

Forged in blood and fire

A report from the “Towards a Global History of Primitive Accumulation” Conference

By Marten Dondorp

How are land, seas, habitats, and human bodies incorporated into global market society? This question animated more than forty researchers to come together at the “Towards a Global History of Primitive Accumulation” conference. This conference at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, from 9 to 11 May, 2019, and was co-sponsored by the IISH, the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Houston. Apart from the speakers and chairs, it drew visitors from many countries, including the US, Japan, Brazil, the UK, Sweden, Germany and Austria. The large audience that followed the conference proceedings throughout these three days, shows the re-emergence of interest in questions of the role of violence and dispossession in capitalism’s long history.

Primitive, or *ursprüngliche*, accumulation is a term Karl Marx used to describe the origins of capitalism in one of the most historically-detailed sections of *Capital*. Marx exposed that capitalism could only emerge after a great deal of violence and dispossession had been carried out, both in Europe and in the areas undergoing colonization. For Marx, this original expropriation was “written in letters of blood and fire”. The relevant section of *Capital* shows that in order for social relations to become structured around the production of commodities, direct producers had to be separated from their means of subsistence, and common resources had to be concentrated and privatized. In the opening panel, conference-organizer **Pepijn Brandon** argued that these two elements can be separated in time and space. Once expropriated, land, labor, and capital must be brought together, a process which can take centuries and assume a number of different forms. For co-organizer **Niklas Frykman**, it is therefore important to ground theorization in historical research, both to show the variety of forms which primitive accumulation can assume, and to make sure that the concept does not become too vague or all-encompassing.

Two ways of primitive accumulation

As the presentations at this conference made clear, primitive accumulation was not limited to the origins of capitalism. Rather, it is an ongoing process, present at every stage in capitalism’s history. Brandon highlighted two ways in which primitive accumulation is ongoing: on the one hand, market society keeps expanding into new spheres, as more areas of the globe become incorporated into the global market, and more aspects of life become commodified. For instance, in recent decades more than 7 million people have been displaced from upcountry Colombia to make way for mining and narco-capitalism, as **Aaron Tauss** and **Forrest Hylton** emphasized in their talk. Besides incorporating new areas, however, Brandon stated that “capitalism reproduces its outside”: People, land, and matter are also thrown out of accumulation, becoming superfluous, unemployed, waste. Commodification is not a one-way street. Thus, in their discussion of settler colonialism in British Columbia, **Justin Paulson** and **Julie Tomiak** indicated that the commodification of land and the imposition of European models of capitalism entailed the elimination of indigenous peoples who had previously been traded with.

The state, the largest-scale organizer of violence

The violence and force of primitive accumulation necessarily brings in the state, the largest-scale organizer of violence. **Wendy Matsumura** examined the complex role of the state in enclosing commons in Japan during the twenties and thirties, sometimes acting against the interests of both small agriculturalists and railway industrialists. **Amiya Kumar Bagchi** emphasized the large transfer of wealth from the colonies to imperial states as a major factor in primitive accumulation. Using the

Early Modern military supply industry as an example, **Peter Way** showed that the trinity of government, business, and military supply cannot be split apart: State militaries relied on markets to provide their needs, and in turn many processes of capitalism have been driven by military demands.

Keynote 1 Jairus Banaji

In his keynote address, **Jairus Banaji** linked these conceptualizations of the state back to the wider history of capitalism, focusing on the way merchants and states shaped each other in different moments of capitalist development. Banaji also called for an end to “stagist” histories of capitalism, which try to confine the state, merchant capital, or primitive accumulation to particular time-periods. A thorough history of capitalism analyzes how these three elements continue to exist and affect each other.

The question of coercion therefore informed a returning discussion on the place of forced labor in this history. **Heide Gerstenberger** argued that market competition does not inherently lead to wage labor, but that the owners of capital have historically used whatever means within their power to produce commodities. As **Marcel van der Linden** highlighted in his closing talk, forced labor exists on a continuum, involving a large variety of different ways of compelling workers to be productive for capital. Thus, **Nicole Ulrich** analyzed how trekboers in South Africa expanded the frontier of capitalism, while developing different forms of coerced labor. **Rafael Marquese** presented a paper co-written with **Leonardo Marques** on the transition between different slavery regimes in Brazil, showing how gold-mining slavery of the Early Modern period was crucial for European industrialization. **Dale Tomich** analyzed the place of slavery within global capitalism. Through the creation of a world market, the products of labor with different levels of coercion were made comparable, and this drove the spread of a sugar commodity frontier from the Mediterranean, to the racialized slavery of the Azores, and eventually across the Atlantic. **Thierry Drapeau** fleshed out the technical details of the slave-plantation model on Barbados, showing how the need to make laborers productive despite their tendency to resist drove a new class of small-merchant investors to tie workers to centralized plantations. In the process, they solidified the racialization of slave labor.

Can we really define capitalism by the presence of wage labor?

These discussions raised pertinent questions about the definition of capitalism. If coercion was so important in developing market society, can we really define capitalism by the presence of wage labor? **David Mayer** traced the various answers to this question by a succession Latin American historians. For Van der Linden, all inputs into production, including labor, must be commodified in order for the label “capitalism” to apply. But commodification of labor does not have to take the form of wages. **David McNally** showed that the market “continually haunted” the lives of enslaved workers, who were constantly under threat of being sold to other workplaces.

This threat, and all the management strategies developed by the exploiters of capital throughout the history of capitalism, worked as a counterweight to workers’ resistance. Many presentations therefore highlighted how resistance shapes the ways in which land and labor are incorporated into capitalism. **Rossana Barragán** and **Forrest Hylton** showed how indigenous rotational labor systems persisted in silver-mining in colonial Potosí, indicating that production decisions did not simply emanate from merchants and colonial planners, but also from the workers who resisted them. **Tithi Bhattacharya** noted how indigenous people displaced due to deforestation in other parts of India were put to work on Bengal tea-plantations, as a way to get around strikes by local laborers. **Noeleen McIlvenna** and **Terence Dunne** traced resistance in 18th century North America and 19th century Ireland respectively, showing how this affected the land property-systems in these places.

The conversion of land into a tradable commodity forms an important part of the narrative of primitive accumulation. **Alexia Yates** discussed the way in which land was financialized in the 19th century French metropole and its colonies, in a quest to harness the perceived stability of land for financial trading. **Navyug Gill** showed how at the same time in India, British colonial administrators closely classified peoples based on productivity, in order to overcome the land's propensity to flood, dry up, or otherwise hinder the production of cash crops. **Hillary Taylor** highlighted a similar process in Early Modern England, where rural workers were made to testify in court to settle land claims, thereby converting their knowledge of traditional property rights into privatized land holdings ready to produce surplus value. **Edward Baptist** set out to formulate a new concept of "Dark Capital" to theorize how capitalism relies on capital accumulated outside of merchants' ledgers, such as black soils, fossil fuels, and indigenous knowledge.

Keynote 2 Wendy Goldman

Questions surrounding the continuing role of the state were developed most starkly by the presentations covering primitive accumulation under ostensibly socialist regimes, an under-researched area when it comes to primitive accumulation. In her keynote address, **Wendy Goldman** analyzed the contentions surrounding industrialization in the early Soviet Union. State planners were faced with the question of how to industrialize without a sufficiently concentrated surplus to draw on. Should the peasantry therefore be made to produce at a loss, so that their capital could flow to the cities? Or should they be granted market prices for their produce, with the expectation that their consumption would eventually stimulate urban industry? In 1929, forced agricultural collectivization under Stalin won out, achieving rapid industrialization on the backs of the peasantry. **Don Filtzer's** subsequent talk on Yevgeny Preobrazhensky, a Bolshevik economist, highlighted how different models of growth had emerged among the Left Opposition in the 1920s.

The Stalinist model of industrialization by peasant expropriation was applied in other countries under supposed workers' rule. In separate talks, **Alina-Sandra Cucu**, **Jacob Eyferth** and **Shuxuan Zhou** showed that similar unequal exchanges between a countryside and city fueled industrialization in Romania and China. **Velia Luparello** and **Adam Fabry** discussed how in women in Hungary were incorporated into the workforce on a massive scale after the Second World War, but on different terms from men. These talks showed how labor and land was subjected to the logic of capital-accumulation even in supposed socialist societies. In the words of Cucu, "the state acted as capital" in the way that it extracted a surplus, especially from rural women, in order to kickstart industrialization.

In all, the conference worked to thoroughly question the concepts that have been handed down to us by holding them up to history. Are state and market really so separate? Are peaceful exchange and violent expropriation really opposite poles? Is slavery really antagonistic to wage labor? In rousing final speeches, **Silvia Federici** and **Peter Linebaugh** linked these historical and theoretical questions to political questions facing us today. As global capitalism trudges through a long existential crisis and violence proliferates, it is useful analyze how its various elements have hung together and persisted.