

## TWO



### *Marx, after the Feast*

Man's reflection on the forms of social life and consequently, also, his scientific analysis of these forms, takes a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins, *post festum*, with the results of the process of development ready to hand before him. The characters . . . have already acquired the stability of natural self-understood forms of social life, before man seeks to decipher not their historical character (for in his eyes they are immutable) but their meaning.

—KARL MARX, *Capital: Volume 1*

In his 1944 masterpiece, *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi analyzed the role that the “commercialization of the soil” played in the emergence of modern capitalism. As he rightly noted, this required a distinct and troubling transformation in human relations to the earth: “What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors.”<sup>1</sup> In the previous chapter, I sought to demonstrate that the process Polanyi identified gave rise to a new conceptual vocabulary, one in which a very old terminology of dispossession, expro-

priation, and eminent domain was put to new, critical purposes. Debates surrounding the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe provide therefore the first context in which the political radicalization of dispossession took place. As we saw, however, there is a second lineage of dispossession at play. As Anglo settler societies expanded and consolidated their hold on Indigenous lands beyond Europe, dispossession also came to operate as a tool of critical-theoretical analysis in relation to colonialism and its attending forces of displacement and domination.

Although these two lineages of dispossession are analytically distinct, they have always also been practically intertwined. It is therefore necessary to consider how we might compose a relation between the two. This task is complicated by the fact that already existing analysis of these processes has tended to take the second field as merely an application or extension of the first. For instance, although Polanyi refers to the “field of modern colonization” as the site where the “true significance” of the commercialization of the soil “becomes manifest,” nowhere does he pause to reflect on the considerable challenges that attend transposing from one context to another.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, when English historian E. P. Thompson sought to make sense of the great “enclosures of the commons” in early modern Europe, he made similar parenthetical reference to the colonialism without appreciating the distinctiveness of the latter terrain.<sup>3</sup> One might also point to Carl Schmitt’s influential *Nomos of the Earth*, which presents land grabbing (*Landnahme*) as constitutive to the emergence of the modern global order but treats the non-European world as merely a blank sheet on which European modes of territorial organization stamp themselves.<sup>4</sup> In each of these highly influential contributions to the study of land as a unit of political and legal theory, the colonial world is presented as a field of application. Accordingly, the conceptual vocabulary that derives from their respective studies (commercialization, enclosures, and land grabs) is developed initially to name some feature of intra-European historical development. The colonial world is thus treated as an *example* to which the original concepts apply rather than a *context* out of which a proximate yet distinct vocabulary may arise.

Rather than follow this model, I have argued that we ought to consider the two lineages of dispossession as analytically distinct yet practically intertwined. If that is a minimally plausible rendering, then it remains to clarify how one might compose the relation between the two in such a way as to retain their distinctive characteristics while nevertheless highlighting their connections. In my view, one invaluable resource for doing just this is the dialectical tradition of critical theory and, in particular, Marx and

Marxism. This does not mean that we can simply adopt critical theory's framework of analysis wholesale; to echo Frantz Fanon, it should always be "slightly stretched."<sup>5</sup>

A turn to this tradition of analysis is partially motivated by the fact that dialectics is so commonly concerned with just such a relation of connection/distinction. This chapter takes up this task by considering various relations of connection/distinction that are of direct relevance to the substantive concerns of this book, including the relation between the general law of accumulation and primitive accumulation (sections I and II), exploitation and expropriation (sections II and III), and labor and land (section IV). Beyond these substantive contributions, however, dialectical thinking is useful here for its methodological concern with recursivity.

How we relate distinct historical processes such as intra- and extra-European forms of dispossession is partially a function of which historical contexts we take to be their paradigmatic or "classic" cases and, by implication, which others we take to be derivative or secondary. This prioritization is, in turn, a function of the historical efficacy of these same processes in generating the contemporary horizon of meaning. Thus, our contemporary conceptual vocabulary is indebted to the very processes it is meant to describe and critique. There is, therefore, another level on which the theme of recursivity operates. Not unlike Hegel before him, Marx argued that critical theory is always recursive in this fashion. As the epigraph to this chapter highlights, Marx was alive to the fact that, since forms of social life and the characters who populate them are products of the very historical processes they seek to apprehend in thought, critical inquiry appears to arrive *post festum*—after the feast—running counter to the actual course of historical development. One aim of this chapter is to explore this theme more fully, but now at a higher level of generality. Here, I consider the general implications for thinking through recursivity, not only between theft and property, or law and illegality, but also more generally between historical processes and the conceptual categories used to describe and critique them. The vehicle for doing so shall be to fold the question back upon Marx and Marxism itself, suggesting that this intellectual and political tradition must be read at once as an effect of dispossession and tool in its critical apprehension.

The chapter tackles this interrelated set of problems through an explication of the category of "primitive accumulation" in Marx and Marxist thought more generally. The chapter unfolds as follows. Section I reconstructs Marx's original theory of primitive accumulation and the role that

the category of dispossession played therein. In section II, I turn to more contemporary “revisionist” accounts of Marx’s original theory, many of which seek to correct his supposedly Eurocentric bias by extending the category to include a range of non-European (colonial) contexts. I critique this move, arguing that disaggregating and reformulating the idea of primitive accumulation is more useful than simply extending it to a new field. Sections III and IV undertake this work first by freeing the concept of dispossession from its historically subordinated role within the broader theory of primitive accumulation, restoring it to a category of critical theory in its own right, and second by considering how the category of land is subsequently rethought from this new vantage.

## I

Within the Marxian tradition, the concept of dispossession has often been subordinated to other categories of analysis. One important task in the conceptual renovation of the concept will be therefore to situate it in relation to these other key concepts. I begin here with a close examination of *Capital: Volume 1* (1867), particularly the chapters on so-called primitive accumulation, for, although Marx employs the terms *Expropriation* and *Enteignung* in some of his earlier, more journalistic writings, his most extended and systematic analysis is found in the concluding sections of *Capital*.<sup>6</sup> To understand the impetus and underlying motivation behind Marx’s account of primitive accumulation, we first need to take an additional step back and consider another proximate term of critical theory: exploitation.

A relationship of exploitation is, in part, an asymmetrical relationship of governance in which subordinate partners have little effective control over determining the conditions of the relation and thus over the conditions of their own lives. It is therefore a relationship of power. But it is also the *employ* of this hierarchical relationship for the compulsory transfer of benefit from the subordinate partner to the agent or agents in a position of superiority. Exploitation mobilizes the creative-productive powers of subordinates for the well-being and improvement of governing parties. So it is not only a relationship of power: it is also a specific mobilization of that relationship for the purposes of what can be thought of as a kind of systematic, coercive transfer of benefit, effectively a form of theft.<sup>7</sup>

There have been all manner of exploitative relationships in history, including the paradigmatic examples of the relationship between master and

slave in the world of classical antiquity, or the feudal relationship between lord and vassal. According to Marx, however, there are (at least) two features that make the exploitative relationship characteristic of capitalism qualitatively unique.<sup>8</sup>

First, under capitalism, workers are nominally free. In a proper free market society, no worker is overtly compelled to contract herself into any particular employment relationship, nor indeed to enter into employment at all. Workers contend with one another in a free market to fix a competitive price to their labor, but no one dictates directly that any particular worker must accept any particular position or condition of employment. Workers under capitalism are therefore governed through a peculiar kind of abstract freedom, namely the freedom to choose within a range of exploitative relationships, even while they cannot reject the background structuring condition of exploitation as such. This is why it is consistent with a range of liberal political rights. In *Capital*, Marx repeatedly calls the modern proletariat *vogelfrei*, denoting this peculiar condition that combines a form of freedom with extreme vulnerability.<sup>9</sup>

Second, capitalism can be distinguished from previous exploitative relations by the specific transfer of benefit it engenders. Workers labor to create all manner of commodity products, and they are separated from these items by the way in which production is organized under modern capitalism. The division of labor and the highly decentralized and mediated nature of production effectively operate to alienate workers from the products of their labor. Direct alienation from the material objects of labor is not, however, itself distinctive to capitalism. The classical slave or feudal serf also labored under conditions not of their making to produce items from which they were alienated. The distinctiveness of capitalism lies in the fact that workers do not merely produce commodity objects. In fashioning objects under these specific working conditions, they also produce and are alienated from *surplus value* in a highly abstract form (i.e., money). Money, as the medium of their exploitation, is qualitatively distinct because it serves as the representation of surplus value. This permits the partner in the position of control (the owners of the means of production) to reinvest surplus value itself, allowing for its *self-valorization*. Exploitation, combined with the self-valorization of surplus value, is the basis of true capital and is expressed by Marx as the *general law of capital accumulation*.<sup>10</sup>

While the majority of Marx's writings are devoted to explicating these very broad points, *Capital* adopts a unique method for doing so, namely, the critique of political economy. Marx essentially adopts the highly idealized

picture of capitalism handed down by the liberal economic theories that had developed by his time to explain the creation of wealth in this new form of social organization. So we find in *Capital* Marx periodically taking on board such abstractions as a frictionless world of commodity circulation, or a closed national monetary system without foreign intervention, or an ostensibly “free” market in labor. The point of this method is clear: if Marx can demonstrate that capitalism requires systemic exploitation even under these highly idealized circumstances, and that this exploitation produces internal contradictions and crises that capitalism cannot resolve using resources only internal to it, then he will have revealed capitalism to be intrinsically flawed. This would foreclose the common rejoinder that one hears up to the present, that is, that various economic crises are merely the result of an imperfectly realized capitalism, the solution to which is a purer realization of the ideal.

So the first and most important objection Marx lodges against traditional bourgeois political economy is that it fails to properly grasp the systematically exploitative nature of the capital relation and, as a result, cannot properly grasp the source of capitalism’s contradictions and tendency toward crisis.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, a secondary objection to the main body of political economy. Marx also argues that traditional political economy cannot account for the *origins* of the capital relation. If capitalism can be characterized by a form of social organization in which one class of people “freely” contracts its labor power out to another class, then it will be important to liberal political economists that the background conditions that enable this “free” exchange be themselves explainable and defensible. Liberal thinkers typically construe this background story as the general emancipation of the lower classes from the bonds of feudalism. People are thought to have a “natural” inclination for self-determination, expressed primarily in the desire to produce, barter, and trade, which was stifled and distorted by the feudal system of command and obedience. The destruction of feudalism was the emancipation of this latent, natural *homo economicus*.

To this, Marx lodges a powerful objection in two parts: the traditional account is (1) a form of circular reasoning that (2) presents an empirically inaccurate portrait of the historical development of the West. Liberal political economy essentially projects backward into the feudal era a latent but stifled proto-capitalist agent. For Marx, however, this amounts to circular reasoning because the kind of self-interested, contractual agency projected backward onto the precapitalist world in fact presupposes the very social context (i.e., a market society) it is meant to explain. Retrospectively

projecting a kind of latent capitalist laborer who pursues the sale of her own labor on a free market as a means of explaining the dissolution of feudalism is clearly inadequate since it presumes, rather than explains, a context of action in which such an agent would exist and behave in this manner. So while traditional political economy can make clear sense of the processes by which some people sell their labor power under conditions of exploitation while others extract the surplus value of this laboring activity in the form of capital, reinvest it, and profit from this cycle, it cannot explain why some people are in the former category while others are in the latter. Without a true explanation, we are forced to make recourse to a crude mythology of a humanity divided along moral lines: that is, the original class division is a function of the “diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal élite” winning out over the “lazy rascals” who waste their time away in “riotous living” (C, 873). In lieu of a true analysis of these initial conditions, then, the traditional political economists resort to mythology: their historical narrative “plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology” (C, 873). For the political economists, it suits their theological telling of the beginnings of capitalism in “original sin” to construe the coexistence of capital and wage labor as the product of a “social contract of a quite original kind” (C, 933). The notion of an “original contract” as a metaphorical device to represent the beginnings of capital construes the differentiation of classes as the result of a *moment of decision* in which “the mass of mankind *expropriates itself* [*exproprierte sich selbst*] in honour of the ‘accumulation of capital’” (C, 934).<sup>12</sup> Bourgeois thinkers can then employ this morality tale of self-dispossession as a device to import tacit consent onto their own aims, in other words, the restructuring and subsequent naturalization of the European world as a “market society” that has emancipated labor from its premodern, feudal bonds.

Marx clearly thinks that this “self-dispossession” reading of the origins of capitalism is historically inaccurate. Therefore, in the eighth and concluding section of *Capital*, he drops the immanent critique of political economy to provide his own empirical-descriptive account of the actual historical emergence of capitalism. In this moment, the general methodology of *Capital* shifts. The only way out of the above circular reasoning is to posit an agentic intervention that is not itself the *product* of normal market relations as the classical political economists envision them but is instead a *precondition* for them. This amounts then to a necessary breach of the general method of conceiving of the capital relation as a totality, since it requires bringing in explanatory devices not contained within the ideal,



closed system envisioned previously. These other explanatory features are not contained with the *general law of capitalist accumulation* but are instead what Marx terms *primitive accumulation*. Reference to primitive accumulation as the actual history of capitalism's originary formulation breaks the circular logic of traditional political economy's idealism, thus completing the critique undertaken in the bulk of *Capital*: "The whole movement . . . seems to turn around in a never-ending circle, which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation . . . which precedes the capitalist accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure" (C, 873). In the first instance, then, primitive accumulation is logically entailed by the general law, although it cannot be given a complete account from that standpoint alone. An account of primitive accumulation is required by the general law because it is only logical for self-interested agents to contract their labor out to another class of people in exchange for a percentage of the total value produced if those same laborers do not have direct access to the means of production itself (which would enable them to reabsorb all the value produced by their labor): the "capital-relation presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour" (C, 874). So the kind of sociality envisioned (a market society) presupposes the separation of producers from the means of production but cannot itself explain how or why this would occur.

More ambitiously, Marx also provides his own empirical-descriptive account of primitive accumulation. Although he does not offer a general systemic overview, following the work done by numerous subsequent commentators (especially Rosa Luxemburg's influential account), we can identify four component parts to his story. They are (1) dispossession, (2) proletarianization, (3) market formation, and (4) the separation of agriculture from urban industry.<sup>13</sup> It is my sense that Marx himself did not clearly separate out these distinct elements because he largely saw them comprising a general package: they hung together as parts of a composite whole. A quick gloss on the tale told by Marx is perhaps helpful in demonstrating how these four elements relate to one another.

Prior to the rise of capitalism, European feudal societies were held together by a chain of hierarchical relations, at the bottom of which stood serfs and peasants. Communities of peasants were subordinated beneath various feudal lords in a relationship not unlike a modern protection racket; that is, they would pay a portion of the products of their labor (directly in the form of goods such as grain, or indirectly through forced,



statue labor, most famously the *corvée* in France) in exchange for protection from other lords.<sup>14</sup> Although serfs would have to pay these dues to their superiors, they otherwise had relatively direct access to the basic material conditions necessary for the reproduction of themselves and their communities. They could access common lands for the purposes of collecting wood, growing and gathering crops, or hunting. They were what Marx calls by the somewhat ambiguous category “immediate producers” (an issue I return to later). Feudal nobility frequently faced the problem of how to compel these immediate producers to pay tithes, hence the need for various forms of overt, “extra-economic” violence (e.g., harassment by officers of the state, imprisonment, torture, war, etc.). This also caused periodic peasant uprisings and rebellions against nobility who overzealously prosecuted this essentially exploitative tithe relationship.

The long, internally complex process of primitive accumulation changed all of this by first subjecting the feudal commons to various rounds of “enclosures.” Lands were partitioned and closed off to peasants who had for hundreds of years enjoyed rights of access and use. This meant that peasants could no longer rely on the commons as the means for the basic reproduction of their communities (i.e., food, shelter, clothing, etc.). In these moments, they were subjected to *dispossession*—that is, they lost their immediate relation to the means of the reproduction of social life (e.g., the common lands).

This expropriation was intimately linked to a second component: *proletarianization*. Without direct access to the common lands that once had sustained their communities, the feudal peasantry found themselves unable to fulfill their obligations to the landed nobility, nor indeed to maintain the material reproduction of their families and communities. The only possession left to the peasant was his own personhood, so peasants contracted themselves into waged employment for the first time, selling their labor directly. They were still producers, but now their production was mediated by way of the wage.

Third, the emergence of a class of people engaged in the selling of their labor produced for the first time a *market*, that is, a competitive system in which laborers would vie with one another to set a price on the abstract unit of labor time. Now spending their days in the service of an employer, and finding themselves without direct access to the commons, these peasants also soon found that they no longer had the time or the means to produce a whole host of subsistence items they once created directly for themselves and their communities. Thus, demand was created for a market

in items such as food, clothing, shelter, and later, as the accumulation of capital permitted, for luxury items as well.

Fourth, the formation of a market in labor and commodities had implications for the *geospatial organization* of populations. The emergent competitive labor pool meant that feudal peasants had to move wherever employment could be found. Hence, dispossession and proletarianization were also directly related to urbanization and the separation of agriculture from industry.<sup>15</sup> In a characteristic dialectical move, Marx views this as a process of separation and recomposition. Agriculture and industry are disembedded from their “primitive” organic combination in the feudal family and village, and are separated only to be reconnected in a new, highly mediated manner, a process that transforms both human labor and the natural world around us.

The capitalist mode of production completes the disintegration of the primitive familial union which bound agriculture and manufacture together when they were both at an undeveloped and childlike stage. But at the same time it creates the material conditions for a new and higher synthesis, a union of agriculture and industry on the basis of the forms that have developed during the period of their antagonistic isolation. Capitalist production collects the population together in great centres, and causes the urban population to achieve an ever-growing preponderance. This has two results. On the one hand it concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil. . . . Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker. (*C*, 638)

Finally, Marx emphasizes time and time again that the definitive characteristic of this four-fold process of primitive accumulation was its violence. Contrary to the idyllic tales of traditional political economy, Marx’s narrative is a horror story. In actual historical fact, capitalism does not emerge from the struggle of the masses to achieve the honor of contracting themselves into the services of their new employers. Rather, it is born of a protracted battle in which artificial, “extra-economic” state violence was employed to separate immediate producers forcibly from their relatively

unmediated access to the primary means of production (i.e., common lands) so that they might be compelled to sell their labor under deeply asymmetrical conditions, effectively contracting into their own exploitation. As Marx famously puts it, the history of primitive accumulation is written “in letters of blood and fire” (*C*, 875); “capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (*C*, 925–26). Peasants, serfs, and all manner of “immediate producer” actively resisted this forced construction of a market society,” but they lost the longer war. Marx emphasizes this point because he wishes to make clear his objection to the traditional narrative, which paints this transition as though it were the natural result of agitation by self-interested proto-economic agents.

## II

For nearly 150 years now, critical theorists of various stripes have attempted to explicate, correct, and complement Marx’s account of primitive accumulation. This is perhaps especially true of Marxism in the English-speaking world. Whereas French and German interpretative traditions have tended to focus more on the formal, conceptual categories of *Capital*, Anglophone debates have attended more closely to Marx’s historical-descriptive account, perhaps due to the privileged role that England plays in the historical drama staging the bourgeois revolt against feudalism, the early emergence of capitalist relations, and the subsequent industrial revolution. The enclosures of the English commons and transformation of the rural peasantry into an industrial work force serves, after all, as the primary empirical referent from which Marx derives his conceptual tools. From Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb in the 1950s, to Christopher Hill, C. B. Macpherson, and E. P. Thompson in the 1960s, to Perry Anderson and Robert Brenner in the 1970s, these “transition debates” have focused on the accuracy and adequacy of Marx’s history of early modern England.<sup>16</sup> Here, however, let me focus more on the general conceptual framework, specifically, the relationship between primitive accumulation and the general law of accumulation, and on the nature of the violence envisioned within each.

A major point of contention with regard to the theory of primitive accumulation has been the sense given in *Capital* that primitive accumulation is best thought of as a *historical stage* eventually supplanted by the general law of capitalist accumulation—what we can call the “stadial interpretation.” The primary reason why this has been contentious is that it implies

a corresponding stadial succession in the *forms of violence* engendered by capitalism.

There are many sections in *Capital* in which Marx gives one the impression that we ought to interpret primitive accumulation as a historical stage, overtaken and superseded by the true, mature, general law of accumulation once a full and complete capitalist system is in place. As mentioned above, Marx's primary example of primitive accumulation is the series of "enclosures of the commons" that took place in England and Scotland, primarily in the seventeenth century. While acknowledging some variation in the historical experience of different countries and regions, Marx does designate this English version the "classic form" (C, 876) and certainly suggests that, by his own time, this process had *ended*. He expressly relegates it to the "pre-history of capital" (C, 928).

In a certain sense, Marx's own argument centrally depends on the interpretation of primitive accumulation as a historically completed stage. His argument requires this because of the role it plays in the account of the general law of accumulation under the fully developed form of the capital relation. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Marx argues that the proper functioning of the capital relation is predicated upon systematic exploitation. Exploitation of the sort described above is the normal state of affairs; it is intrinsic to how capitalism produces wealth rather than a side effect or a distortion. But if it is so systematic and widespread, then why does it require such elaborate unmasking by Marx in the first place? Why can't the people who labor under this system of exploitation recognize it as such?

To explain this obfuscation, one needs an account of something like ideology or hegemony. Marx has argued that one of the distinctive features of capitalism as a system of exploitation is that it operates through the nominal freedom of the exploited. Laborers "freely" contract into their own exploitation, experiencing this as an actualization of choice and free will because they lack an analysis of how this context of choice was established in the first place or a vision of how it might be replaced by another. Capitalism is "naturalized" when one accepts only the range of possibilities within immediate view without recognizing the background structuring conditions of this range as the product of an arbitrary and historically contingent set of circumstances. But for this ideological normalization story to be plausible, Marx must assert not only that mature capitalism does not require overt "extra-economic" violence but also that the period when such violence was required has faded from immediate consciousness. Although

capitalism's prehistory is dripping in blood, once the fundamental capital relation is established, extra-economic force is thought to fade away. It is replaced by the "silent compulsion of economic relations [*der stumme Zwang der ökonomischen Verhältnisse*]," which "sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force [*außerökonomische, unmittelbare Gewalt*] is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases" (C, 899). Even the immediate consciousness of the previous period of violence has been largely erased; hence, for instance, Marx's insistence that, by "the nineteenth century, the very memory of the connection between the agricultural labourer and communal property had, of course, vanished" (C, 889). This is why the very idea of a primitive accumulation seems to necessitate a stadial interpretation: a stadial account explains our "forgetting" of capitalism's birth in blood and fire.

It is also perhaps clearer now why the stadial interpretation has been so controversial and vexing. Critics have raised objections not only with the historical periodization but also with the very idea that the overt, extra-economic violence required by capitalism is surpassed and transformed into a period of "silent compulsion" through exploitation. Peter Kropotkin, for one, vigorously objected to the "erroneous division between the *primary* accumulation of capital and its present-day formation."<sup>17</sup> For Kropotkin and his anarchist-collectivist movement, the framing of primitive accumulation as a historical epoch was more than a side concern; it spoke to the central question of the relationship between capitalism and the state form itself.<sup>18</sup> Rejecting the "silent compulsion" thesis, Kropotkin argued that capitalism required the use of continuous, unmediated and unmasked violence to maintain its operation. As a result, he also rejected any attempt at working within bourgeois capitalist political systems, favoring direct action and the immediate creation of noncapitalist spaces of work and life (a position that has split anarchists and Marxists from the First International [1864–76] to the present).<sup>19</sup>

In a different way, this was also central to Rosa Luxemburg's work. In her germinal 1913 text, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg famously reworked the concept of primitive accumulation into a continuous and constitutive feature of capitalist expansion. In her rendering, primitive accumulation is transposed from Marx's "prehistory" of capital to a central explanatory concept in the apprehension of imperialist expansionism. As she put it then, "The existence and development of capitalism requires an environment of non-capitalist forms of production. . . . Capitalism needs non-capitalist social strata as a market for its surplus value, as a source of

supply for its means of production and as a reservoir of labour power for its wage system. . . . Capitalism must therefore always and everywhere fight a battle of annihilation against every historical form of natural economy that it encounters.”<sup>20</sup> So, for Luxemburg, not only does overt, political violence persist; it takes on “two faces.” *Within* Europe, “force assumed revolutionary forms in the fight against feudalism,” whereas *outside* Europe, this force “assumes the forms of colonial policy.”<sup>21</sup> The importance of Luxemburg’s innovation, therefore, resides with her ability to draw a variety of distinctive manifestations of political-economic transformation, upheaval, and violence into a single analytic frame—the constitutionally expanding field of imperial capitalism. At least at this general level, this basic insight has endured and found resonances with a wide range of subsequent thinkers.<sup>22</sup>

In more recent times, debates within feminist and postcolonial theory have revived this question. The intertwining of empire, primitive accumulation, and extra-economic violence has, unsurprisingly, played a central role in the emergence of an entire tradition of postcolonial Marxism, particularly in India. Ranajit Guha’s landmark *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) set the tone for these debates. As the title of his subsequent work, *Dominance without Hegemony* (1998), makes all the more explicit, Guha and the entire subaltern studies movement took issue with the occlusion of imperial domination in favor of the Western Marxist experience of hegemony. They argued that, contrary to the traditional Marxist (but especially neo-Gramscian) account, the most advanced, “mature” accumulation of capital coexisted alongside and necessarily required the kind of overt state violence Marx had supposedly relegated to its “pre-history.” There was no historical transition from extra-economic violence to silent compulsion, only a geographical displacement of the former to the imperial periphery.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of this discussion, one would be remiss in not mentioning the work of Silvia Federici. Federici’s *The Caliban and the Witch* deserves a place alongside *The Accumulation of Capital* as a coruscating appropriation of the concept of primitive accumulation. Federici delves into the dense archive of state and capital formation from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century in order to correct for Marx’s blindness toward gender as a central axis of social organization and control, demonstrating how violence against women is congenital to capitalism’s formulation.<sup>24</sup> Reconstructing the early history of capitalism from the standpoint of women as a social and political class, while always subtended by a racial and imperial horizon, Federici entirely reworks primitive accumulation as a category of analysis.

Her conclusion confirms that of Kropotkin, Luxemburg, Guha, and others, “A return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times.”<sup>25</sup>

The North American Indigenous (Dene) political theorist Glen Coulthard has also recently engaged in a critical reconstruction of primitive accumulation, expressly designed to shift the focus toward the *colonial relation*. In his work, Coulthard seeks to strip Marx’s original formulation of its “persistently Eurocentric feature[s]” by “*contextually shifting* our investigation from an emphasis on the *capital-relation* to the *colonial-relation*.”<sup>26</sup> In this contextual shift, Coulthard draws resources from Marx’s own writings, noting that after the collapse of the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx began to engage in more serious empirical and historical investigations of a variety of non-Western societies. The so-called ethnographic notebooks, written between 1879 and 1882, are filled with such studies, including lengthy treatment of communal property and land tenure. These writings, when combined with the revisions that Marx made to the 1872–75 French edition of *Capital* and his periodic comments on the Russian *mir*, or communal village form, present us with a significantly altered picture of Marx.<sup>27</sup> Marx searches here for an alternative to the relatively unilinear account of historical development given in his earlier works, suggesting that capitalist development could take a variety of different paths, and at the least implying the possibility of alternative modes of overcoming capitalism and implementing socialist systems of social organization. This rethinking rebounded back upon Marx’s own understanding of the theory of primitive accumulation. Perhaps most famously, in an 1877 letter to Nikolay Mikhailovsky, Marx reiterated that “the chapter on primitive accumulation [in *Capital: Volume 1*] does not pretend to do more than trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist order of economy emerged from the womb of the feudal order of economy.” If one wished to undertake a parallel study of similar such processes in Russia or the United States, for example, Marx speculated that one would find them “strikingly analogous.” Nevertheless, although we may study “each of these forms of evolution separately and then compar[e] them,” Marx cautioned against undo theoretical extrapolation: by this comparative method, “one will never arrive at . . . a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical.”<sup>28</sup>



If revisionist accounts of primitive accumulation have slowly gathered steam over the past 150 years, they have exploded in the past decade or so, particularly in the field of critical geography. This explosion has, however, also caused a certain conceptual shattering, throwing forth a range of ambiguously related companion concepts such as “accumulation by displacement,” “dispossession by displacement,” “accumulation by encroachment,” and “accumulation by denial.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps most influentially, David Harvey speaks of “accumulation by dispossession.” While offered as a synonym for primitive accumulation, in Harvey’s rendering dispossession is essentially a stand-in for *privatization*: “the transfer of productive public assets from the state to private companies,” especially as a result of the supposedly overaccumulation of capital in neoliberal times.<sup>30</sup> The category is thus shorn from any connection to the transition debates, or indeed from any particular connection to land.

In the now rather fragmented conceptual field responding to Harvey, three broad approaches appear. The first defines primitive accumulation in terms of the processes by which the “outside” of capital comes to be incorporated within it. It is thus an essentially spatial framework but one that often oscillates between the metaphors of “frontiers” and “enclosures.” Whereas the former denotes the outside boundary of capital, and is inescapably tied to colonial imaginaries, the latter invokes more a sense of encirclement and physical (if not also metaphorical) gating, fencing, and partition.<sup>31</sup> A second framework emphasizes “extra-economic means” as the definitive feature of primitive accumulation. For instance, Michael Levin defines “accumulation by dispossession” as “the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of production, subsistence or common social wealth for capital accumulation.”<sup>32</sup> As this formulation highlights, the linking of primitive accumulation to “extra-economic means” demands consideration of the politics/economics distinction and (unlike the first framework) does not necessarily pertain to the expansion of capital into new societies and spaces, but it may take place entirely “within” capital’s existing sphere of influence. Finally, a third framework emphasizes the *object* of appropriation. This is most evident in the large literature that defines primitive accumulation in terms of “land grabbing.”<sup>33</sup> It is this emphasis on land—and its relation to the other elements of primitive accumulation—that I explore further below. For the moment at least, we can say that while the above elements may hang together in some specific formulations (i.e., extra-economic land acquisition on the frontier of capital), they need not do so. Considerable disagreement persists therefore when it comes to

identifying which element is decisive in demarcating primitive accumulation as a distinct category of analysis.

Among the myriad complexities of these debates, two matters stand out most prominently: (1) Is primitive accumulation best thought of as a historical stage of capitalist development or as a distinct modality of its ongoing operation? (2) Does the supposed “silent compulsion” characteristic of capitalist exploitation constitutionally depend on the continual injection of “extra-economic” violence? The first is about the relation between the general law of accumulation and primitive accumulation; the second refers to the forms of violence they imply. From Marx’s own later writings, through to Luxemburg, Guha, Federici, and Coulthard, and much of the critical geography framework, this has generally been resolved by shifting the *temporal* framework provided in *Capital* to a *spatial* one: we are no longer operating with a distinction between mature capital and its prehistory but with a distinction between core and periphery, colonizer and the colonized.

On the one hand, it seems intuitively correct to suggest that the extra-economic violence engendered by capitalism has not been superseded historically by the emergence of the supposedly more “mature” features of the general law of accumulation, that is, the silent compulsion of exploitation. Capitalism’s entanglement in expansionist, imperial war is too widespread, systematic, and ongoing to be relegated to a prehistory. On the other hand, however, characterization of this dimension of capitalist expansion and reproduction as “primitive accumulation” places considerable strain on the coherence of that term of art. Specifically, such reformulations drive a wedge between the *conceptual-analytic* and *empirical-descriptive* functions of the concept.

Tensions between these two functions are, of course, already latent within Marx’s original formulation. Marx sought to provide an empirical-historical description of the actual processes of capital formation in Western Europe from the seventeenth century to his own time in the mid-nineteenth. In this descriptive register, the primary empirical case is that of England. However, this description then goes on to serve a *conceptual-analytic* function as a paradigmatic or “classic form.” It thus provides the basis for the general theory or formal model that, while originally rooted in the specific historical experiences of early modern England, exceeds and transcends this particular case. In this second, formal register, other cases can be evaluated as better or worse approximations of the ideal. Since Marx expressly analogizes between the prehistory of European capital

and the non-European, noncapitalist world existing in contemporaneous time with his own theoretical formulations in *Capital* (e.g., the colonial periphery of the mid-nineteenth century), a certain historicist tendency is disclosed, providing fodder to important postcolonial criticisms to emerge subsequently.<sup>34</sup>

Ironically, reformulations of Marx's original thesis along the lines of the work discussed above have tended to compound, rather than resolve, such tensions. By expressly grouping the diversity of extra-economic violence manifest at the peripheries of capitalism under the general heading of primitive accumulation, such work has only exaggerated and expanded the historicist tendency already implicit in *Capital*. After all, if the extra-economic violence of the imperial peripheries is an instantiation of primitive accumulation, then we should expect its empirical content to conform to the "classic case" of seventeenth-century England. This requires a large generalization across space and time, threatening to empty the term of its original content. As political theorist Onur Ulas Ince has pointed out, however, in a drive to expand the descriptive extension of primitive accumulation (what it *covers*), its conceptual intension (what it *means*) has become less precise and clear.<sup>35</sup>

In an effort to avoid a theory of primitive accumulation that smacks too much of the stages of development theses characteristic of Eurocentric nineteenth-century philosophical anthropology, subsequent commentators have elided the fact that at least in one important respect the developments that took place in Western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were in fact qualitatively unique. Specifically, primitive accumulation in Western Europe took place in a global context in which no other capitalist societies already existed. Whatever analogies between capital formation in Europe and non-European societies obtain, this fact attests to a singular event that could never again take place. All other, subsequent experiences with primitive accumulation were dissimilar from Marx's "classic case" in this specific respect (at least). And this had enormous implications for the shape, speed, and character of capitalist development in all other locales, because in all other places, it was structurally affected by already existing capitalism in Western Europe. Put differently, while the original framework attempts to explain the strange alchemy of capital's emergence out of *noncapital*, subsequent focus shifts to the subsumption of noncapital by *already existing* capital. This is why colonial policy of the nineteenth or twentieth century is not analogous to primitive accumulation in seventeenth-century England. The spatial expansion of capital through

empire does not, in fact, represent a return to capitalism's origins so much as a succession of qualitatively unique spatio-temporal waves, simultaneously linking core and periphery.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, I submit then that primitive accumulation cannot be coherently extended to define a feature or dimension of contemporary capitalism without considerable reconstruction of its conceptual intention. In order to preserve the insight with regard to the persistence of extra-economic violence but avoid the problems of an overly generalized extension of primitive accumulation, what is required is, first, a *disaggregation* of the component elements of primitive accumulation in favor of an analysis that contemplates alternative possible relations between these elements. Marx largely treats the four elements of primitive accumulation as one modular package: he explicates the violence of dispossession as a means of explaining the other elements of proletarianization, market formation, and the separation of agriculture and industry. Subsequent debates have largely taken on this model, treating the four elements as though necessarily interconnected, focusing debate on whether their initial formation (and the overt violence required for their emergence) has been superseded or remains alive today. This leads one to the (mistaken) expectation that all cases of primitive accumulation should express this four-fold structure. Thus, my first postulate here is that, by treating primitive accumulation as a modular package of interrelated processes, the category becomes overdetermined by the specific historical form originally given by Marx.

My second basic postulate is that, rather than adopt a general extension of primitive accumulation, we are better served by reworking the category of *Enteignung* originally formulated therein. *Enteignung*—variously translated as “dispossession” or “expropriation”—is a narrower and more precise term of art than primitive accumulation. More to the point, it comes closer to grasping the original intent of the revisionist theories of primitive accumulation: naming a form of violence distinct from the silent compulsion of exploitation. Rather than working with a distinction between general versus primitive accumulation, then, I commend working with a distinction between exploitation and dispossession. By disaggregating primitive accumulation, we allow for the possibility of relating exploitation and dispossession in a variety of ways rather than assuming they hang together in the manner envisioned by Marx's “classic form.” We can now return to a more direct explication of the concept of dispossession in *Capital*, with an eye to extricating it from the general theory of primitive accumulation.

### III

At the most general level, Marx employs the concept of dispossession to denote the “separation process” (*Scheidungsprozess*) by which “immediate producers” (*unmittelbare Produzenten*) are detached from direct access to the means of production.<sup>37</sup> Marx’s most basic and frequent example of this is the separation of peasant agricultural producers from direct access to publicly held land, or “commons.” Through his use of the terms *Expropriation* and *Enteignung*, Marx thereby teaches us something about his views on land, nature, and locality or territorial rootedness (a point we shall return to below). Marx uses a variety of formulations to elaborate upon the idea, but a favorite phrasing is that dispossession entails the “theft of land.” *Capital* is replete with words like *Raub* (robbery) and *Diebstahl* (theft) as instantiations of *Expropriation* and *Enteignung*. Marx also occasionally uses these terms more or less interchangeably with *Aneignung*, which translators have frequently rendered as usurpation, although appropriation is probably more helpful, since it retains the direct link to expropriation, proprietary, and indeed property.

While evocative (and thus popular in contemporary debates), the phrase “theft of land” is indeterminate in a variety of ways.<sup>38</sup> Both key words need unpacking. The former term seems to imply a normative basis for the critique (i.e., denoting a kind of offense or violence), while the latter suggests its natural object. But what exactly is meant by *theft* here and in what sense can it pertain to *land*? Is this meant only as a specific example, relevant to seventeenth-century enclosures and/or nineteenth-century colonialism, or is it the necessary and fundamental expression of a general dispossessive logic in capitalist development across time and space? And what of the conjunction joining them? Is the key element theft, with a variable object, or is land the decisive element, subject to various kinds of appropriations? And, perhaps most obviously, how can Marx continue to speak of the “theft of land” without falling prey to the same problems he identified with the anarchist theories of expropriation discussed in chapter 1, namely, the question-begging normative investment in already existing property relations?

Marx does not directly address these questions in *Capital*, in large part because he does not think it necessary for the success of his argument. Although he does provide some key resources for analyzing the distinctiveness of dispossession as a form of violence, Marx is not interested in expropriation for its own sake. Instead, dispossession is analyzed in *Capital*

instrumentally, that is, as a means of explaining other phenomena, especially proletarianization and class formation. This is apparent even in his analysis of the violent expulsion and “clearing process” implied by dispossession. In his account of the transformation of the Scottish highlands, for instance, Marx emphasizes that “the last great process of expropriation of the agricultural population from the soil [*Der letzte große Expropriationsprozeß der Ackerbauer von Grund und Boden*]” is “the so-called ‘clearing of estates,’ i.e., the sweeping of human beings off them. All the English methods hitherto considered culminated in ‘clearing’” (C, 889). Citing Robert Somers’s *Letters from the Highlands*, Marx even expressly links this clearing process to environmental destruction and colonial expansion: “The clearance and dispersion of the people [*Die Lichtung und Vertreibung des Volks*] is pursued by the proprietors as a settled principle, as an agricultural necessity [*landwirtschaftliche Betriebsnotwendigkeit*], just as trees and brushwood are cleared from the wastes of America or Australia; and the operation goes on in a quiet, business-like way, etc.” (C, 893).<sup>39</sup> However, Marx proceeds to interpret this process of dispossession as causally linked to the other component elements of primitive accumulation, especially proletarianization: “In the eighteenth century the Gaels were both driven from the land and forbidden to emigrate, with a view to driving them forcibly to Glasgow and other manufacturing towns” (C, 890–91). Marx is quite clear that the purpose of this dispossession process is precisely to drive landed peasantry into disciplinary waged-labor relations. Elsewhere, he confirms this:

Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labour. (C, 899)

The intermittent but constantly renewed *expropriation and expulsion* [*Expropriation und Verjagung*] of the agricultural population supplied the urban industries, as we have seen, with a mass of proletarians. . . . The thinning-out of the independent self-supporting peasants *corresponded directly with the concentration of the industrial proletariat*. (C, 908, emphasis added)

In other words, we can see that Marx views the violence of dispossession in light of the other constitutive elements of primitive accumulation, namely, proletarianization, market formation, and urbanization. *Expropriation und Verjagung* emerge as key concepts for him in these moments but only in-

strumentally as the means of explaining proletarianization. The enclosures of the commons and the clearing of the land are undertaken *in order that* a labor market will emerge.

This formulation is, however, vulnerable to the same criticisms Marx lodged against the traditional political economists. Proletarianization cannot be the motivational impetus behind the enclosure of the commons since this would, again, presume the very context it is meant to explain. Marx comes close to committing this error at times because he does not always clearly differentiate between *functional* and *explanatory* accounts.

While the enclosures of the commons may have significant explanatory power when it comes to documenting the formation of an urbanized class of waged laborers, it is an altogether different matter to claim this as its *purpose* or *function*. On Marx's own terms, it cannot be the function of dispossession to generate a proletariat, at least not in the original case. We must qualify with "in the original case" here, because it *is* possible to envision a nontautological functionalist account of dispossession relative to proletarianization *after* the original formation of a capitalist society. From that point on, the demand for new labor may in fact be a significant factor in subsequent enclosures and dispossessions.

To clarify the distinction, consider two archetypal agents of dispossession in *Capital*: the Duchess of Sutherland and E. G. Wakefield. Marx pillories the first for her appropriation of 794,000 acres of land and subsequent expulsion of the Scottish clans who had lived on them "from time immemorial" (C, 891). However violent this process of dispossession was, it was not undertaken *in order to* produce a class of vulnerable waged proletariat, even if this was the effect. E. G. Wakefield, however, is an entirely different case. The English colonial advocate did expressly and intentionally work to dispossess both Indigenous peoples and independent agrarian settler-producers *in order to* generate and maintain a pool of vulnerable waged laborers in the colony of New South Wales, and could do so precisely because previous iterations of dispossession had *already* generated a proletariat.<sup>40</sup> Although both processes of dispossession are related to proletarianization *in some way*, they are also importantly different in a manner that alters the overarching conceptualization of primitive accumulation. In the move from Sutherland to Wakefield, we also move from an explanatory account of the dispossession-proletarianization connection to a functionalist one.

My postulate here is that the causal linkage between dispossession and exploitation in Marx's original formulation is underdetermined. It is not the case that that dispossession is always explainable in terms of its function



relative to proletarianization, a matter that is obscured by the modular conception of primitive accumulation in both its original and revisionist forms. It is, however, possible to recast dispossession as a distinct category of violent transformation independent of the processes of proletarianization and market formation.<sup>41</sup>

## IV

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, “land” is a complex and mercurial legal construct. It is likewise a surprisingly evasive philosophical concept. Reading Marx’s writings on primitive accumulation, dispossession, and expropriation gives us another set of tools for unraveling this nest of issues. In this respect, I consider Marx’s most important contributions to be methodological. Generally speaking, when Marx turns to define key concepts, he does so dialectically, meaning that he does not provide an ideal, analytic definition of the term but rather attempts to grasp the multisided processes in which they are embedded. For instance, primitive accumulation is defined in relation to the general law of accumulation, and expropriation in relation to exploitation. This method of conceptual explication can also be usefully extended to consider the very category of “land” that, for Marx, is dialectically intertwined with labor. In other words, rather than define land as wholly outside of human intervention (i.e., as pristine “nature”), or as merely another product of labor, Marx helps us grasp how it can be between these, can be a *medium* of expression. This, in turn, will help clarify the distinctive violence associated with dispossession.

The phrase *Grund und Boden* appears periodically throughout *Capital*, but it is a phrase that stands in need of some unpacking. On the one hand, as we have already seen, terms like *land*, *ground*, *earth*, and *soil* are used in their ordinary-language senses to refer to various material objects in the simple sense. It is in this sense that Marx speaks from time to time of the “theft of land.” Land here appears to be little more than another kind of commodity, reworked by capitalism, and subject to the same forces we would expect to find in the struggle over any other resource.<sup>42</sup> In other moments, however, Marx is more careful—expressly working to demonstrate that land is not, in fact, simply another object of production and circulation. In those moments when Marx speaks to the distinctiveness of land, he typically does so in a voice more reminiscent of his earlier, so-called philosophical-anthropological writings. In these passages, the land appears

as a category derived from a classical Hegelian idiom of “man and nature.” In short, *Land* is dialectically related to the category of *Labor*. Consider the formal definition of labor from chapter 7 of *Capital*: “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature” (C, 284). Labor in this precise sense is said to be “an exclusively human characteristic,” because “man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purpose in those materials” (C, 284). This definition is clearly rooted in a Hegelian framework, with its emphasis on the external objectification of the will: “During the labour process, the worker’s labour constantly undergoes a transformation, from the form of unrest [*Unruhe*] into that of being [*Sein*], from the form of motion [*Bewegung*] into that of objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*]” (C, 296). From this general definition, Marx proceeds to disarticulate the labor process into three component parts: (1) purposeful activity, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work (C, 284). We are left then with a labor process composed of *activity*, *object*, and *instrument*.

It is in the context of this discussion of labor that we find a more formal and conceptually precise definition of land. In the formal sense given by *Capital*, land is not merely another product of labor (a commodity) but is rather a special kind of *instrument* or *medium* of labor. (In the tripartite division above, it is number 3, not 2.) Marx writes:

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which serves as a conductor, directing his activity onto that object. . . . Leaving out of consideration such ready-made means of subsistence as fruits, in gathering which a man’s bodily organs alone serve as the instruments of his labour, the object the worker directly takes possession of is not the object of labour but its instrument. Thus nature becomes one of the organs of his activity, which he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself in spite of the Bible. *As the earth is his original larder, so too it is his original tool house.* It supplies him, for instance, with stones for throwing, grinding, pressing, cutting, etc. *The earth itself is an instrument of labour.* (C, 285, emphasis added)

So, rather than relating land back to other commodities, in this formulation it is clearly seen as a component of the broader category of “nature.” It

is part of “the earth itself.” In some cases, it seems that the term *land* is being used to designate that element of nature yet to be transformed directly by human laboring activity. In these moments, land is deployed paradoxically as both an *instrument of labor* and as that which stands *outside of labor*. Land is, “economically speaking, all the objects of labour furnished by nature *without human intervention*” (C, 758). Such apparent contradictions can only be resolved by grasping them dialectically, that is, by relating them to the more general category of nature. It would take us too far from our specific objectives here to provide a complete explication of the concept of nature in Marx, but it is nevertheless important to note that the status of the land as both inside and outside of the labor process reflects Marx’s broader conceptualization of nature as something “outside” of humanity, or at least nonidentical with it (i.e., that which humanity confronts and transforms) and, at the same time, the totality of all that exists (thereby encompassing humanity as well). Marx’s innovation was in recasting the moment of encounter with nature from a contest with an unhistorical, homogenous substratum to an already historically mediated element of human practice. Nature is not eternally self-same but is itself the product of previous generations of human praxis. As a result, it has a necessarily temporal and historical character.<sup>43</sup>

Marx’s use of the term *land* is therefore clearly intended to link labor and nature. However, it is not synonymous with either of these. For land in its specificity designates a relationship to *place*. The metabolic international of humans and nature is rooted in and mediated through particular locales, and this territorial specificity gives form to a society’s labor process. This is reflected in the simple observation that to relocate an entire human community to some other place is to fundamentally and irrevocably transform it (moreover, most people view their homelands as nonfungible, to the point that adequate compensation cannot, even in principle, be given for their irredeemable loss or destruction). So, just as we can affirm the Hegelian-Marxist point that human communities do not interact with nature in a historical vacuum, we must add that neither do they encounter it in a *spatial* one. Land then is best grasped here as an intermediary concept—situated between labor and nature, between activity and object—designating the spatial and territorial specificity of this mediation. Importantly, while this spatiality can be shaped and reworked by human praxis, it is not reducible to that activity. The land mediates laboring activity through a set of spatial relations that are not themselves the product of human will but rather a set of worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is why it

functions as a mediator; it retains something of the natural world. (This is the reason, for instance, that Karl Polanyi insisted land was really only a “fictitious commodity.”<sup>44</sup>) While land can clearly be commodified in certain respects (bought, sold, traded, rented, stolen, etc.), it nevertheless must also be grasped in its distinctiveness if we are to understand the nature of dispossession.

In sum, then, Marx makes a number of significant contributions to thinking about dispossession that renders his account superior to theorizing by Rousseau, Paine, Proudhon, or Kropotkin. First, Marx does not frame dispossession in terms of an “originary theft.” Rather than thinking of it as a process that generates property (or civil society) *as such*, Marx considers it as part of a historically specific transition from one form of social organization to another. Second, while retaining the sense that dispossession pertains first and foremost to *land*, Marx offers a more sophisticated and elaborated analysis of the term, understood here not as an object that stands wholly outside human social relations but grasped dialectically as a mediating category between “humanity” and “nature” but situated within a multisided composite “form of life.” In chapter 3, I argue that Indigenous thinkers have, over the centuries, formulated versions of these two points quite independently and in an even more apt form, in part because the struggles over land have been central, rather than peripheral, to their concerns. Their account is moreover superior because it is not burdened by the third feature of Marx’s framework, namely, the generally subordinated role that dispossession plays therein, subsumed as it is beneath categories such as primitive accumulation, class domination, and exploitation. In a highly ironic twist, however, contemporary work that continues to be inspired by Marx has generally *rejected* the first two (valid) contributions and *affirmed* the third (problematic) one.

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The “analytic Marxist” framework of G. A. Cohen provides an illustrative case in point. Analysis of his *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (1995) functions as useful contrast, both in terms of how one might relate exploitation and expropriation but also more generally in terms of methodological approach (in this case, contrasting dialectical to analytic methods of critical inquiry).

Cohen argues that we have legitimate grounds to critique expropriation because of the way it makes exploitation possible, even likely. Although he recognizes that the unequal distribution of the means of production might

be regarded as unjust on “independent grounds,” in Cohen’s reading, it is “thought unjust by Marxists chiefly because it forces some to do unpaid labour for others.”<sup>45</sup> In this reformulation then, the relation between exploitation and expropriation is explicitly circular. Cohen argues that it can be true both that exploitation is “unjust because it reflects an unjust distribution” *and* that the original “asset distribution is unjust because it generates that unjust extraction.”<sup>46</sup> At first glance, this seems confused since both key concepts appear fundamental from the standpoint of the other. But we can relatively easily decode this seemingly tautological formulation by showing that the two poles are fundamental in different senses, namely, in *causal* versus *normative* ways. On Cohen’s rendering, exploitation is wrong on fully independent grounds, because the coercive extraction of value is indefensible in and of itself. By contrast, dispossession—defined here as the unequal distribution of access to the means of production—is not normatively wrong in a similarly self-standing manner. Dispossession is only objectionable inasmuch as it enables the kind of coercive transfer characteristic of exploitation. Thus, dispossession is causally but not normatively fundamental. The unequal distribution of access to productive resources in, say, land is not *intrinsically* unjust, at least not in one sense of the word. It is not intrinsically unjust because it is possible to imagine scenarios in which such inequality would diminish, rather than enable, exploitation. However, in order to prevent his thesis from becoming tautological in the wrong way, Cohen must posit *as a matter of fact* that dispossession is exploitation-enabling: “Such a distribution [of unequal access to the means of production] is intrinsically unjust because its injustice resides in its *disposition* to produce a certain effect, a disposition which might not be activated.”<sup>47</sup>

There are many things to commend in this approach and much more could be said about it. Provisionally, however, we can at least observe that there are a number of reasons why we might find this approach unsatisfactory for our purposes here. Like many approaches within the Marxist tradition, this perspective takes exploitation to be primary, considering dispossession only secondarily.<sup>48</sup> This approach assumes that the two issues are related in a teleological manner. Dispossession is causally primary, whereas exploitation is normatively so. This is somewhat compounded by the ideal, normative theory perspective employed in the specific example of G. A. Cohen’s work, in which the categories are largely lifted out of their original historical and social context. However, this commitment to a certain methodological individualism and decontextualism distorts some of the main issues at stake.

The general aim of Cohen's work is to provide a sufficiently coherent, analytic reconstruction of (what he takes to be) the core of Marxism in a manner that will render it intelligible and convincing to other Anglo-American political philosophers (but especially Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin, Joseph Raz, John Rawls, etc.). The specific aim of the work is to provide a critique of the idea of self-ownership at the heart of Nozick's libertarian defense of private property (and, in Cohen's view, also covertly at the heart of some versions of Marxism), coupled with a revised account of normative force of the concern with exploitation. Cohen's investigation is thus motivated by and indeed, as I shall argue below, to some extent structured in terms of, the libertarian attempt to defend inequalities generated by private property and "free" market exchange. In particular, his account is generated by an interest in undermining the foundational role that the concept of self-ownership plays in some Marxist accounts of exploitation since, on his rendering, this positions Marxism dangerously close to libertarian arguments, especially those of Nozick. Since Cohen is motivated by an interest in undermining recourse to concepts of "property in the person," he wishes to show that exploitation is not necessarily derivative from dispossession, in either the causal or normative ways. For to say that exploitation obtains *only* in virtue of dispossession is (implicitly or explicitly) to endorse the notion that matters related to the differential distribution of anything beyond original productive resources (e.g., powers, talents, and luck) are incidental to and apart from the problem at hand. That would seem to lend credence to the idea of self-ownership and hence, tangentially at least, to libertarian arguments.<sup>49</sup>

In setting up the basic problem here, Cohen has adopted the broad framework of analysis of his principle interlocutors, namely, normative political philosophers of various liberal and libertarian stripes. What these approaches have in common is a certain methodological individualism and decontextualism. One begins by imagining a counterfactual scenario involving two historically and socially dislocated individuals engaged in some transaction. Through this thought experiment, one clarifies the basic moral intuitions at stake with regard to such matters as "fair" agreements, transfer of goods, and so on. Once the underlying principles have been established, one can then return to the actually existing world and deploy the appropriately clarified and general moral principles as tools of critique. So, when Cohen envisions the relationship between expropriation and exploitation, he imagines a scenario in which person A and person B confront one another. In step 1 of their interaction, access to productive resources is

distributed unequally (expropriation), such that A gains a monopoly over the means of production. In step 2 of their interaction, person A can now coerce a systematic transfer of value from person B, despite the fact that B is nominally free, because B has no real viable alternative (exploitation or starvation). In this case then, the original expropriation at step 1 has enabled the exploitation at step 2, and the wrongness of the coercive transfer at step 2 is revealed as such in light of the fact that it is predicated upon the unequal expropriation at 1. Expropriation is wrong because it enables exploitation. Exploitation is wrong because it is coercion that requires expropriation; that is, it would not function in the presence of viable alternatives.

The issue with this kind of formulation of the matter is not so much that it is wrong on its own terms (although it may also be that) but rather that it is partial. Its partiality derives from the manner in which it abstracts from the concrete specifics of matter, in two senses. First, the framing of the problem of expropriation and exploitation here proceeds as though the movement into a capitalist system of private property and markets arises out of a zero point in time, that is, as though no previously existing normative order exists. Expropriation is conceived of as a moment in time, and one that arises more or less *ex nihilo*. Expropriation is not thought to replace any previously existing property arrangements, and thus whatever violence can be associated with it must be violence that is future oriented, in the sense that it applies to what happens as a result of this originary moment. In this way, the whole framework of expropriation (and primitive accumulation more generally) comes to serve as a kind of Marxist version of the social contract thought experiment of an exit from the state of nature. It is envisioned here to exist in the time/space of something like Rawls's original position. But this is clearly not the intention or function of the analysis of primitive accumulation in its original iteration. As we have just seen, primitive accumulation is not Marx's story of the origins of property as such, much less the origins of civil society. It is the historically specific account of the origins of *capitalism*. Transposing this discussion into an original position scenario is, ironically, to adopt a position much closer to that of Rousseau, Paine, or Proudhon than to Marx. Moreover, it obscures the factual circumstances we are concerned with here—that is, the rise of capitalism as a historical form of life that colonizes and consumes actually existing alternatives.

Second, and for related reasons, Cohen imagines the “expropriated” and the “exploited” to be *one and the same*. In the formal restatement above,



person B is unfairly denied access to the means of production relative to person A. As a result, *this same* person is placed in an unfair bargaining position, which enables their exploitation. In this scenario, B can complain that the exchange of labor for wages undertaken at the second stage is unjust—even if she “freely” contracts into it—because the situation in step 2 is predicated upon the unequal distribution undertaken at step 1. Person B would not rationally accept such a transfer of value except under these circumstances, which were not her making. Thus, we have reason to complain that the situation envisioned in step 2 is normatively suspect. But again, there is no reason to suppose that this is the relation between expropriation and exploitation in the actual historical scenarios we are trying to grasp and subject to critique. As I have argued in the last chapter, not only is it entirely possible to imagine cases in which expropriation does not lead directly to proletarianization, this is in fact *the historically dominant phenomenon in vast portions of the world*. In the colonial context, we routinely find cases of expropriation without exploitation. In such a context, the two processes are still related to one another but not in a linear or teleological manner, such that those subject to the first pass directly into the conditions of the second. In sum then, both of these two elements of Cohen’s formulation are abstractions that differ significantly from the original impetus behind the terms *Expropriation* and *Enteignung* in Marx’s analysis. While perhaps interesting from a moral philosophy standpoint insofar as they may clarify intuitions about fairness under *those* conditions, Marx did not have these circumstances in mind—nor, I think, should we.

Finally, the ahistorical analytic approach leads to persistent equivocation about the proper object of expropriation, specifically, whether it must retain something of its original orientation to *land*. Most critical theorists today would, I suspect, view the original focus on landed property as an antiquated feature of the original eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates. As we have already seen, this focus on land has been obviated in the work of David Harvey. In a recent exchange between Michael Dawson and Nancy Fraser, expropriation emerges as a key category of analysis, but its original relation to land-based struggles is likewise obscured. There, Dawson and Fraser rightly point to the deep collusion of capitalist development and forms of coercive expropriation while nevertheless equivocating on its proper object. Recognizing that the expropriation of land and natural resources has been central to this story, both ultimately define expropriation in terms of a relation to labor. As Dawson puts it, the core problem

here is that “racially expropriated labor never becomes ‘free labor’ in the classic Marxist sense.”<sup>50</sup> Or in Fraser’s formulation, “expropriation works by *confiscating* capacities and resources and *conscripting* them into capital’s circuits of self-expansion. . . . The confiscated assets may be labor, land, animals, tools, mineral or energy deposits—but also human beings, their sexual and reproductive capacities, their children and bodily organs.”<sup>51</sup> As we can see, both Dawson and Fraser recognize that although expropriation aims at a wide range of targets, its ultimate function is to mark a (largely racialized) distinction of “*free subjects of exploitation*” and “*dependent subjects of expropriation*.”<sup>52</sup>

This distinction is useful and generative. And yet, in their attempt to consider the widest range of possible objects of expropriation, Dawson and Fraser leave certain fundamental problems unresolved. For while we may say that labor, land, animals, tools, and so on are all targets of expropriation, what that means as a matter of critique remains unclear. If someone coercively appropriates my labor, my body, or my sexual and reproductive capacities, they are targeting my *personhood* in some importantly direct way. But if they dispossess me of my land, tools, or natural resources, they are divesting me of the material objects that mediate my relation to the world, and it would appear at least that the critique of this “separation process” can only get off the ground if those material objects are, in some sense or another, *properly mine* in the first place. Thus, we are back to the original problem with the concept of dispossession: its investment in prior forms of proprietary relations.

Consider again the “classic” Marxian formulation. Whereas *exploitation* is the accumulation of surplus value generated by the capital relation itself, *expropriation* is original appropriation of the means of production. This is, of course, a highly abstract formulation that appears to avoid the problems of overly specifying a particular historical configuration of the forces of production (i.e., it does not name any specific mediation tools). The “means of production” is a category that is highly variable in content, containing almost anything depending upon the historical and sociological specifics. It can include everything from factory equipment and tools to computers and other electronic devices. However, all those objects are themselves the *products* of previous cycles of labor. They may function as the means of production in specific contexts, but their unequal distribution is not itself necessarily the function of a dispossessive logic. Rather, inequality in such goods can be more easily explained as the fruits of exploitation. In order for dispossession to be a *distinctive* category of capitalist violence (e.g., not

reducible to exploitation), we must be clearer in our use of the abstract formulation. The unequal access here must, in other words, ultimately refer to some element contained within the concept of “means of production” that is not reducible to the products of labor itself. As already intimated above, this irreducible element is the contribution of the productive powers of the natural world. If, for instance, we follow Marx’s logic back through the various particular manifestations of the means of production, we arrive at the insight that the “separation process” at the heart of dispossession is a separation of the bulk of humanity from the productive power of nature. As he put it in the *Grundrisse*, “all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society.” However, the specific and necessary component of capitalist production is the “(1) *Dissolution* of the relation to the earth—land and soil—as natural condition for production—to which [the worker] relates as to his own inorganic being; the workshop of his forces, and the domain of his will . . . [and] (2) *Dissolution of the relations* in which he appears as *proprietor of the instrument*.”<sup>53</sup> “Land” is the name given to this irreducible element in Marx’s particular formulation in *Capital* because it was the most visible and concrete manifestation of this dual-sided dissolution/appropriation in the specific immediate contexts that most shaped his thought.<sup>54</sup> This can be obscured by the fact that we also speak of land as the means of production for one particular kind of laboring activity, namely, agricultural. Hence, possible confusion resides in the fact that the term is used both as *one example* of the means of production (e.g., on par with tools) *and* as the original fount of all other, secondary means of production. A properly reconstructed account of dispossession must preserve the original insight of the latter while, at the same time, transcending the limitations of the former. The reformulated account highlights that “land” is not a material object but a mediating device, a conceptual and legal category that serves to relate humans to “nature” and to each other in a particular, proprietary manner. This is why dispossession can be said to create its own object of appropriation: dispossession generates and then monopolizes a distinct medium of human activity in the world via the legal and conceptual construct “land.” In so reformulating the question, we must move beyond the particular expression given by Marx, not only the nineteenth-century portrait of land as bound distinctly to agricultural production but also the notion that its appropriation is “originary” in a temporal sense, that is, as an event in time or a stage of development. What follows from this is that dispossession comes to name a distinct logic of capitalist development grounded

in the appropriation and monopolization of the productive powers of the natural world in a manner that orders (but does not directly determine) social pathologies related to colonization, dislocation, and class stratification and/or exploitation, while simultaneously converting the planet into a homogeneous and universal means of production.