³. Hence the accumulation of capital depends on surplus-value, just as surplus-value depends on capitalist production, and capitalist production in its turn depends on the availability of a sufficient amount of both capital and labour-power in the hands of the commodity-producer (i.e. the capitalist). The question now is: what is the starting point on which these relations

initially depend? As we have seen, it is only by means of what Marx calls ‘the servitude of the labourer’ (being the initial instigator of this cyclical movement of capital), which results in a hegemonic relation between the wage labourer and the capitalist, that the engine of capitalism starts to work.

Thus the capitalist mode of production arises out of the encounter of two antipodal commodity-owners: the owner of capital (i.e. the means of production, the means of subsistence and money), who needs labour-power to accumulate his capital, and the owner of labour-power, who is in need of money in order to sustain himself. This encounter becomes a done deal in no time, and the circularity of the process is brought into motion. But now it turns out that the circle is ‘vicious’ in another sense of the word: the owner of labour-power has chosen to sell his labour-power in all freedom, which basically means that nobody can be blamed for the fact that he is now being expropriated as a wage-slave. In that sense, the labourer is totally un-free: on an individual level, there is nothing he can do about the fact that his superior subtracts a determinant amount of surplus-value from the sum-total amount of labour-power that he delivers everyday. The problem is that this fact only seems to stem from the system itself, and not from the capitalist for whom the labourer works. As Negt and Kluge rightly observe, primitive accumulation entails more than a specific history of state violence: It is also a systematical category that attempts to theorize the systemic force of capitalism that creates class relations.

The permanence or continuous re-enactment of primitive accumulation plays a central role in the maintenance of the capitalist system. It decides upon the relations between labourers and products, between labourers and capital, between labourers and capitalists and between labourers and labourers. Competition fixes the relations in such a way that some are better off than others, and because capitalism is constantly growing, the economic polarization of these relations fluctuates, often leading to stronger discrepancies and more social inequality. As long as the act of primitive accumulation is re-established on a continuous level, this tendency will not change.

Negt and Kluge point out that capital itself is not created ‘once and for all’, but is in fact constantly reproduced. In that sense, primitive accumulation not only consists in the foundational *expropriation* of the labourer, but also his ongoing *appropriation*; for the expropriation can only be secured by a continuous suppression of the possibilities of self-organization on the part of labourer.

It is because of this double face of primitive accumulation that David Harvey, in *The New Imperialism*, calls primitive accumulation as ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Harvey’s account of accumulation by dispossession is theoretically similar to Marx’s primitive accumulation, but he applies the term to current times while discussing neoliberalism as the latest, highly sophisticated form of the capitalist mode of production. The neoliberalist strategy consists in successfully ranging vast masses of people on its side while, in fact, implementing socio-economic measures that go against their objective class interests. Accumulation through dispossession is a means applied by capitalism to temporarily overcome the problems caused by over-accumulation. In the Marxist tradition, overaccumulation is often seen as a flaw inherent to the capitalist mode of production that systematically produces internal crises. Harvey’s account of accumulation by dispossession also deals with abundant, i.e. overaccumulated capital. He describes the process of accumulation by dispossession in a prosaic and succinct manner:

‘What accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost. Overaccumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use.’ (149).

It concerns a process that includes both legal and illegal dimensions and thrives on a ‘mixture of coercion and consent’. A good example in recent history that lies at the foundations of the credit crunch is the extending of subprime mortgages to low-income earners that could not afford them and were subsequently stripped of their savings and belongings after falling into serious debts. And again, it is the violence of the state that is held to be responsible for creating economic inequality amongst its people:

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

Sara Murawski – Primitive Accumulation

‘The umbilical cord that ties together accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction is that given by finance capital and the institutions of credit, backed, as ever, by state power.’ (152).

In the light of this remark, it might be interesting to cast back to Negt and Kluge’s dual characterization of primitive accumulation as both a category of totality and a category of the imprint of particular and specific traits. In a capitalist society, primitive accumulation obviously dominates class relations. But, as Negt and Kluge point out, there might always be elements that escape the hegemonic force field, potentially creating possibilities of resistance. The struggles against the system, as Harvey rightly remarks, will always have to link themselves, in one way or another, to the cry for ‘reclaiming the commons’ (that is, reclaiming communal property, which is opposed to the capitalistic category of private property of the means of production).

If we indeed want to use *Capital* as a concrete source that can give us access to forms of political organization and acts of resistance within and against the capitalist system, we should keep in mind what Rosa Luxemburg noted on Marx’s dialectical method. Dialectics, namely, seem both to affirm and to exceed the genealogical method by showing how capitalism ‘produces its own gravediggers’ and narrates false stories about itself. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg writes the following:

‘Here, in form at any rate, peace, property and equality prevail, and the keen dialectics of scientific analysis were required to reveal how the right of ownership changes in the course of accumulation into appropriation of other people’s property, how commodity exchange turns into exploitation, and equality becomes class rule.’

It is this dynamic unfolding of concepts that makes Marx’s analysis dialectical: Whenever he investigates something, be it a material or an immaterial entity⁴, he at first presents it in an ordinary way, as if it were a neutral phenomenon. He then proceeds by showing that things are not what they appear to be, that the object of study cannot be understood in an isolated fashion, and that its manifestation (and thereby our understanding of it) is determined by the relatedness to other

phenomena. By means of this analysis, new concepts are introduced to explain what is really going on, things are turned ‘upside down’ and the analysis of capitalism gradually develops.

If we want to provide guidelines for our understanding of capitalism, we must examine the forms and modes wherein it manifests itself today and look for the shapes that primitive accumulation (or accumulation by dispossession, for that matter) tends to take in current times. By doing so, an immanent critique of capitalism might have a successful chance of delivering the theoretical tools that are needed in order to organize viable resistance on a practical level.

Primitive accumulation is a unique moment in Marx’s analysis of capitalism: It functions as a starting point which makes the system move, and which gives it the semblance of a perpetuum mobile, but at the same time is always there in the background to enforce the necessary social relations that have to continue to exist in order to propel the capitalist system as a whole. What Marx’s postponed analysis of primitive accumulation shows is that one has to read *Capital* as a totality, in its totality, because the structure of the book reveals something fundamental about the structure of capitalism itself, namely, the urge to think through logically and historically the appearance of the capitalist system. Concretely, this means that we must both acknowledge that capitalism has specific historical roots and examine capitalism’s systematic tendency that aims at securing its hegemonic position by reabsorbing the elements that fall outside its logic. In other words: We must understand the capitalist mode of production in a dialectical fashion, starting from its appearance today and producing an immanent critique. It is here, in the margins of the particularities of the system that escape the semblance of totality, that the germ of resistance can be found.

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¹ For an extensive reading of Marx's usage of the category 'labour-power', see Peter Thomas' article in *Krisis*, 2010, issue 2.

² For an extensive reading of Marx's usage of the metaphor 'phantom-like objectivity', see Johan Hartle's article in *Krisis*, 2010, issue 2.

³ Interdependent rather than dependent, for the loops form a closed chain, and thereby affect each other.

⁴ This distinction should not be taken too literally, since Marx's materialist dialectics evolve exactly around the collision of the material and the immaterial, of mediation and immediacy, etc.