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# The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of "So-called Primitive Accumulation"

**Sandro Mezzadra**

*Translation by Arianna Bove*

*The essay discusses Marx's analysis of "so-called primitive accumulation" starting from the idea that contemporary global capitalism is characterized by new enclosures and by a set of other processes long considered characteristic of the historical transition to capitalism. A reflection on this temporal short circuit leads the author to an investigation of some of the peculiarities and difficulties of Marx's method as, for instance, the relationship between the historical and the logical order of exposition. Reading the temporal structures of capitalism against the backdrop of Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation suggests an emphasis on temporal heterogeneity, on the intertwining of continuity and rupture, of progress and catastrophe, that is far from any "historicist" interpretation of Marx. From this point of view, the author investigates some of the key questions connected to primitive accumulation: the production of labor power as a commodity as a specific and strategic form of the production of subjectivity, the concept of transition, the role of violence in capitalist development, and the relationship between formal and real subsumption of labor under capital.*

**Key Words:** Karl Marx, Primitive Accumulation, Capitalist Development, Transition, Labor Power, Operaismo

For why should he that is at libertie make himself bond?  
Sith then we are free borne,  
Let us all servile base subjection scorne.

—Edmund Spenser, *Complaints: Mother Hubbard's Tale* (1591)

The first capitalists are like waiting birds of prey. They wait for their meeting with the worker, the one who drops through the cracks of the preceding system. It is even, in every sense, what one calls primitive accumulation.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Capitalism and Desire* (1973)

In the section on “so-called primitive accumulation” in volume 1 of *Capital*, Karl Marx takes us back to the early days of modern England (1976a, 875). The object of the text is, in his words, the “pre-history” of the capitalist mode of production. Is this issue of purely antiquarian and historical interest? Clearly not. Marx’s text on primitive accumulation has recently been read and reinterpreted as a decisive contribution to the critique of the present in various contexts. In the autumn of 1990, the U.S. journal *Midnight Notes* dedicated its tenth issue to a phenomenon that it named New Enclosures. In the midst of the “idyllic” rhetoric (idyllic in the precise sense employed by Marx in his analysis of primitive accumulation) surrounding a new world order, the *Midnight Notes* comrades defended the centrality of enclosures and several other concepts and themes treated in this section of *Capital* for a critical interpretation of the significant transformation of the capitalist mode of production underway since the mid 1970s. In their words:

The New Enclosures ... name the large-scale reorganization of the accumulation process which has been underway since the mid-1970s. The main objective of this process has been to uproot workers from the terrain on which their organizational power has been built, so that ... they are forced to work and fight in a strange environment where the forms of resistance possible at home are no longer available. Thus, once again, as at the dawn of capitalism, the physiognomy of the world proletariat is that of the pauper, the vagabond, the criminal, the panhandler, the street peddler, the refugee sweatshop worker, the mercenary, the rioter. (1990, 1, 3)

Two issues in the analysis of the *Midnight Notes Collective* serve as a quasi introduction to my own reflections on the topic of “so-called primitive accumulation.” First, the process of enclosure and expropriation they describe does not exclusively invest the “South” of the world; it affects the *global space* of contemporary capitalism as it keeps redrawing its geographical coordinates defined as

aspects of a single unified process: the New Enclosures, which must operate throughout the planet in differing, divisive guises while being totally interdependent ... Under the logic of capitalist accumulation in this period, for every factory in a free-trade zone in China privatized and sold to a New York commercial bank, for every acre enclosed by a World Bank development project in Africa or Asia as part of a “debt for equity” swap, a corresponding enclosure must occur in the U.S. and Western Europe. (2)

The second point concerns the strategic relevance of the question of *mobility*, which must be seen against the backdrop of the great question of the production of labor power as a “commodity,” and of the political constitution of the labor market, which always entails *violence*. As the *Midnight Notes Collective* puts it, “the New Enclosures make mobile and migrant labor the dominant form of labor. We are now the most geographically mobile labor force since the advent of capitalism” (4).

Examples of the contemporary conditions of primitive accumulation are abundant, including enclosures of heterogeneous “commons,” from land to knowledge, from

water to the abstract code of life (DNA). I want to offer here only one specific example. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), on the conflicts determined by the effort of Japanese corporations to open the large Indonesian rain forests to the capitalist wood trade during the 1990s,<sup>1</sup> discusses many of the processes that attack the "common" rights to the land in the name of the right to private property Marx described, focusing especially on *enclosures*. Tsing's analysis offers a further conceptual contribution: primitive accumulation establishes *frontiers* in the spaces it invests. These are simultaneously *savage frontiers*, insofar as their first rule is violence, and *salvage frontiers*, because capitalism—single capitalists—appear to be the sole agents capable of development in a state of emergency as a result of the destruction of "traditional" social environments (2005, 27 ff.).

### Questions of Method

As the 1857 Introduction contends, the methodological problem of the dialectics between the abstract and the concrete (see Ilyenkov 1982) is historically determined and fundamentally imposed by the nature of the capitalist mode of production. It is only under the conditions of this peculiar mode of production, Marx suggests, that "abstract" concepts make "concrete" history. This means that, if one takes such a fundamental category of political economy as "labor as such," it is surely true that it is inscribed into a set of complex relations with other categories. And it is both possible and necessary to reconstruct critically the logical order of these relations. Conversely, in the capitalist mode of production, "labor as such" as well as other "real abstractions" become embodied in history as a powerful standard dictating complex social, legal, cultural, and political transformations and, above all, affecting the production of subjectivity. The tension between these historical processes and the logical order of conceptual relations must be methodologically reflected in the critique of political economy.

In the Introduction, particularly in the third paragraph on "The method of political economy," Marx seeks to find a method capable of working out the character of the historically determined totality of political economy and critically revealing the conditions of emergence of the conceptual abstractions of economic discourse. This he does not simply by reducing them to "concrete" historical processes, but by taking the social power of "real abstractions" in capitalist social relations (capital, value, money, etc.) as the regulatory principle of critical analysis. The section of *Capital* on primitive accumulation concentrates on the origin (*Ursprung*) of the capitalist mode of production and sets out to study the conditions under which a whole set of "real abstractions" becomes for the first time in history "embodied" as real powers, to the extent of determining the a priori conditions of social experience itself. It is for this reason that the section on primitive accumulation is so important also from a

1. I italicize the verb "open" to recall Rosa Luxemburg's statement: "capitalism emerges and historically develops in a non-capitalist social milieu ... Within this milieu, the process of accumulation of capital opens its way" (1913, 363).

methodological point of view: because it at the same time studies the origin of the intertwining between “abstract” concepts and “concrete” history, which means the origins of the main methodological problem of the critique of political economy.

In his analysis of Marx’s discussion of the relationship between abstract and living labor, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, chap. 2) demonstrates that the short circuit between the abstract and the concrete *must* repeat itself every day in order for the capitalist mode of production to continue to exist and reproduce itself. As Marx writes, “accumulation is only the continuing development of what appears as a particular historical process in primitive accumulation” (2000).<sup>2</sup> Whatever happened for the first time at the origin of the history of capitalism must logically repeat itself every day: this apparent paradox prevents us from seeing the historical time of the capitalist mode of production as merely linear and progressive. In addition to the topicality of the origin, it also opens up a problem that Étienne Balibar formulated in his contribution to *Reading Capital* (1970, 199) and that a large number of postcolonial critics have taken up in the past fifteen or twenty years:<sup>3</sup> what Balibar calls the disconnection between the diachrony and the dynamics (324) of the structure of temporality in capitalist society,<sup>4</sup> particularly in the transition to capitalism under conditions of colonialism, which is also the great theoretical problem of “the insertion of different times one into another” (317).

Balibar’s notion of “a genealogy of elements of rupture in the capitalist mode of production” (300) as the main stake in the section of *Capital* we are discussing helps to further this discussion on Marx’s method. Marx is indeed operating with a rich and complex notion of *Ursprung* (origin) in his analysis of what is somewhat erroneously translated as “primitive” accumulation. Balibar’s reference to “genealogy” suggests a quite intriguing parallel with Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, Marx looks with nothing but contempt at a “history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself; a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development” (Foucault 1998, 379). While we always have to keep in mind the specificity of Marx’s method, it can thus be appropriate to interpret Marx’s use of “origin” in the texts on primitive accumulation as fulfilling the same role as “emergence” (*Entstehung*) in Nietzsche’s writings, which, à la Foucault, allows us to present “the entry of forces; their eruption, the leap from the wings to center stage, each in its youthful strength” (377). These forces are the protagonists of the unfolding drama of the history of the capitalist mode of production, of the buying and selling of labor power, famously described by Marx with the theatre

2. On the continuity between “primitive accumulation” and the general form of “capitalist accumulation,” see Rosdolsky (1992, 327–9).

3. See the introduction of the new edition of Young (2004).

4. What Balibar means with the concepts of *diachrony* and *dynamics* must be understood within the framework of the general approach developed by Louis Althusser and his coauthors in *Reading Capital*. To put it simply, while *diachrony* refers to the transition from one mode of production to another, *dynamics* refers to the “tendency” of the capitalist mode of production—to the internal development of its structure.

concept of *Charaktermaske* (see Haug 1995), already used in politically dense meaning by Hobbes in chapter 16 of his *Leviathan* (“Of Persons, Authors, and Things Personated”).<sup>5</sup>

### For a Critique of Classical (and “Vulgar”) Economics

Three of the questions raised in the section on primitive accumulation of Marx’s *Capital* have now been addressed: the relationship between the logical and historical order of exposition in Marx’s method, the relationship between “normal” and “primitive” accumulation of capital, and the peculiar temporality inherent to the capitalist mode of production. However, another preliminary observation is in order. For Marx, primitive accumulation is *not* a concept. Starting with the title (“*So-called primitive accumulation*”) the chapter proceeds with an ironic reference to original sin.

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as *original sin does in theology*. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. 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. The legend of the theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. (1976a, 873)

Marx’s powerful irony signals his polemical intentions to radically critique classical political economy, especially Adam Smith’s analysis of “previous accumulation of stock,”<sup>6</sup> and to reveal *exploitation* (its historical origin and conceptual status) as the hidden “secret” of classical economics.

Unlike classical economics, Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation does not revolve around “a previous concentration of a stock of commodities as capital in the hands of a buyer of labor” (Marx 2000), but focuses on the *violent* production (and “original” accumulation) of the conditions of possibility of capitalist relations of production, of the “encounter” (1976a, 202) between buyer and seller of labor power. As Marx asserts in the section on “Forms which precede capitalist production” in the *Grundrisse*, “the *production of capitalists and wage laborers is thus a chief product of capital’s realization process*. Ordinary economics, which looks only at the

5. It would be worth developing the connection between Hobbes and Marx. While Hobbes used the equivalence of “mask” and “person” to build his theory of representation, Marx employed the concept of *Charaktermaske* to describe the “personification” of economic categories—and in particular to designate the “bearers” (*Träger*) of capital and labor power.

6. On this issue and more generally on Marx’s critique of classical political economy and “vulgar” economics, an important reference is Zanini (2008). On primitive accumulation in classical economics, see Perelman (2000).

things produced, forgets this completely” (1976b, 512). The accumulation of money (of “*monetary wealth* which, regarded in and for itself, is altogether unproductive, as it only springs up out of circulation and belongs exclusively to it”) says nothing about the “original formation” of capital: the latter “occurs purely by virtue of the fact that existing value, the *monetary wealth*, through the historical process of dissolution of the old mode of production, can, on the one hand, *purchase* the objective conditions of labor, and on the other hand, obtain the *living* labor of the freed workers in exchange” (137).

No Smithian “idyll” here; rather a process of what might be named “*original expropriation*,” as Marx does in his 1865 text on *Value, Price and Profit*. This process reveals that

so-called *original accumulation* means nothing but a series of historical processes, resulting in a *decomposition* of the *original union* existing between the laboring Man and his Instruments of Labor . . . The *separation* between the Man of Labor and the Instruments of Labor 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. (1935, 39)

The perspective of the section on “so-called primitive accumulation” in *Capital* is consistent with Marx’s method, highlighting some of the main characters of the mode of capitalist production, which would otherwise be concealed by its “normal” functioning. Appearing near the end of the first volume of *Capital* and just before the “Modern theory of colonization,” the section on so-called primitive accumulation requires us to read the analytical direction of the book backward, stopping and starting again especially in the analysis presented in chapter 25 on “The general law of capitalist accumulation.” To use Antonio Negri’s thirty-year-old formula, this section is an example of the “research” (*Forschung*) that intervenes to renew the “exposition” (*Darstellung*) so that “the previous mode of presentation must, itself, be subjected to research and must constitute in turn the material of a new presentation” (Negri 1991, 13 f.), a *neue Darstellung*.

The concepts of “norm” and “exception” not only need to be applied to the relationship between the *origin, history, and present* of the capitalist mode of production, but they work to critically deconstruct the very image of “normal” capitalism—if necessary, “beyond Marx.” **Undoubtedly, “norms” of functioning of the capitalist mode of production do exist, but each includes a constellation of logical and historical “exceptions” that are part of their conditions of possibility and operate as a reserve of options that can always be realized.** Some of the most interesting recent theoretical propositions and researches, such as the work of Yann Moulier Boutang (1998) on the “deformed forms” of submission of labor to capital and Chakrabarty’s proposal to “provincialize Europe,” follow from such applications. Marx’s work contains reflections pointing in a similar direction. Note, for instance, the strategic relevance he ascribes to colonization and the wealth of his references to the issue of slavery. This would legitimate a reconstruction of the history of

capitalism similar to that put forward by many of the protagonists of Black Marxism (see Robinson 2000), which traces its origins to Africa, the West Indies, and the Atlantic rather than to England. Or, consider Marx's later writings on Russia,<sup>7</sup> where he explicitly deals with the "exceptionality" of the case of England, on which a considerable part of the analysis of primitive accumulation rested, while strongly rejecting any attempt at deducing the model of a "philosophy of history" from this analysis (Marx 1877, in Marx and Engels 1958–71, 19, 111), averring, in a well-known letter to Vera Ivanova Zasulich, that "the historical inevitability" of the movement described in the section on primitive accumulation "is expressly limited to *Western European countries*" (Marx and Engels 1958–71, 35, 166).

If we look at capitalism and valorize its character as a "world system" since its origins, rather than through "peripheral" exceptions, these different modalities seem to have determined the structure of the capitalist mode of production both as conditions of possibility and as a "reserve" of options that can be realized. We will return to the notion of transition and some of the problems it raises later on in this article. But for now, we would say that the term *origin* (transition) always refers back to that force, violence, that Marx defines as the "the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one: it is itself an economic power (*Potenz*)" (1976a, 916). The question of violence in history is indeed another fundamental issue raised by Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation. In the recent entry on "Gewalt" for *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Balibar presented stimulating observations on this point: notably, he expanded on the multiple meanings of the term (power, violence, force) and contended that the first book of *Capital* could be read as a "treatise on the structural violence instituted by capitalism" or on "the excess of violence inherent to the history of capitalism" (2009, 273).

The question of violence works at least at two different levels in the analysis of primitive accumulation. On the one hand, the crucial role of "the concentrated and organized violence of society," the *power of the State*, assumes the form of a *machine* in determining the transition to capitalism (e.g., the role of the colonial system, public credit or national debt, and the protectionist system Marx refers to). Mario Tronti insisted on this same issue in his writings of the 1970s (1977, 212). The complication of the relations among politics, the law, and the economy that emerges from Tronti's reading, starting from his discussion of Marx's definition of the "extra-economic origin of property" (Marx 1976b, 488), stems from his reconstruction of the history of political centralization of power that took place in England between the "two Cromwells." Tronti both stressed the relevance of the modern state as the "political engine of transition" to capitalism, and contended, as a kind of historical foundation of his thesis on the autonomy of the political, that the origin of the modern bourgeois State precedes the very process of the transition to capitalism (1977, 220).

On the other hand, Marx analyzes the operations of violence also from another angle, without looking at its "concentration" in the state machine. Instead, he

7. In recent literature, see Burgio (2000, chap. 4). An important reference on the issue remains Shanin (1983).



studies its effects as they spread at the social level where the crucial role of the state, legislation, and the law is highlighted “from below,” first and foremost from the point of view of the production of the conditions of existence of labor power as a commodity, and the regulation of wages and the working day (Marx 1976a, 896). This is what Marx does in his analysis of the enclosures and the “bloody legislation” against vagrancy that preceded the creation of the factory (and the birth of the working class) in early modernity.

### A Commodity Like No Other

Historiographically, Marx fails to emphasize adequately the conflictual nature of the social processes and conditions of development of primitive accumulation. The crisis of feudal authority in the countryside was not univocally produced by these processes; rather, these processes intervened in a context already characterized by revolts and peasant wars that were unmaking the feudal fabric from within (see Dockès 1980 on the long-term peasant insubordination; see also Blicke 2003). As Theodore W. Allen explains in *The Invention of the White Race*, a constant movement of insubordination that extended from Wat Tyler’s rebellion of 1381 in England to the peasant wars of the 1520s in Germany was more responsible than the bourgeoisie for overthrowing the feudal system (1997, 14 ff.). Allen rightly draws our attention to the role that popular protests against enclosures played in the abolishment of the 1547 English law that had introduced slavery as a punishment for vagrancy only three years earlier and that could have otherwise become the basis of the institution of slavery in England (20–2).

Also important is attention to the issue of mobility. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s work (2000; see also Linebaugh 1993) shows how the multiple subalterns resisted their proletarianization and how such efforts often translated into practices and concrete demands for mobility. For Marx, this is not news. He famously writes in the *Grundrisse* that the subjects expelled from the countryside were “thrown into the labor market ... dependent on the sale of their labor capacity or on begging, vagabondage and robbery as their only source of income. It is a matter of historic record that they tried the latter first, but were driven off this road by gallows, stocks and whippings, onto the narrow path to the labor market” (1976b, 507). Just as labor mobility is one of the central issues in Marx’s writings on primitive accumulation, it is worth reminding ourselves, from the point of view of our present, that “there is no capitalism without migration” (Mezzadra 2010).

“Subaltern” movements are a fundamental element at stake in the process of determination of the production of labor power as commodity and point to the *antagonistic* nature of this process. This antagonism must be conceptually distinguished from the antagonism between capital and labor that presupposes the production of labor power as commodity; at the same time a rigid opposition between the two forms of antagonism and between the conflicts arising out of them must be avoided. While there are obvious differences between the conflicts produced by the expropriation of land that make the opening of a special economic zone (SEZ)

(for instance, in India) and the antagonism that shapes labor relations in the factories of that same special economic zone, it is more productive to draw attention to the situations where these “types” of conflict overlap and reveal the original radical, logical, and historical articulation of expropriation and exploitation. These situations occur precisely when the “labor market” is put under intense pressure by processes that reveal the problematic nature of what the labor market takes for granted: that is, the persistence and “normality” of the production of the labor power as commodity.

The reemergence of the question of the production of the commodity labor power, always ridden with conflict, affects the *conditions* of the working class (Perelman 2000) as well as determines its *composition*. Thus we are confronted with processes of expropriation and dispossession that directly and immediately affect the making, unmaking, and remaking of the working class, challenging its stability and homogeneity. In many respects this is the situation we find ourselves in today, and we must continuously map these processes from the point of view of their subjective dimensions. Clearly, we must recognize the elements of poverty, fragmentation and even conflict that the reemergence of the question of the production of labor power as a commodity introduces into the global and local class composition, but we also must read the new condition against the grain, emphasizing new emerging forms of solidarity and struggle.

In Marx’s analysis of the political and juridical constitution of the “labor market,” where he deconstructs the very category of labor market, the emphasis on *violence* and *force* plays a strategic role in the polemic against the classical economists who believed market relations to be both free from coercion and conceptually opposed to it. Marx claims that there is nothing “natural” in the fact that a class of individuals is *forced* to sell its own labor power in order to reproduce its own existence. This point should be underscored in considering contemporary debates on wages and income, where orthodox Marxists too often prioritize wage (the struggles of dependent workers) over income (that appears to them not directly related to the conditions of laboring subjects). To properly frame this opposition, the complexity of the proposal of struggles for income that strategically insist on the very existence of the capitalist mode of production must be understood. The latter cannot conceptually subsist without an element of *coercion* to work (Marx traces the genealogy of this process in the chapter on primitive accumulation). Under the constant pressure of workers and proletarian struggles, the history of capitalism registers many instances of “mitigation”<sup>8</sup> of this element of duress; Marx’s analysis of the working day in chapter 10 of *Capital* is an excellent example (see Balibar 1996, 101–3).

8. It is important to insist on these as mitigation rather than annihilation (as some supporters of “unconditional income” would claim), because the abolition of the coercion to work would simply imply the end of the capitalist mode of production. On the issue of basic income see the “classical” book by Van Parijs (1995). For a text that is representative of the discussion within Italian post-operaismo, see Fumagalli (2005). See also the Web site of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) at <http://www.basicincome.org/bien/>.

## “Free” Labor?

Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* interprets Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation as “allowing us to read the past as something that survives in the present” (2004, 12). Federici asserts the importance of the different forms of criminalization that culminated in the witch hunt (163) and of the efforts of “subaltern” women to control their reproductive function during the demographic crisis that followed the plague of the fourteenth century (40). This is another essential dimension of conflict in primitive accumulation, which Marx actually neglected: the process (needless to say, far from “idyllic”) of the capitalist rationalization of sexuality shapes the sexual division of labor and assigns to women the primary function of reproduction of the labor force. The condemnation of the *maleficia*, termination and contraception marks this process (144) to the extent that the feminine body is literally constructed as a reproductive machine: this, Federici writes, “and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism” (146).

Federici’s intervention is important also for another reason. Like many other contributions from the emerging field of “global labor history,”<sup>9</sup> *Caliban and the Witch* argues both historically and conceptually against Marx’s identification of the capitalist mode of production with “free” wage labor (Marx 1976a, 874). This issue is all the more significant if serious consideration is granted to the proposal of “provincializing Europe” and to the global dimension of the development of the capitalist mode of production from its origins: in this framework, the “transition” to capitalism displays multiple forms of forced labor that “provincialize” and dislocate the “norm” of the wage relation. Moulier Boutang proposes to replace the notion of “wage labor” with “dependent labor” as a necessary condition for the development of the capitalist mode of production, and to understand the former as a variant of the latter that needs to be studied in its specific historical, social, and juridical context. Preserving Marx’s emphasis that capital must be understood and criticized as a *social relation* rather than a “thing” (Marx 1976a, 941), this reading also allows us to analyze more insightfully the different forms of transition and subjugation of labor to capital in the context of the “global” present.

In order to make sense of both writers’ analysis, we can elaborate on the Marxian image of the “encounter” between the money holder and the proletarian who is deprived of everything but his or her labor power.<sup>10</sup> While this “encounter” can take many shapes (not necessarily the contractual one giving rise to “free” wage labor), the constant element is a radical difference of the two subjects of this “encounter,” whose relationship *constitutes* capital. The section on primitive accumulation studies the genealogy of this constant. Jason Read, influenced by Althusser and Italian operaismo, is also concerned with the issue of primitive accumulation. Read insists on

9. See, for instance, van der Linden (2008) as well as the important collection edited by van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (2009).



10. Louis Althusser suggestively (and enigmatically) wrote about this image in a text dated 1982 here he refers to Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation as the “authentic core” of *Capital* (2006, 109).

the production of subjectivity as the key to a critical analysis of the capitalist mode of production: “production of subjectivity understood in the two meanings of the genitive: on the one hand, the constitution of subjectivity, of a particular subjective behavior, on the other hand, the productive power of subjectivity itself, of its ability to produce wealth” (2003, 153). He develops this argument in an analysis of the section on primitive accumulation in *Capital*, which he also uses to return to the (Althusserian) distinction between capitalist “economy” and “mode of production.” “The production of subjectivity,” according to Read, “is necessary to the constitution of the capitalist mode of production. In order for a new mode of production, such as capitalism, to be established, it not only needs to form a new economy, but also establish itself in the daily dimensions of existence and become custom” (36). Marx’s polemics against the classical economists’ “idyllic” representation of primitive accumulation is highlighted and identified as a chapter of a more general polemic against the “a-historical” character of human nature, defended in the classics of political economy as analytically foundational. Read correctly underlines that this is not merely a question of philosophical (and *political*) anthropology, but also “the more practical question of the place of desires in history, of motivations and human beliefs (or subjectivity): the question of their conditions, limits and effects” (20).

Desires, motivations and beliefs are presented as being radically separated in the capitalist mode of production, along a line that cuts across subjectivity and splits individuals into two “classes”: those of the money owners and the owners of labor power. The chapter on primitive accumulation traces the genealogy of this severance, which takes many forms throughout the history of capitalism and is destined to keep reproducing itself and make all discussion of “human nature” that calls upon an abstract and disembodied universalism redundant, *until today*.

## In Transition

This discussion of Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation leads to the last great question to address here: *transition*. This is a formidably relevant and complex issue that seems to have become rather topical. Saskia Sassen’s latest book (2006), for instance, is a study of the transition from “national” to “global” political and juridical assemblages that reconstructs the passage from the medieval to the modern order to get a comparative perspective on the present. It is useful to our argument to mention at least three great debates on the issue of transition: the one emerging between Franz Borkeu and Henryk Grossmann in the 1930s at the Frankfurt school (see Schiera 1978; Jay 1973, 16 f.);<sup>11</sup> the polemic between Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb that started in the 1950s in the U.S. journal *Science and Society* (see Tronti 1977, 207–27); and finally the debate initiated with the 1976 publication of Robert Brenner’s article on “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe” in the journal *Past and Present*, which returned to many of the issues developed by Dobb and Sweezy, but also included the work of many non-Marxist historians (for the main texts on this debate, see Aston and Philpin 1985).

11. The debate was opened by the publication of Borkeu (1934).

Bringing together these three crucial debates on transition with Marx's writing on primitive accumulation in *Capital* helps us frame the debate in an original way. Take, for instance, the issues of transition, the bourgeoisie, and the "bourgeois revolution." A rereading of Marx's writings on primitive accumulation shows that Negri's (2007) interpretation of the debate between Borkenau and Grossman in the early 1970s is fundamentally correct: his criticism of the rigid and deterministic Marxism of Grossmann allowed him to open up the space for investigating the crucial role played in the transition by cultural and above all *political* and legal elements while at the same time challenging the traditional (not only Marxist) understanding of such important historical categories as "bourgeois revolution" and "bourgeois class." "I do not think that we can talk about a 'bourgeois revolution,'" Negri wrote in 1978. And he further added: "We should rather talk about a *capitalist revolution* (in primitive accumulation, manufacture, industry and then socialism). The category of 'bourgeoisie as class' is extremely ambiguous" (1978, 139).

His point about the ambiguity of the bourgeoisie as a class is extremely important. On the one hand, it anticipates later developments in the historiography of the bourgeoisie where the complex political, juridical, "ideological," cultural, and scientific mediations necessary for it to constitute itself as a unitary subject are exposed,<sup>12</sup> as is the "long-term" development of the symbiotic relation between bourgeoisie and aristocracy that lasted at least until the First World War, a relation that was also analyzed by Marx in his texts on primitive accumulation (Mayer 1981). On the other hand, this point also frees the notion of class from a set of "sociological" incrustations built on it over time and allows us to reclaim it in its original Marxian sense, which was entirely *political* (Mezzadra and Ricciardi 2002).

A second problem arises, however: the relation between "formal" and "real" subsumption of labor under capital, an issue well known in the theoretical "tradition" of operaismo and post-operaismo. Marx writes that primitive accumulation can only be dominated by a "formal subsumption (*Unterordnung*)" of labor under capital and by the extraction of "absolute surplus value" (achieved by means of a constant increase of the length of the working day): "the capitalist mode of production did not display a specifically capitalist character" (1976a, 907), and lived of the "formal subsumption" (of domination and exploitation) of modes of labor and forms of production that were not directly organized and revolutionized by capital.

The theoretical tradition of operaismo and post-operaismo has long emphasized "real subsumption" (and the extraction of "relative surplus value") mainly for *political* reasons, but in so doing our debates have suffered from a residue of "historicist" and "progressivism," and we have often presented this method of reading *tendency*, one of the most precious contributions of Italian operaismo, as being excessively linear. So far as the specific relation between formal and real subsumption is concerned, this became a *commonsensical* appreciation of how these two concepts were simply indicative of two different "epochs" (when not "stages") of the capitalist mode of production, destined to succeed one another in a linear way.

12. See Kocka and Mitchell (1987) and especially Schiera (1987). A particular important book in the discussion of this topic within Italian operaismo was Zapperi (1974).

Marx certainly uses these concepts *also* to describe transformations (“transitions”) internal to the capitalist mode of production, and we can interpret in this way famous texts such as the chapter in the first book of *Capital* on machinery and large-scale industry, the “Results of the immediate process of production,” and the “Fragment on Machines” in the *Grundrisse*, where these categories are discussed at length and originally in this sense. But in the “Results,” we find that formal subsumption is also defined by Marx as the “*general form of any capitalist production process*” (1976a, 1019).

In proposing a synthesis of our argument, while also taking into account the problems of “historicism” and “progressivism,” we must stress that the “pre-history of capital,” its “previous history” (*Vorgeschichte*), *is and is not* the history of capital. In “Forms which precede capitalist production,” Marx makes this absolutely clear: “in this preliminary or first period of capital,” a set of fundamental conditions of the capitalist mode of production (“a certain level of skill, instrument as means of labor etc.”) are “*already available*... This historic process is not the product of capital, but the presupposition for it” (1976b). On the other hand, this peculiar temporal structure (where the time of capital is dependent on other historical times that are not its own) characterizes “formal subsumption” as a whole because all its modes of labor and forms of production are not directly organized by capital, and thus they were “already” there. Rosa Luxemburg clearly observed this when she asserted that in order to exist and develop, capital needs a milieu of noncapitalist forms of production (1913, 363). Yet if we accept that “formal subsumption” is also “the *generic form of any capitalist mode of production*,” the temporal disconnection we are adducing inscribes itself at the very heart of the concept of capital and logically determines its structure.

This disconnection thus defines the relationship between the history and “prehistory” of capital. As previously stated, this relation is always open in capitalist development and its everyday functioning. We can also now see that progressivism and historicism are actually and materially inscribed in the temporal code of capital (and critics must take this into account), though only constituting *one* vector—literally and deeply *Utopian*—that is always interrupted by the violent (*catastrophic*) reopening of the problem of the *origin*. This is the constant repetition of *transition*, which designates the historical moment of the origin of capitalism as well as some of the main characters of its daily operations and surfaces above all at times of great transformation of capitalism itself.

From the perspective of long-term historical development and the world system, capitalism is structurally characterized by the *coexistence of formal and real subsumption, of absolute and relative surplus value*. Contemporary capitalism takes this coexistence to its extreme consequences because, as Paolo Virno argued, one of its constitutive traits is the determination of a sort of “universal exposition” of the kinds of labor and forms of production that marked its history. Needless to say, this posits the problem of the *articulation* of these diverse forms of labor and exploitation, which is one of the most important problems for the conceptual definition and empirical investigation of contemporary capitalism (for a recent discussion of the problem, see Mezzadra 2010). The reemergence of formal subsumption and absolute surplus value (and the violence that is inherent in them)

is more intensive where the question of the production of labor as a commodity arises—that is, where the latter can no longer be taken for granted as a presupposition “regulated” by the “labor market.” And not by accident has the concept of “formal subsumption” recently been introduced into the debates of (post)operaismo again by people who are researching the devices of “capture” and exploitation of “cognitive labor” (see Vercellone 2006, 55 ff.) and the issues of migrant labor and the forms of its domination (Ricciardi and Raimondi 2004; Mezzadra 2006; Rigo 2007).

It would be wrong to think that the connection of these issues and the circulating link between precarious and migrant labor suggest that the conditions of a “recomposition” of the different subjects of labor these concepts refer to is automatic and “spontaneous.” The reflections presented here on the coexistence of formal and real subsumption propose that these subjects are radically heterogeneous and that this is clearly both an enrichment *and* a political problem. The debate on the category of *multitude* must start from here. However, it would be fair to point out that the coexistence of formal and real subsumption, so far analyzed in terms of the structures of temporality, has important implications for a reflection on what we might call the spatial coordinates of contemporary capitalism. To put it briefly: while in other phases of capitalist development real and formal subsumption tended to be distributed in different spaces (following the distinction between “center” and “periphery,” “first” and “third” world, and the chain of spatial, technological, product, and financial fixes [see the important book by Silver 2003]), today they exist in every area of capitalism. This does not make the differences between “spaces” irrelevant at all, but as Hardt and Negri (2000) point out in *Empire*, their borders become increasingly blurred and porous.

To deal with the third and last question of transition, we return to the issue of temporality. Previous discussions on the temporal disconnection that is inscribed in the very concept of capital have taken issue with the analysis of the relationship between “abstract” and “living” labor proposed by Chakrabarty as well as with some of Balibar’s intuitions. Admittedly, Chakrabarty’s argument is not without problems when considered as a whole; nevertheless his contribution remains extremely important. He distinguishes between “two histories of capital”: one (history 1) entirely dominated by the “homogeneous and empty” time of “abstract labor”; the other (history 2) forced to register the constitutive heterogeneity of “living labor.” In an essay coauthored with Federico Rahola (2006), I have tried to relate Chakrabarty’s analysis to the conceptual history of modernity developed by Reinhart Koselleck (2004), in particular his relation between History as a “collective singular” and the plurality of histories, as well as to the analysis of the structure of historical time proposed by Virno (1999) in his *Il ricordo del presente*. In doing this, we wanted to point out that the tension between History and histories (“resolved” in the transition to modernity) opens up again and unfolds in the everyday functioning of global capital because the latter is forced to turn the constitutive heterogeneity of historical times it encounters into the strategic field of the redefinition of the valorization of capital. In this way, the tension between potential and act that, according to Virno, underlies the very possibility of historical experience comes to the surface.

I will not return to this issue although I am aware that it needs further development. I simply mention two further points that emerge from Chakrabarty's text. The first concerns the centrality of a confrontation with colonialism for our research on the "transition" to capitalism and primitive accumulation. In the section on "primitive accumulation" of *Capital*, colonialism is presented as a "looting" enterprise; the specific social relations it produces outside Europe are not discussed (while the chapter on the modern theory of colonialism is mainly dedicated to settler colonialism). If one were to fully adopt the colonial standpoint on transition, one would have to redesign its "geography" and question any linear relation between the center and periphery of the capitalist world system since its "dawn."<sup>13</sup> Yet, as Partha Chatterjee (1983) pointed out in an intervention in the "Brenner debate," it would highlight situations where the historical and cultural "heterogeneity" of the violent initial conditions of development of capitalism in relation to "history 1" was even greater than in Western Europe and where the "solutions" imposed were themselves radically heterogeneous (a combination of devices of domination and exploitation of different nature and "origin").

The second point I would like to make is that for this reason, given the conditions of colonial domination, the link between *transition* and *translation* clearly comes to light (Chakrabarty 2000, 34, 102). In order for there to be a transition to capitalism, the historically and "culturally" heterogeneous conditions that capital encounters and subsumes must be *translated* into the codes that govern the "history 1" of capital, in particular the code of "abstract labor" understood as the interpretive device of the outlook that capital demands the world to be observed through (82). But if what we have previously said about the peculiar "quality" of historical time in global capitalism is plausible, we may legitimately go a step further: *this nexus between transition and translation, so clearly evident at the origin of the capitalist mode of production, is one of the fundamental modes of operation of contemporary capitalism and can, for instance, be critically detected in the operation of global financial markets* (Fumagalli and Mezzadra 2010).

This observation allows us to gain a working perspective to analyze the central role of the issue of translation in recent debates of cultural studies and political theory. So defined, translation is shown to be entirely material and deprived of all "culturalist" semblances, and also appears in its *ambivalence*: on the one hand, it is the primary field of the labor of construction of political practice and "alternative" projects; on the other hand it is crucial to the constant recomposition and transformation of the devices of domination and exploitation. *Far from belonging to a Habermasian community of ideal communication, translation entertains conspicuous relations with the "midwife of history"—that is, violence and force* (Mezzadra 2010).

13. I began to develop this issue in "Tempo storico e semantica politica nella critica postcoloniale" in *La condizione postcoloniale* (2003, 39–55).



## In Search of the Common: Of Communism

One remaining issue left to us by Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation is that of the *commons*: the common land and rights that have been enclosed since the beginning of the capitalist mode of production for the *violent* establishment of private property. Early on Marx dealt with this issue in a series of articles on the "law against the theft of wood," written in the autumn of 1842 for the *Rhine Gazette*.<sup>14</sup> The young Marx maintains "that a customary right by its very nature can *only* be a right of this lowest, propertyless and elemental mass." As such, it involves "rights against the customs of positive law" (Marx 1975, 187),<sup>15</sup> which sanctions popular "habits" in the name of private property and attacks one of the fundamental bases of the reproduction of the poor in the countryside. "Let the idols of wood triumph and human victims fall!" Marx writes, anticipating the tone of the section on primitive accumulation (180). In his later writings on Russia, there is ample room for the political conjecture that the struggles in defense of the traditional commons (in this case, the *obscina*, a Russian rural community) could open up unexpected scenarios of direct transition to communism. This was, I repeat, a political conjecture in the sense that its fulfillment entirely depended, for Marx, on political action and revolutionary struggle. While he was spending some time in Algiers in the attempt to recover from illness in the spring of 1882, he was quite fascinated by common property and customs among Algerians. Describing them to his daughter Laura, he added, however, in his characteristic mix of German and English: "dennoch gehen sie zum Teufel [nevertheless they go to hell] without a revolutionary movement!"<sup>16</sup> As a whole, Marx's contemptuous assessment of the apologetic reconstruction of the origin of capitalism offered by classical and vulgar political economy keeps a safe distance from the nostalgic tones of a Sismondi, for instance, whose "hypochondriac philanthropy" is merely concerned with the preservation of the past and fails to see the antagonism that characterizes the present (Marx and Engels 1958–71, 8, 544).

The contemporary debate on the *commons* is similarly marked by nostalgic tones suggesting that "common goods"—rigorously in the plural—are exclusively something of a given and thus something to *preserve*. Federici's *Caliban and The Witch*, which I have otherwise praised, is symptomatic of this attitude: although Federici moves from the important emphasis on the autonomous behavior and resistance against attempts to place sexuality under control of the women of the countryside between the Middle Ages and Early Modernity, she ends up delivering a rather "idyllic" representation of European feudalism, which is entirely unsustainable.

The issue of the *commons*, used here in conclusion to our discussion of the section on primitive accumulation in the first volume of *Capital*, is crucial and complex (see Hardt and Negri 2009). It clearly involves entirely practical considerations (water,

14. The articles were rediscovered in the 1970s during the great season of "history from below." See Thompson (1990, 241 n. 1).

15. The English translation can be found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1842/10/25.htm> as well as in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (1975).

16. See Vesper (1995, 200) for the citation, which is taken from a letter by Marx to Laura Lafargue dated 13 April 1882.

public services, and intellectual property rights), but **it is also connected in philosophical and political terms to the very semantics of community, which is ridden by speculative simplification in the debates of the movements and the Left, not so different from that surrounding the topic of the commons**, for instance. I am certainly not going to exhaust this debate here, but simply indicate that this field of research is necessarily collective. The point I would like to stress is that we need to leave behind the image of the commons as something that is exclusively given and existing, and work toward the possibility that the common is something *to produce*, something that is built by a collective subject that is capable, in the process of its own constitution, of destroying the basis of exploitation and reinventing the common conditions of a production structured on the synthesis of freedom and equality. What is communism, if not the “dream of a thing” that we need to start dreaming again?

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