

Towards a Global History of Primitive Accumulation

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A conference co-sponsored by the International Institute of Social History, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Pittsburgh

This conference aims for a historically grounded rethinking of the concept of “primitive” or “original” accumulation of capital. With this phrase, Karl Marx tried to capture the dual process by which wealth was accumulated in the hands of capitalists on the one hand, and labor power was commodified and made available for exploitation on the other. Recalling the often neglected violence of the centuries-long process that transformed peasant producers into industrial workers, Marx famously raged that its history was “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.” More than 150 years later, the same processes he described have continued to unfold all over the world, including in ostensibly socialist countries like the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and many postcolonial states throughout the global south. Given the current wave of interest in the role of violence and forced labor in the history of the global economy, we think the time has come to critically re-examine these processes, focusing in particular on the ways in which primitive accumulation has been a critical feature of economic development on a world scale.

In much writing by both Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike, primitive accumulation appears, if at all, as simply a foundational moment in the history of capitalism, a relatively brief period of transformative violence that was centered on Europe, and that soon receded into the background as the more orderly discipline of the market rose to take its place. In our view, such a narrow definition of the temporal and geographic scope of primitive accumulation misreads the history of capitalism: it underemphasizes the importance of forced labor and the creation of colonial regimes; the continued role of violence in supporting productive relations even in the most developed capitalist

economies; and the mass expropriations that have similarly characterized alternative pathways of economic development in countries such as the USSR and PRC.

In order to begin the development of a broader conceptual framework that more fully captures the role of accumulation through violence in the history of the global economy, we solicit proposals for papers that are both grounded in empirical research and theoretically informed, and that explore any aspect of the worldwide history of primitive accumulation. Questions such papers might explore include, but are not limited to:

- 1) What are the primary forms and elements of primitive accumulation? Who are its principal agents? What role do states, capitalists, landowners, corporations, small-producers, and settlers play? What is the infrastructure of primitive accumulation?
- 2) What is the history of primitive accumulation? Does it have identifiable stages? What has been its chronology and geography? How has primitive accumulation changed over time?
- 3) What is the relationship between primitive accumulation and different forms of colonialism? What role did primitive accumulation play in the creation of racial categories?
- 4) What role does primitive accumulation play in the creation of a fragmented global class society? What role does primitive accumulation play in the simultaneous spread of wage labor and commercial slavery?
- 5) What has been the impact of primitive accumulation on the household, women's roles within the household, and patterns of marriage and the family? Has women's waged and unwaged labor contributed a critical, although often overlooked, source of capital accumulation by either the state or private economic enterprises?
- 6) What is the connection between primitive accumulation and largescale ecological degradation and catastrophe? What is its connection to the history of migration and urbanization on a global scale?
- 7) Is primitive accumulation a useful concept for understanding the history of accumulation through violence in non-capitalist or socialist states like the USSR, PRC, and postcolonial countries in the global south?
- 8) How has primitive accumulation been conceptualized and theorized by different traditions, in different countries, and in different periods?

The conference organizers expect to be able to provide lodging for all participants, and a limited amount of funding will also be available to assist with travel costs, especially for those without access to institutional funds who come from far away. We plan to follow up the conference with a smaller workshop that will result in an edited volume published by a major international press.

Proposals should include a title, 250 word abstract, and short CV. Please submit materials by email attachment to <primitiveaccumulation2019@gmail.com> by July 1, 2018.

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