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Michael Perelman and the Persistence of Primitive Accumulation

Michael Perelman's analysis of Marx's treatment of primitive accumulation is a triumph of deductive and what might be described as intuitive logic. Specifically, despite the ambiguities arising from the sheer volume of Marx's published output, Michael correctly rejected the teleological and eurocentric "stagist" formulae of the dominant Cold War versions of Marxism, confirming instead the significance of contingency in capitalism's formal subsumption of non-capitalist forms and practices and the consequent "unevenness" of development, capitalism's universalizing and relentless expansion notwithstanding.

The significance of Michael's presentation of primitive accumulation as both the intrinsically violent and necessary precursor to capitalist development and, thereafter, an ongoing process of capitalist expansion via expropriation of non-market means of production (and consumption) is twofold:

- (1) it exposes the canonical classical political economists as conscious ideologists on behalf of the bourgeoisie that struggled to throw off the shackles of feudal law and custom at home, whilst "civilizing" the peasantry at home or the natives in the colonies;
- (2) it rejects the "stagist" and eurocentric teleology underpinning both Western Marxist and Stalinist "modernization" theories and policies, emphasizing instead the myriad contingent forms of capitalist expansion and adaptation to local conditions, requiring the "ongoing process" of primitive accumulation "that continues to this day" (Perelman 2000: 36–37).

The latter point—the coexistence of primitive and capitalist accumulation—is particularly relevant when Marxism in general, and Marxist development

theory in particular, remains under attack from postcolonial writers concerned to refute the eurocentric universalism that undoubtedly informs certain applications of Marx's theory and concepts to the problems of the Third World (see Harootunian 2010a). However, in making the argument against the canonical treatment of primitive accumulation as a "once-and-for-all" procedure necessary for the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist economics, Michael noted aspects of Marx's treatment as seeming "to confine the importance of primitive accumulation to the historical past"; as restricted "to a short period in which traditional economies converted to capitalism"; as even "rather ahistorical" (Perelman 2000: 27–29). In so doing, he relied mainly on passages taken from *Capital* volumes 1 and 3, with an additional citation of *Grundrisse*. With the assistance of the work of Harry Harootunian and recourse to Marx, we will endeavor to show that Michael's intuition was correct.

The problem of theorizing an expansionist, universalizing capitalism that must, nevertheless, adapt to whichever local conditions that it encounters, in a way that itself does not itself mimic capitalism's universalizing imperialism but instead remains open to variegated, contingent, localized forms of capitalism that are nevertheless parts of a global system, has been a central concern of Harry Harootunian's work. Harootunian's studies of Japan's capitalist development and his exposition of Japanese Marxists' contemporaneous theorizations of that process have placed him at the forefront of debates involving postcolonial theory and Marxism (Harootunian 2000; 2019). In so doing, Harootunian has emerged as a staunch defender of Marx and Marxism against charges of eurocentrism.

Explaining the "unevenness" of capitalist development, despite its universalizing impulses, is a particularly urgent task, especially given postcolonialist critique of Marxism as inherently eurocentric, stemming from

the confluence of Edward Said's critique of orientalism (Said 1978) and the increasing popularity of poststructuralism in Western academia (Gandhi 2018: 24–28). The variegated nature of capitalist development cannot be explained satisfactorily by recourse to the “varieties of capitalism” or comparative capitalisms (CC) discourses of comparative political economy, as useful as these are in highlighting the differentiations in institutional configuration separating individual states. As Bob Jessop writes:

I argue that [the CC literature] *knows less about the present than about the past* of capitalism—and is even less insightful about its future. (Jessop 2015: 65)

Jessop prefaces his argument by quoting Marx's September 1847 speech on protection, free trade, and the working classes. Here, as Marx highlighted:

All those laws developed in the classical works on political economy, are strictly true under the supposition only, that trade be delivered from all fetters, that competition be perfectly free, not only within a single country, but upon the whole face of the earth ... the economists—Ricardo and others—know more about society as it will be, than about society as it is. They know more about the future than about the present. (Marx 1976b: 290)

In juxtaposing comparative political economy with the stylized representation of globally free trade in its purest form, Jessop provides an important clue as to Marx's central purpose in *Capital*. This was the exposition of capitalism as a complete, “pure” economic system—an “abstraction of a constitutive historical process” (Harootunian 2010a: 40)—consistent with, but fully conscious (and

therefore critical) of classical political economy's "claims to transhistoricality" (Harootunian 2017: 75).

Marx was hardly unmindful of historical residues or "suspended presuppositions" of pre-capitalist time that remained captive within new capitalist relations:

its vestiges would appear with the exercises that actively enlisted past practices to make of every present an uneven mix of 'then' and 'now' ... The temporal unevenness accompanying the dissolution of the ancient forms was at the core of Marx's new view of history. (Harootunian 2017: 76)

Classical political economists' advocacy of *laissez-faire* in their canonical texts obscured their often private encouragement of state activism, laid bare by Michael, aimed at achieving the transformations required to make such conditions possible. Somewhat analogously, Harootunian finds in Marx's correspondence with Vera Zasulich in 1881 clear evidence of his "repudiation of a standardized model that must be emulated at every step in the development of capitalism." Here Marx showed "how time itself intervened to short-circuit the process" of primitive accumulation in Russia (ibid.). Stagirist teleology and the associated concept of "modernity" superimposed upon history "the presumption of a completed present based on a perspective of the homogenized continuum of historical time that enables the making of abstractive comparative judgements from empirical data, free from qualitative temporal differences" (Harootunian 2010b: 371). Yet Marx himself did not make this superimposition, as his correspondence reveals. So why has this misinterpretation persisted?

Harootunian (2017: 24) presents *Capital* as especially revealing of:

the circumstances of the transformative force of capitalism that established the permanence and the primacy of the present as a temporal tense and with it the hegemony of a vast conceptual organization of time deposited and embodied in forms empowered to act as agents capable of reconfiguring the historical field. This reconfiguration resulted in an active erasure of capitalism's own prehistory by accelerating the process of forgetting itself through enacting the task of normalization demanded by the new mode of production that followed a rhythm of repetition. [*Capital*] is still the most detailed accounting of capital's structure of abstract temporality, presenting itself as a natural, ordinary time, world time, whose notice has even escaped the practice of historical materialism at risk of 'dilut[ing]' its conception of history (2017: 24–25, quoting from Agamben 1993: 91).

The materialization of that risk resulted in “a vulgate version of historical materialism” that adopted “a linear and homogeneous conception of time alongside a revolutionary concept of history, constraining events to a development along infinite time progressing toward some distant future” (Harootunian 2017: 25).

The reorganization of time under capitalism is in fact a complex coordination challenge, conceptualized in *Capital* as the divisions between production (linear), circulation (cyclical), and reproduction (the organic union and repetitive reproduction of production and circulation, “but always with a difference” (ibid.)). Its synchronization ultimately requires the guarantee of the state, but this synchronization is subject to precariousness that must, given

class struggle, release historical time from its shackles “in the form of political change, and appears as a distinct temporality” (Harootunian 2017: 26).

The means by which the abstract logic of capital, the focus of the first volume of *Capital*, acts upon history is through “formal subsumption—capitalism’s rule of development—and its inexhaustible capacity to make history by joining what it takes over or appropriates for use and combining it with the new” (ibid.). Harootunian proceeds to show that Marx and Engels, already in *The German Ideology* (1845), in addition to *Theories of Surplus Value* (Marx 2000: 3, 468) and *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993: 105), were fully in acknowledgment of the historical residues continuing to lie behind, alongside and external to capitalism. For Marx, the key to understanding these “suspended historical presuppositions” is the understanding of the present. His “writing ceaselessly asserted the primacy of the present and privileged perspective it supplies from which to understand the past” (Harootunian 2017: 28). Yet the first volume of *Capital* starts with an image of the commodity form that reveals “the depth of Marx’s need to see it in the image of a completed totality as the means of grasping the whole of capitalism itself” (Harootunian 2017: 33), precisely in the manner he attributed earlier to Ricardo and the free trade theorists, *before* proceeding to the matter of primitive accumulation as the necessary precursor of capitalism.

Understanding the actually existing heterogeneity of capitalist development requires:

starting with formal subsumption as a continuing form producing historical unevenness [that] means also seeing the unfolding of original [or primitive] accumulation as an ongoing, accompanying process rather than capitalism’s one-time jump-start. (Harootunian 2017: 38)

Thus, while his reading of Marx led him to question the latter's agreement regarding the persistence or even permanence of primitive accumulation within capitalism, Michael's intuition was correct with respect to both Marx's intentions and the rejection of eurocentric accounts that arrogate to the core states a teleology of advanced "modernity" that presumes backwardness among those yet to "catch up." This narrative was especially dominant during the Cold War, when theories of modernization and convergence "promoted a developmentalism that promised societies not yet in the capitalist present the opportunity of catching up without recourse to revolutionary transformation" (Harootunian 2010b: 370). Western Marxism was often as guilty, with perhaps the lowest point being Bill Warren's notorious intervention in praise of imperialism (Warren 1980), representative of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak witheringly depicts as "Little Britain Marxism" (Spivak 2014).

Nevertheless, Harootunian acknowledges that Marx "may have overshot the mark when he presumed that primitive accumulation was more or less realized" in Western Europe. It is therefore particularly appropriate that in highlighting how Marx had effectively established "the relationship between primitive accumulation and the logic of formal subsumption, deriving from the inaugural overlap and mutually reciprocal dependence, guaranteed that both continue to persist in every future present," Harootunian (2017: 41) cites Michael's work to precisely that effect (Perelman 2000: 25–37). Had Marx clarified that the establishment and subsequent dominance of capitalist relations was so far in advance of almost the rest of the world—that is to say, via original accumulation—rather than primitive accumulation *per se*, this ambiguity would have been avoided completely. In fact, he did, albeit partially:

In Western Europe, the homeland of political economy, the process of primitive accumulation has more or less been accomplished. Here the capitalist regime has either directly subordinated to itself the whole of the nation's production, or, where economic relations are less developed, it has at least indirect control of those social layers which, although they belong to the antiquated mode of production, still continue to exist side by side with it in a state of decay. (Marx 1976a: 931)

Given capitalism's continual, ongoing formal subsumption of social practices, the decay of "antiquated" production modes does not necessitate their full eradication: "practices from the noneconomic realm have continued to be pressed into service of capitalist production in societies in Asia and Africa and are frequently seen as indistinguishable from the enactment of work" (Harootunian 2017: 9). The appropriation of pre-capitalist forms in the service of capitalist development was the subject of innovative theorization by Japanese Marxists trying to make sense of the apparent anomaly of early twentieth century Japanese development (see Walker 2016). It also drove postcolonialist criticism of Marxism, based, somewhat ironically, on "an obsessive acceptance of a Cold War caricature of Marx that relies on Second International 'stage theory' supplemented with Stalinist revisions based on the itinerary of development extracted from European history" (Harootunian 2017: 231).

An example of capitalism's subjugation and harnessing of non-capitalist practices in support of accumulation is what Michael, apparently oblivious to the debates surrounding postcolonialism, identified as the conscious effort to control the *extent* of primitive accumulation such that surplus extraction would be optimal. As he explains with reference to classical political economy texts, the forced subservience of peasants to wage labor dependency involved

technology-dependent “calibration” (Perelman 2000: 108) of wage dependency *with* self-provisioning. While the latter had to be destroyed as a viable *alternative* to wage dependency, it was nevertheless a useful *supplement* that allowed the lowering of wage rates (and therefore greater extraction of surplus value) without undermining the reproduction of labor power. Until the advent of more capital-intensive technology that could not “lie idle for the convenience of its farmer-employees” (ibid.: 119), much intellectual effort was spent by the advocates of classical political economy in elaborating the ideal balance of self-provisioning and wage labor, so described by Michael as “relative primitive accumulation” (ibid.: 105). More contemporary policy debates concerning the gendered and racialized impact of in-work benefits carry strong echoes of such balancing in the ongoing calibration of wage labor and state provisioning (Pearson 2019).

Recent work on the significance of the border separating capitalism from non-capitalist practices is suggestive of the ways that capitalism generates and exploits boundaries that both define the limits of capitalist development (and therefore serve to direct its future expansion) and regulate wage labor (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; 2019). This is consistent with Michael’s “relative primitive accumulation” concept, and the more general argument advanced here, regarding Marx’s and Marxism’s understanding of primitive accumulation as integral to capitalism and continually in process. Given Michael’s sociological treatment of relations of production and their wider impact on human society—unusual for an economist but integral to his work (e.g., Perelman 2005)—it is highly unlikely that he would have fallen for teleological stagism or claims regarding the final realization of real subsumption, even if Marx had explicitly advocated these.

Despite the violence of primitive accumulation, history has not been erased. Instead, it is re-emerging from behind capitalism to reclaim its place as a lived, evolving set of social practices. It is evidenced in the ongoing struggle of oppressed peoples to delink from the world market in such a way that reconstructs “increasingly complex social structures to effectively attend the needs of their members and their territories” in line with “an ethos of sufficiency” (Barkin 2022: 11; see also Lewontin 2005 on Cuba).

For as long as capitalism remains, primitive accumulation—“the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 1976a: 875)—will persist within and around its borderlands. Yet resistance to that is growing due to increasing recognition of the unsustainable social metabolisms (Barkin 2022: 8; see also Hornborg 2001) that are destroying our planet.

At a time when war, great power rivalry, and the covid-19 pandemic have all underlined the fragility of supply chains and exposed global food and energy insecurities, and the inequalities of exposure to the latter especially, such practicalities have particular relevance. Political leaders’ encouragement of “reshoring” and harnessing the power of the state in the name of national security are evidence of somewhat dim yet fundamentally compromised recognition of this emergency (see also Lieven 2020), as are initiatives like the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, with “their renewed focus upon economic growth and business flourishing” (Langan 2018: 179).

Michael’s contributions exposed many of the absurdities and perversities of capitalism. Equipped with his insights, we can continue his work in the service of a better, fairer, and more sustainable human existence. Our lives, and that of our planet, depend on it.

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