



CALL FOR PAPERS

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Marx22: Primitive Accumulation

Stockholm, October 28–30, 2022

Following the successful international conferences Marx13, Marx16 and Marx19, it is now time for Marx22, on the theme of “primitive accumulation”!

Why did capitalism emerge, and why does it persist? Marx argued that an understanding of capitalism’s blood-soaked prehistory is necessary if we want to understand and change the system. In the present era, when everything – from health care and water to our emotions and outer space – is rapidly transforming into commodities, it is more important than ever to think through the processes of capital accumulation.

For capitalism to exist at all, a class of people must be separated from the means of production and forced to sell their labor power in exchange for wages. But such a working class does not appear out of nothing – it must itself be created. The historical processes that gave rise to our modern class societies were accompanied, every step of the way, by violence and repression against those who resisted proletarianization and the plundering of the commons. Karl Marx called this process “primitive accumulation,” and he described capital coming into the world as “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”

Within the Marxist tradition, the concept of “primitive accumulation” has been used in two different ways. First, the term has been used to delineate a historical period that provided the conditions for the capitalist mode of production to emerge. Second, “primitive accumulation” has been used to name the ongoing processes through which capital creates new markets, expands to new spheres of life, and reinvents itself by incorporating new resources.

Human trafficking, the commodification of water, and the grand plans of Silicon Valley moguls to colonize Mars are only a few examples of how our bodies, life-worlds, and surroundings are incorporated into capital’s process of accumulation. How can we understand these processes? And what can we do to limit and roll back the expansion of capital’s rule?

SUBMIT A CONTRIBUTION

In preparation for Marx22 we now call for papers as well as proposals for sessions and panels. We welcome suggestions from researchers, organizations, activists, and other concerned parties who want to help shed light on the main theme using theoretical tools and practical examples that connect to Marx or the broader Marxist tradition. We welcome historical perspectives on primitive accumulation as well as analyses of how similar processes of plunder continue today. Contributions may be theoretical or empirical, and focus on economic, social, political, cultural, ideological, or ecological concerns. Finally, we call for contributions that highlight progressive alternatives and visionary perspectives for a society beyond the rule of capital accumulation.

Proposals can be sent to us as collective arrangements, typically of minimum three involved individual contributors. You are free to suggest the form and content of the arrangement, that should last for 60–120 minutes. One possible form is an academic-style session, based on papers and individual presentations, followed by general discussion. It could also be organised as a workshop, a panel discussion, a round table, or any other form you find suitable. You will take the full responsibility to organise the arrangement, including recruitment and contacts with participants, as well as the actual implementation of the arrangement if the suggestion is accepted.

We ask you to send an abstract of 300–500 words, where the following should be included: title, suggestion for format, length, language (a Scandinavian language or English), as well as a general descriptive summary of content and theme: theoretical context and description of participants with brief description of their (if relevant) individual contributions.

Please send your abstracts no later than April 30, 2022 to: marxconf@cmsmarx.org. This applies to both sessions and individual papers.

SESSION IDEAS

What is Primitive Accumulation?

Why and how did capitalism emerge to begin with? Marx's answer was that capitalism was preceded by a period of "primitive accumulation" in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, during which farmers saw their land violently expropriated and turned into capital by the ruling classes. The debates over the specific character of this historical process, however, have continued. For this session, we call for discussions and analyses of how Marx's ideas about primitive accumulation can be grasped and used today. We also call for contributions that discuss the theory of primitive accumulation and historical studies that employ the concept to explain societal change. What is the

logic of primitive accumulation, and how does it relate to the logic of “mature” capitalism? Is the concept universally applicable or is it bound in its usage to a specific time and place?

The State, the Market, and the Commons

Recent decades have seen rapid privatization of social services and welfare institutions like schools, health care, and elderly care. Communal resources have been sold off or simply handed over to private interests. Ownership has been concentrated in the hands of a few corporations. Marxist theorists have interpreted this development as indicative of a neoliberal regime change and highlighted the role of the state itself as an exploiter of labor. How did this happen? Is it possible to reclaim what we once held in common? Here, we call for analyses of the immense accumulation of wealth resulting from the privatization of common resources.

The Human Condition, Digitalized

The spread of information technology and digitalization has turned ever greater parts of human life into raw material for continued capital accumulation. One great concern is the amassing of tremendous amounts of personal information and behavioral data in the hands of the internet giants, who use these resources to sell targeted advertisements and attempt to modify people’s behavior. In this emergent “surveillance capitalism,” our desires, personalities, and capacities are transformed into raw materials that can be controlled, manipulated, and sold to the highest bidder. What remains of the socialist dream of liberating technologies in the era of surveillance capitalism? How can we understand the digitalized and information driven social formation that is emerging? What forms of organization and struggle are needed to safeguard individual integrity, reclaim the digital commons, and realign technology to serve societal purposes and fill human needs? For this session we welcome contributions that discuss these and similar questions.

Social Reproduction and Capital Accumulation

Today, the reproduction of human and social life is increasingly shot through by commercial interests as the familial, private, intimate and emotional aspects of our existence are opened for capital accumulation – often with the help of the state. In her seminal work *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici argued that the historical persecution and oppression of women, culminating in the witch hunts, contributed to the groundwork for modern capitalism by confining women to the private sphere and rendering their reproductive labor invisible. In a polemic against Marx, Federici argued that the period of primitive accumulation did not only spawn capitalist class relations – it also

underpinned modern patriarchy. Even in our time, the witch hunts continue (see, e.g., the work of Maria Mies), alongside a range of disciplining, alienating, and exploitative practices designed to maintain hierarchies of gender and race. As Federici notes, this indicates that primitive accumulation does not simply precede capitalism, but rather permeates it and fuses with it. What is the relationship between the exploited labor that goes into the production of commodities and that which goes into the reproduction of human life (and, thus, of labor power itself)? What is capitalist about sexism and racism, and how does sexism and racism underpin capitalism? This session welcomes theoretical and empirical contributions focusing on the gendered and racialized dynamics of capitalist accumulation and social reproduction.

Space mining (or “Why on earth should we go to space?”)

What happens when capital moves into outer space? In 2021, billionaires like Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos launched themselves via self-funded rockets into space, and NASA decided that Elon Musk’s SpaceX rockets will help transport the next generation of people to the moon. New actors are entering the space race, and old social contracts between states and corporations are being renegotiated. Space is offered up as a new tourist destination as well as a solution to the climate crisis. This expansionary drive into space is riddled by questions: Which of these grandiose projects are going to change our everyday lives in the future? What are the legal and political economic ramifications of space mining in the asteroid belt? How is this accumulation in space tied to colonial and imperial conflicts back on earth? And last, but not least: How should the left analyze and respond to the possibilities and dangers that the new space race will bring about?

Indigenous Struggles

Modernity is often associated with electrification, hydro power plants, highways, advanced technological infrastructures, and urban sprawl disseminating throughout the natural landscape. One of the communities that have experienced the detrimental impact of this modernization is the Yurok tribe, inhabitants of the Klamath river area in Northern California. Starting with the gold rush and the concomitant North American land grab in the nineteenth century, the Yurok were displaced from their traditional hunting grounds and saw their culture increasingly marginalized. Their struggle continues today, as the tribe fights to save the river from capitalist exploitation. As such, their struggle mirrors what Marx saw in Germany in the 1840s, when private property rights were imposed on the woodlands and poor farmers were prohibited from collecting firewood, a resource previously held in common. The ongoing conflict over the Klamath river concerns fishing rights, particularly the attempts of capitalist businesses to trawl the river for salmon to sell on the market –

a process that threatens to deplete the river altogether. The struggle highlights the inherent contradiction between the expansionary drive of capital and any attempt to responsibly manage vital ecosystems. For this session, we welcome contributions that highlight the impact of primitive accumulation on indigenous communities, cultures, and economies.

Whither the Left?

Ever since the financial crisis of 2008 we have seen increased mobilization both on the left and on the extreme right. Nonetheless, the neoliberal consensus that was consolidated in the 1990s has survived. While there is a growing acceptance for state intervention through fiscal policy, these efforts are entirely bereft of visionary perspectives and ignore the need for radical, fundamental, social transformation. At the same time, the extreme right has managed to realize parts of its agenda, for example in the form of a nationalist politicization of citizenship. Borders have been militarized while international class struggle has been pushed in the background. The left, too, has moved from being a protest movement to making serious attempts at taking over state power. Both Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US came close but narrowly lost in the race for the highest political offices. Across Europe, several projects on the left have made similar efforts. How should we evaluate these efforts? And how do we move on from here?