

***Towards an Environmental Understanding of So-Called Primitive
Accumulation, Part I: Socio-Spatial Partitioning***

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of Karl Marx's writing on *so-called primitive accumulation* to the immanent climate crisis. This work aims to fill a gap in the discourse around the "shifting" of capitalism's "metabolic rift" by foregrounding the state-lead mechanisms through which capitalism shifts its ecological burden from its "core" and to its dynamic "periphery." The paper offers theoretical vantage point from which we can systematize the uneven pressures of climate change on select populations, led by the imperialist expansionism of global capital. Through a close reading of Marx's writings leading up to 1868, I investigate the mechanism by which humanity's labor metabolism is disrupted and how capitalism's ecological burden has been weaponized to serve the accumulation of capital. This paper invokes examples from an array of historical and geographical contexts, connected by a mode of relating to 'nature' implied by the logic of capitalism and imperial state interests.

Introduction

Reeds dance, backlit by a vibrant chemical sunset. The distant humming of machinery lays thick like a blanket over the landscape. From a circle of sunken lawn chairs, family members chat, chuckle, and cough. Hand-me-down sneakers tied to young feet chase after a ball, kicking sparse grass into the humid air. Beneath them, lies a ground carved with approximately 10,000 miles of canals and a network of pipelines drilled 90,000 meters into the hot earth.¹ This is the Louisiana coastline. A place where “today's multinational oil companies inherit the quasi-sovereign status of colonial joint stock companies,” achieving a faster rate of coastal erosion than anywhere else in the world.² This land, once tilled by enslaved sugar harvesters, now makes up 25% of the United States’ oil refining capacity and 25% of the nation's chemical production.³ Louisiana ranks second to last in the country for life expectancy and last in the nation for social and economic outcomes.⁴ Located in the heart of the empire, it is a place among many where a history of dispossession, resource extraction, and racism directly supports the accumulation of super profits under capitalism.

This Part I of a paper that aims to re-examine Karl Marx’s writing on *so-called primitive accumulation* in the context of our imminent climate crisis. Drawing on Marx’s early writing and a wide array of historical examples, I argue that *so-called primitive accumulation* is an ongoing, state-led process that continually shifts the ecological burden of capitalism onto *periphery* populations. Capitalism’s *outside* lies not only beyond the official borders of its imperial entities, relegated to distant IMF-enforced wildlife conservations or the far-flung coltan mines that power American smartphones. Capitalism’s outside permeates the imperial core in rows of former slave accommodations where Louisiana’s migrant workers rest between long hours. It surfaces in contaminated prisons where billions of dollars of annual revenue pour from incarcerated bodies.⁵ And it erupts in the tired arms of low-income parents who have been zoned into food deserts, working a ‘double shift’ to raise the nation’s reserve labor army.

This essay aims to show that *so-called primitive accumulation* is a central disruptor of climate equilibriums and humanity’s ability to adapt to climate change. Following Kohei Saito’s publication of *Marx in the Anthropocene*, which features new insights from the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, there has been a growing interest in environmentalist readings of Marx. That said, as John Bellamy Foster once noted, “an ecological-materialist critique was embedded in all of Marx’s work,” even before Marx’s later analyses of natural science.⁶ For Saito, *so-called primitive accumulation* is the dawn of an irreparable metabolic rift between humanity and the Earth. According to him, capitalism deals with this rift by ‘shifting’ its environmental burden *spatially, temporally, and technologically*. Part I of this paper deals with the spatial aspect of this shift, while Part II will elaborate on the temporal and technological. Something Saito leaves to be elaborated is *how* and through what social structures these “metabolic shifts” occur, conveniently deferring environmental damage *elsewhere*. Marx’s writing on *so-called primitive accumulation* localizes Saito’s shifts in the dependent agency of the capitalist state, a central mechanism

¹ Imani Jacqueline Brown, 2023, “And Still, in Spite of It All, We Integrate and Flow,” Medien|Denken Lecture, Ruhr-Universität, Bochum.

² Imani Jacqueline Brown, 2023, www.followtheoil.org.

³ Together Louisiana, 2018, “Why Louisiana Stays Poor,” (McKinsey and Co, 2018).

⁴ Together Louisiana, 2018, “Why Louisiana Stays Poor,” (McKinsey and Co, 2018).

⁵ ACLU, 2022, “Captive Labor: Exploitation of Incarcerated Workers,”

⁶ Foster, John Bellamy, 2008, “Marx’s Grundrisse and the Ecological Contradictions of Capitalism.”

through which environmental injustice is carried out. In Louisiana, for example, a state-level board holds the authority to grant tax exemptions for local entities' property taxes, when no other legislative branch in the country has this power. This prevents Louisiana's most lucrative and polluting industries from financially benefiting the local community.

Against a spacio-temporal localization of *so-called primitive accumulation* – I propose that for Marx, *so-called primitive accumulation* is an ongoing state-sponsored mechanism that disrupts *natural economies*, by forcing wage labor onto *periphery* populations and actively maintaining a wage-labor-dependence in the *core*. I consider *so-called primitive accumulation* to be a structural feature of capitalism; one which dynamically organizes its sites of extraction along lines of space and social identity to meet market demands.

I use this reading to describe the necessity of a *periphery* into which the expansionist capitalist core constantly encroaches, and yet upon which capitalism's existence fundamentally depends. Left to its own devices, capitalism tends towards the cannibalization of its own extractive foundation. Through ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation*, however, the imperial state defers capitalism's self-destructive tendency. Abroad, this takes both colonial and neo-colonial forms. Domestically, the imperial state divides its population along lines of race, citizenship, gender, sexuality, and class.

As the spontaneous needs of a global market shift, so too do the geographic and social partitions between those engaged in *doubly-free labor* and *unfree labor*. It is at the ever-changing edges of *core* and *periphery* that we find global capitalism's populations made most vulnerable to so-called 'natural disasters.' *So-called primitive accumulation* not only involves the initial dispossession of communities from shared land but implies the constant de-integration and re-integration of populations (and their soil) into capitalist production. This paper mobilizes the concept of *so-called primitive accumulation* to deduce how the early Marx might render environmental collapse a uniquely capitalist, systemic issue; one that is inseparable from colonialism.

My argument is threefold. **First**, I offer that in Marx's own terms, the expropriation of the producers from the soil (*so-called primitive accumulation*) is an ongoing part of capitalism. I then argue that Marx's General Formula for Capitalist Circulation is the driver of *so-called primitive accumulation's* necessity. **Second**, I review how private property relations, proliferated through *so-called primitive accumulation*, disrupt humanity's *species being* or *metabolism* (*Stoffwechsel*) with the Earth, producing the human subject at a distance from its natural component. I connect this with present-day examples of climate collapse in the colonized world. **Third**, following Marx's line of thought, I propose three dimensions of *so-called primitive accumulation* along which the state works to sustain the infinite accumulation of capital, and by extension, itself, in the face of climate catastrophe.

In what follows, I draw on an array of historical examples to establish the far-reaching interdependence of capitalism's constitutive *so-called primitive accumulation* process and climate catastrophe. We will travel from Louisiana's oil fields to Scotland's highland deer parks, to occupied Gaza, and beyond. While each context is historically distinct from the next, each highlights a mode of relating to 'nature' implied by the logic of capitalism and the imperial state's role in preserving it. Building on existing literature by authors such as Saito, Foster, Jason Moore, and McKenzie Wark, I propose that Marx's writing on so-called primitive accumulation contributes needed depth to Marx's account of nature. As a researcher speaking from within the imperial core, I believe it imperative to center the colonial dynamics upon which capitalism

sustains itself. Section 8 of *Capital Volume I* aids me in integrating capitalism's colonial foundation into an understanding of the system's fundamental ecological incompatibility.

1. Situating So-called Primitive Accumulation

In its simplest formulation, *so-called primitive accumulation* denotes the process of “divorcing the producer from the means of production,” opening laborers up to capitalist exploitation.⁷ *So-called primitive accumulation* has at times been read as a historically located “period of transition that led to the emergence of capitalism.”⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, who propagated the idea of ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation* as integral to capitalism, famously asserted so as a departure from Marx. While drawing on her contribution, this paper emphasizes Marx's declaration that *so-called primitive accumulation* “assumes different aspects in different countries and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs.”⁹ The term “ursprüngliche Akkumulation” poses a particular challenge for translation, as Ben Fowlkes noted in his version of *Capital Volume I*.¹⁰ The word “primitive” was chosen over “original” to represent “ursprüngliche” in attempt to avoid the concept's temporal restriction to a particular moment. By *so-called primitive accumulation*, Marx meant to signify “a series of historical processes,” resulting in the decomposition of an original union between the laborer and their instruments.¹¹

Expropriation of the producer from the land is “primary” in the sense that it is foundational to capitalism's becoming. This, however, does not preclude the process from recurring. Across Marx's critique of political economy, there emerges a tension between social forms that are primary in a logical sense and those that are primary in a historical sense. In the *Contradictions in the General Formula*, for example, “merchant's capital and interest-bearing capital are derivative forms” of the modern form of capital, despite their earlier appearance in history.¹² The unmediated M-M' formula of usurer's capital is incompatible with the nature of money and inexplicable from the standpoint of commodity exchange, thus it is logically downstream of M-C-M'.¹³ For Marx, as demonstrated here, a form of exchange that is historically prior can be logically derivative from one that emerged later. In the words of Rosalind C. Morris, *so-called primitive accumulation* is “at once the condition of possibility and the effect of capitalism's emergence.”¹⁴ By untangling logical and historical primacy in Marx, ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation* becomes easier to understand.

Marx's qualification of ‘primitive accumulation’ with the words ‘so-called’ denotes his skepticism towards the pseudo-historical origin of the term as coined by Adam Smith. Marx proceeds via a doubled motion to reveal the mystification embedded in ‘primitive accumulation.’ He first overturns a historically specific concept that has been naturalized by political economy and then excavates its logic through materially surfacing contradictions. By invoking Smith's ‘primitive or original accumulation,’ Marx exposes the force bound up in the proliferation of

⁷ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, pp. 874-875.

⁸ Werner Bonefeld, 2001, “The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation, Commodity Fetishism and Social Constitution,” p. 1.

⁹ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 876.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 714.

¹¹ Karl Marx, 1985, “Value, Price, and Profit” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, pp. 101-149, esp. p.129.

¹² Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 287.

¹³ M-C-M' or The General Formula for Capitalist Circulation will be expanded on in the next section.

¹⁴ Rosalind C. Morris, 2016, “The Language of Capital,” p. 30.

‘free’ capitalist labor. He unveils how a structural necessity of capitalism (*so-called primitive accumulation*) was cleverly masked as a historical myth. What is missed by Fowlkes’s translation, for Morris, is, “the aporetic relation between the structural and temporal paradigms.”¹⁵ Marx’s allegorical gesture marks ‘primitive or original’ accumulation as an ideological tool of political economy. As this paper progresses, it is worth keeping the following question in mind: what so-called environmentalist notions ideologically serve the ruling class?

The term “primitive accumulation” is imperfect.¹⁶ However, in the difficulty of its translation, we are reminded of the concept’s veiled appearance. Several reformulations of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ have been suggested in recent years, including Morris’s “originary accumulation,” David Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession,” and Anna Tsing’s “salvage accumulation.”¹⁷ Each of these accounts builds towards the continuous aspect of *so-called primitive accumulation*, yet does so at a distance from Marx’s own context. This paper retains *so-called primitive accumulation* as a token of the concept’s complexity in Marx’s own terms. This paper avoids semantic attempts at ‘updating’ Marx’s work, instead leveraging its original context to trace Marx’s ecological, non-productivist turn towards the end of his life (more on this in Part II). Our first task is to reconcile Marx’s writing on *so-called primitive accumulation* with his thoughts on nature.

1a. Capitalist Circulation: The Motor of Climate Catastrophe

While Marx could not have predicted our current moment, much of the contemporary human-nature relationship is embedded in the logic of capitalism as elaborated by Marx in 1867. Capitalism is unlike any prior mode of economic organization. Under capitalism, *use value* (such as food’s capacity to satiate hunger) emerges only as a mere means to *exchange value* (a numerical measure of account or the money commodity). As such, humanity’s reproductive cycle becomes disjointed from its own reproductive ends. Instead of working to reproduce the human species directly, capitalist subjects sell their labor time in exchange for currency, which can then be exchanged to reproduce the worker. The disruption of humanity’s *species being* historically begins with *so-called primitive accumulation*, but logically, it begins with the capitalist mode of circulation. Marx’s General Formula for Capitalist Circulation is essential to understanding 1. the imperialist expansionism of a free market and 2. humanity’s estrangement from nature; two leading factors in present day climate collapse.

Via circulation, Marx shows that capitalism is structurally unable to subsist beyond the premise of its own expansion. The General Formula for Capital begins with an inversion of the direct form of circulation. Commodity-Money-Commodity (C-M-C) (direct circulation), changes into Money-Commodity-Money’ (M-C-M’) (capitalist circulation), as capitalists exchange *use values* to receive increased *exchange value* in return. The capitalist form of circulation contradicts Marx’s previously developed laws of commodity exchange, by failing to adhere to a

¹⁵ Rosalind C. Morris, 2016, “The Language of Capital,” p. 13.

¹⁶ Let it also be recognized that “primitive” is often associated with negative attitudes in the English-speaking world regarding indigenous knowledge and social forms of organization. While this unfortunate connotation was not directly involved in the mistranslation, it may be another source of skepticism towards ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ today.

¹⁷ Tsing was alerted to ‘salvage accumulation’ by the necessity of cultural translation to the matsutake trade, but her conception of the term strikes close resemblance to my reading of *so-called primitive accumulation*, as an ongoing interpenetration of capitalist and non-capitalist forms for the accumulation of exchange value. Anna Tsing, 2021, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 70.

trade between commodities of distinct *quality* and equal *quantity*. Under capitalism, the money (M) put into exchange by the capitalist is qualitatively no different from the money (M) the capitalist seeks in return. The only escape from this tautology (M-M) is the addition of a greater sum of the money commodity on the other side of the exchange. From here, the constant need for valorization arises. In each circuit of exchange, the demand for valorization begins anew.

Capital cannot develop from circulation alone, but “it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation.”¹⁸ In line with the demands of capitalist circulation, the exploitation of *variable capital*, or *doubly free labor*, becomes capitalism’s *core* mode of valorization. In the capitalist *core*, laborers trade *labor time* for the *exchange value* they require to reproduce themselves. This process, the exploitation of wage labor, however, is supported by a second exploitative process that runs parallel to it. The “separation of labor and property is the precondition of this (the capitalist mode of) exchange.”¹⁹

Pre-capitalist forms of exploitation (such as slavery) outlay the initial sum upon which capitalist valorization is built. Additionally, “the existence of capitalism,” as oriented towards expansion (M-C-M’), *endlessly* “requires an environment of noncapitalist forms of production” into which it can swell. This ‘*outside*’ fuels capitalism’s market for surplus value, its need for raw materials, and its reserve labor supply.²⁰ *So-called primitive accumulation* severs ordinary laborers from their means of production, their land, and their communal ties, ‘freeing’ them to trade their *labor time* in exchange for wages. I argue that the “transition” to capitalism through *so-called primitive accumulation* must be ongoing so long as capitalism endures. This is because the structure of capitalist circulation is such that infinite accumulation is an *ontological necessity* to the capitalist class. When the production process is viewed as a process of valorization, absorbing the labor of others becomes a means to one’s own life process. Marx echoes Hegel in that capital’s quantitative shift towards the infinite, passes into a potent change in quality.²¹

In a capitalist market, the quantitative value of a commodity takes precedence over its qualitative make up. This is increasingly true as capitalist markets trend towards monopoly in later stage capitalism, limiting competition between small companies to provide better products.²² An environmental example of this is the treatment of GMO plants in the United States as “substantially equivalent” to non-GMO plants following George H.W. Bush’s 1992 Executive Order. This legal categorization “ignored the qualitative internal alteration required to genetically engineer” GMO crops, favoring the booming profits of biotech companies such as Monsanto over civilian health.²³ The state doctrine of “substantial equivalence,” not only lead to untested GMO milk and seeds being sold to farmers across the U.S., but during the U.S. and British military occupation of Iraq, the US State Department of Agriculture brought the food supply of another nation under the control of patented seed technology. As studies revealed GMO’s links to breast cancer and prostate cancer, the U.S. government and the Green Revolution’s corporate accomplices, kept the quality of these new agricultural commodities out of sight.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, 1993, “Grundrisse,” Penguin Classics, p. 295.

²⁰ Rosalind C. Morris, 2016, “The Language of Capital,” p. 22.

Rosa Luxemburg, 1913, “The Accumulation of Capital,” AC 348-49; AK 316.

²¹ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 424.

²² Vladimir Lenin, 2021, “Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism.”

²³ F. William Engdahl, 2007, “Seeds of Destruction,” p.7.

István Mészáros offers that “external obstacles,” such as public health consequences and climate disasters, “could never bring capital’s limitless drive to a halt” regardless of how devastating the effects may be long-term. This is because “both nature and human beings could only be considered external ‘factors of production’ in terms of capital’s self-expansory logic.”²⁴ Within the structure of capitalist circulation, the *use values* that make up our material reality are secondary to the valorization of *exchange value*. As a result, humanity falls out of sync with the material demands of its long-term reproduction needs, which rely on the Earth. According to Marx, “exchange itself is a chief means of... individuation [Vereinzelung],” which makes humanity’s “herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it.”²⁵ For Marx, then, it seems that The General Formula for Capitalist Exchange is the motor that rends humanity from its *species-being* or labor *metabolism* with the Earth.

2. So-Called Primitive Accumulation as a Process of Estrangement

In his ‘classic’ example of *so-called primitive accumulation* in England, Marx invokes a bloody history of turning arable land into pasture, beginning with individual acts of violence in the Fifteenth Century. By the Eighteenth Century, “the law itself” became “the instrument by which the people’s land is stolen.”²⁶ A characteristic moment of *so-called primitive accumulation* was the systematic establishment of Highland deer forests, occupying land where Scottish villages had been burned to the ground a century prior.²⁷ By 1981, these deer parks covered an area of nearly 2,472,113 acres. “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.”²⁸ As the peasants were forced off their land, they were encircled by wage labor, as their only available means of survival. While deer were given “extended ranges,” workers were “hunted within a narrower and still narrower circle.”²⁹ From this violent practice of confinement, a growing working class was born.

The basis of *so-called primitive accumulation* is the expropriation of the agricultural producer from the land, readying the soil to be incorporated into capital.³⁰ For Marx, simple “cultivation of the soil *posits the land as the individual’s extended body*,” establishing a metabolic unity between humans and the Earth.³¹ This unity appears in one respect as a particular form of property, prior to its privatization. Through *so-called primitive accumulation*, producers are divorced from their means of production, which begins with the Earth.

“Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of reproduction, e.g. the village becomes a town... but *the producers change, too*, in that they bring out *new qualities* in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.”³²

²⁴ István Mészáros, 2010, *Beyond Capital*, p. 174.

²⁵ Karl Marx, 1993, “Grundrisse,” Penguin Classics, p. 496.

²⁶ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 885.

²⁷ These elite hunting grounds, which are seemingly even less productive than the sheep runs they replaced, were highly hostile to human life. Hebridean Connections, 1892, “58366: Deer Forest Royal Commission of Inquiry (1).”

²⁸ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, pp. 890, 891.

²⁹ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 893.

³⁰ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 895.

³¹ Karl Marx, 1993, “Grundrisse,” Penguin Classics, p. 493 (emphasis added).

³² Karl Marx, 1993, “Grundrisse,” Penguin Classics, p. 494 (emphasis added).

Through the historical process of *so-called primitive accumulation*, human beings are turned into individuals. As wage labor is forcibly introduced; the worker is rendered object-less.³³ They become an isolated subject.

For Marx, the original form of property is direct, common property.³⁴ Property in the original sense (as opposed to private property) is a relation posited by the community regarding the individual, as to how the conditions of production are one's own.³⁵ Property takes on different forms depending on the changing conditions of production. Under the clan system, the fundamental condition of property was to be a *member* of the clan. One's relation to the land and soil was thus originally mediated by the community. Here, individual possession might involve the division of fruits, but land and labor were held in common.³⁶

As early as 1844, Marx wrote that "in estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, *estranged labor* estranges the *species* from man."³⁷ *So-called primitive accumulation* brings about a new mode of property (private), which involves the dissolution of humanity's "relation to the earth... as the natural condition of production," modifying how individuals relate to *their own inorganic being*.³⁸ The forced implementation of wage labor mutates humanity's relation to the earth, as an extension of itself, through the dissolution of communal property ties. When a worker is severed from their means of production, labor becomes a means to individual reproduction, rather than community survival. Resultingly, *labor*, or the conscious, transhistorical mediation between humanity and the earth, grows estranged.³⁹

The separation of humans from their labor 'frees' workers to confront capitalists as 'equal' sellers on the market. Labor under capitalism confronts the worker as something alien, "as a power independent of the producer," and thus as a commodity to be exchanged.⁴⁰ Estranged labor robs its seller of their *means of life* by rendering work a mere means of satisfying needs external to it.⁴¹ Capitalist workers no longer directly engage with the network of natural and social relations that support their labor. Their tools and raw materials confront them mysteriously in the factory, deprived of social and ecological origin.

Use values too, as mentioned, are disconnected from the labor process. Capitalist workers sell their labor time for *exchange value*, with which they later purchase the *use values* necessary

³³ Karl Marx, 1993, "Grundrisse," Penguin Classics, p. 507.

³⁴ Karl Marx, 1993, "Grundrisse," Penguin Classics, p. 497.

³⁵ Karl Marx, 1993, "Grundrisse," Penguin Classics, pp. 493, 495.

³⁶ In Marx's view, capitalism introduces an entirely new type of property relation. "Slavery and serfdom are... only further developments of the form of property resting on a clan system... In classical antiquity, manufacture appears already as a corruption... The community itself appears as the great force of production..." Karl Marx, 1993, "Grundrisse," Penguin Classics, pp. 493-495.

³⁷ Karl Marx, 1978, "Estranged Labour," "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx Engels Reader*, p. 75 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Karl Marx, 1993, "Grundrisse," Penguin Classics, p. 497 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, 1978, "Estranged Labour," "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx Engels Reader*, p. 72.

⁴¹ "Thus the more the worker by his labour appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of *means of life* in the double respect: first, that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor – to be his labour's *means of life*; and secondly, that it more and more ceases to be *means of life* in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker." Karl Marx, 1978, "Estranged Labour," "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx Engels Reader*, p. 73.

to support individual reproduction. As such, human labor is reduced to an indirect mode of satisfying basic functions such as eating, procreating, and dwelling. In the words of W.E.B. Dubois, “living is earning a living” under capitalism.⁴² For the wage worker, the maintenance of crude need becomes the ultimate end of labor.⁴³ For the capitalist, labor and all its requirements become a mere means to valorization.

It is initially through *so-called primitive accumulation* that nature becomes a matter of utility. Human reproduction becomes secondary to the expansion of capital, whereas, in the clan system, nature was reproduced as a part of the collectively rooted self. Through a history of forced alienation, “the blind dictates of self-expanding exchange value” have come to disrupt humanity’s centuries-long reproductive circuit.⁴⁴ Estrangement is at the heart of the ecological rift that Saito, Meszaros, and Marx speak of.

2a. The Category of Nature

“It is not the *unity* of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather, the *separation* between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital.”⁴⁵

The forcible opening of the world to wage labor via *so-called primitive accumulation* resulted in a seemingly new way of conceptualizing nature. ‘Natural’ environments became a place apart; distant from the ‘dot-like isolation’ of capitalist subjects.⁴⁶ As sheep and deer ranges were cleared of human inhabitants, pastoral aesthetics rose to popularity. In eighteenth-century England, watercolor landscape paintings featuring vacant fields flourished. About a century later, the American Romanticism movement developed in the United States, associating feelings of individual freedom and spiritual ecstasy with vast, empty landscapes. William Cronon calls the bourgeoisie ideal of uninhabited wilderness a “throughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang.”⁴⁷

In the United States, like in England, the invention of nature as a place of leisure relied upon the violent displacement of non-capitalist ways of life. The cruel nineteenth-century idea of wilderness as a pure, ‘virgin’ land bears resemblance to the foggy image of an “original garden... a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin.”⁴⁸ Historically specific notions of individual freedom are naturalized in wilderness’s curated appearance of authenticity. “By the nineteenth century, the very memory of the connection between the agricultural laborer and communal property had, of course vanished.”⁴⁹ Today, I, an individual, confront the landscape as other to my being, as other

⁴² Jackie Wang, 2018, *Carceral capitalism*, p. 99.

⁴³ Thus, labor loses its artistic aspect, which was still half-present under the Guild Corporation System. Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 497.

⁴⁴ István Mészáros, 2010, *Beyond Capital*, p.195.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, 1993, “Grundrisse,” Penguin Classics, p. 489.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, 1993, “Grundrisse,” Penguin Classics, p. 485.

⁴⁷ William Cronon, 1996, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” EPUB.

⁴⁸ William Cronon, 1996, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” EPUB.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 899.

to my labor, and as other to the fellow humans whose distant hands once tended the processed crops I consume.

The separation of nature from the laborer, like the separation of labor from the laborer herself, readies the landscape for commodification. Privatized property incentivizes corporate owners to mine natural resources and industrialize farming on a scale incompatible with the reproductive timeline of the Earth. All is cannibalized in pursuit of infinite accumulation; even the idea of environmentalism itself. In today's financialized economy, the sheer notion of sustainability has been turned into a commodity. One particularly profitable example, praised by the New York Times, is the push by major polluters for carbon credit markets across Africa. By purchasing tens of millions of carbon credits per year, Delta Airlines claims to be carbon neutral, despite operating around 4,000 flights per day.⁵⁰ "Carbon credits" operate as pollution permits for carbon-emitting industries, made up of vast swaths of non-industrial land in the global south.⁵¹ Acquisitions of vacated forests areas in present-day Liberia designed to offset emissions of imperialist nations displace locals, conjuring the image of nineteenth century highland deer parks. In the past year, the Liberian government has agreed to sell 10% of its land to the UAE-based company, Blue Carbon, threatening indigenous communities who rely on forests for their livelihood.⁵² Recently, Blue Carbon, signed memorandums of understanding with governments in Liberia, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to manage large forest areas and produce carbon credits from conservation initiatives.⁵³

Meanwhile, The African Carbon Markets Initiative, run by the American McKinsey consulting company, which has paired with Western billionaire philanthropies in Kenya, Nigeria, and Gabon, aims to increase carbon credit generation to 300 million by 2023.⁵⁴ Climate finance is making it increasingly possible to transfer the ecological burden of developed capitalist nations onto developing nations. Storing carbon in plant life is a vulnerable climate strategy, as forest fires and logging could re-release carbon unpredictably. Carbon credit financial systems put the entire African continent at risk for increased droughts, floods, and storms. Rather than fueling resilient development run by local communities, carbon credits enable consolidated industries to continue polluting as usual, while also serving as a guise for new imperial land grabs. This is capitalism working as designed; siphoning recourses from ever-expanding territories, treating 'nature' as a commodity, and displacing those who threaten capitalist profit motives. Climate finance is one of many new forms of *so-called primitive accumulation*, backed by wealthy countries and serving increasingly transnational billionaires. As elaborated in Section 1, capitalism necessitates the recurrence of *so-called primitive accumulation* in different places, at different times, and in different modes. Supportive ideologies ensue.

The neoliberal bend of environmentalism towards conservation environmentalism can be linked to Marx's logic of estrangement embedded in capitalist production. Vulnerable, untouched wilderness has long been invoked as justification for capitalism's encroachment on local economies. As a growing ecotourism industry allows the upper classes to live out transnational fantasies of pristine wildlife and moral superiority, local peoples such as the Massai, are turned

⁵⁰ Mohamed Adow, 2023, "Africa Carbon Markets Initiative."

⁵¹ A similar system was established in Columbia in the form of carbon taxes.

⁵² Taiwo Adebayo, 2024, "Carbon Colonialism."

⁵³ Matteo Civillini, 2023, "UAE Pitches Itself as Africa's Carbon Credits Leader."

⁵⁴ Matteo Civillini, 2023, "UAE Pitches Itself as Africa's Carbon Credits Leader."

trespassers on their own ancestral lands.⁵⁵ The same is true in the imperial core's proud national parks, where indigenous people, such as the Blackfeet, are accused of poaching on stolen community land.⁵⁶ Wilderness, or nature, as an alienated object of protection forms one of the central "qazi-religious values of modern environmentalism."⁵⁷ It is a cultural tool of the bourgeoisie, much like Smith's primitive accumulation. Under capitalism, the human subject is re-formed at a distance from its objective natural component. In this way, an enclosing of the modern imagination flows from *so-called primitive accumulation's* material enclosures. Saito writes that Marx was concerned with ecological crisis from "an 'anthropocentric' perspective because he consistently recognized the 'non-identity' of nature."⁵⁸ It is important to note that Marx most often wrote from the perspective of capital, seeking to understand it from within, with certain exceptions such as *Notebook V* of the *Grundrisse*.⁵⁹ With this in mind, an anti-capitalist environmentalism might demand a re-unified conception of nature.

2b. Linking Human Economic Activity and Environmental Change Across Time

Marx understood the world as a "constructional whole of relations between elements."⁶⁰ For him, social formations are both self-reproductive and vanishing. As demonstrated in the previous two sections, "the present society is no solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in a process of change."⁶¹ Marx was interested in how the components of certain objective systems (socially determined) operate to reinforce one another. Nature is no exception. What is considered "nature" and how it behaves is constantly shifting with the social activity of its constitutive inhabitants. That said, change follows a historically specific logic.

"The spontaneous rhythm and recalcitrance of nature are no longer credible excuses for justifying the living conditions of countless millions who had to perish in misery in the last few decades, and so continue to perish today."⁶²

Having unpacked the myth of nature as an untouched purity, this section considers how 'natural disasters' have been shaped by human economic activity across capitalism's expansionary history.

Mike Davis begins his book, *Late Victorian Holocausts, El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* by asserting that droughts and famines are never simply 'natural disasters.'⁶³ His analysis draws attention to the staggering millions of people who died of famine in the developing world during the same half-century when famine permanently disappeared throughout Western Europe. Between 1876 and 1902, in India, China, and Brazil alone, between 31.7 and 61.3 died of famine and related diseases. In Ethiopia and Sudan, one-third of the

⁵⁵ The Massai and Batwa people have lost much of their traditional land due to animal conservation projects in Kenya and central Africa. Tanzanian government officials and police are complicit in dispossessing the Massai in collaboration with foreign companies such as Tanzania Conservation Ltd (based in Boston) and Ortello Business Corporation (Based in the UAE) through conservation laws. Oakland Institute, 2018, "Losing the Serengeti: The Massai Land That was to Run Forever."

⁵⁶ Louis Warren, 1994, "The Hunter's Game Poachers, Conservationists, and Twentieth Century America," Yale University.

⁵⁷ William Cronon, 1996, "The Trouble with Wilderness," EPUB.

⁵⁸ Kohei Saito, 2022, "Marx in the Anthropocene," p. 104.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, 1993, "Grundrisse," Penguin Classics, p. 485.

⁶⁰ Naoki Okada, 2007, "The System Theory of Karl Marx."

⁶¹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, 1992, p. 93.

⁶² István Mészáros, 2010, *Beyond Capital*, p. 176.

⁶³ Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 20.

population died of similar causes between 1889 and 1991. No prior record of extreme weather simultaneously affecting the food availability of so many distant lands had ever been recorded.⁶⁴ Alfred Russel, a Victorian naturalist, viewed such mass starvation not as a ‘natural disaster,’ but as a political tragedy.⁶⁵ In his writing on *so-called primitive accumulation*, Marx shows that capitalism needs the power of the state in order to expand, or in other words, to subsist.⁶⁶

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, capitalism’s commodification of agriculture disrupted village-level reciprocities across the globe. Local systems traditionally provided welfare to the poor and maintained local food stores in preparation for unfavorable harvest seasons. Davis writes that “millions died, not outside of the ‘modern world system,’ but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into it.”⁶⁷ From 1743 to 1744, China experienced a similarly strong El Nino Southern Oscillation event to that of the following century. However, then, the Fang Guancheng administration was able to maintain two million peasants for eight months on relief grain, of which 85% was borrowed from greeneries outside the drought radius.⁶⁸ Following the Opium Wars and China’s loss of sovereignty over foreign trade, droughts posed a new threat to population subsistence.⁶⁹

In 1944, Karl Polanyi recognized the role of economic activity in creating natural disasters by attributing “the actual source of famines in the last fifty years was the free marketing of grain combined with local failure of incomes.”⁷⁰ At the same time, Polanyi “reified the market as automata,” making it easy to visualize famine as an inadvertent ‘birth pang’ on the road toward market-based subsistence.⁷¹ Marx’s writing on *so-called primitive accumulation* localizes responsibility for climate catastrophe in the capitalist state. “What historians have so often dismissed as ‘climactic accidents’ turn out not to be so accidental after all,” Davis writes.⁷² The estrangement of humanity from the earth bears immense material consequences that have only worsened in capitalism’s higher stages. Their temporary concentration along colonial and neo-colonial lines is an essential aspect of ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation*.

3. Climate Catastrophe and the Role of the Imperialist State

Working within Marx’s systematic worldview, it is difficult to imagine a time before human activity impacted environmental processes and vice versa. In what is now called the Eastern United States, the presence of Oak and Chesnutt trees is largely a result of cultural burning, which indigenous societies used to achieve certain nut crops.⁷³ This large-scale land-management practice, halted during the 20th century, is an example of long-standing human-

⁶⁴ Droughts and flooding in Egypt, Java, The Philippines, New Caledonia, Korea, Brazil, Southern Africa, the Maghreb, North China, North Africa, Russia, Ethiopia, Sudan. Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Co-discoverer of natural selection with Darwin. (Marx’s affinity for Darwin’s systems approach to nature is worth noting here). Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ This point will be elaborated further in Section 3.

⁶⁷ Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 297.

⁶⁹ It is also worth mentioning that with the opium wars, a new concept of ‘nature’ also emerged in the Chinese language (Ziran).

⁷⁰ Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p.10. Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*.

⁷¹ Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p.10.

⁷² Mike Davis, 2017, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p.295.

⁷³ National Park Service, 2024, “Indigenous Fire Practices Shape Our Land.”

induced climate change. Capitalism does not introduce the simple factor of climate change. Capitalism detaches humanity from its objective natural component, such that humanity's productive goals now conflict with the species' long-term reproductive needs.

Volcanoes, floods, and earthquakes have long disrupted the lives of many thousands of humans, but there was a time when natural disasters could be understood as force majeure. Only in an expansionary capitalist framework, has it been possible for humanity to affect the environmental safety of the entire planet through its social activity. Only through the efficiency of industry that capitalism demands, has air pollution, for example, become a shaping factor in the lives of billions. A defining factor of *climate collapse* is the unique ability to identify complex human-led environmental disaster chains, without the related ability to adapt our behavior to fix them. Even having robust knowledge of better energy sources (such as solar, nuclear, ion, etc.) fossil fuels are too central to the concentrated power of the Trans-Atlantic capitalist class to convert the economy to sustainable and higher-yielding energy sources at scale. While capitalist-developed technologies are often invoked to reinforce a bourgeois, progressive model of history, the use of innovative technology is severely limited by the economic framework from within which it arises.⁷⁴

Meszaros reminds us that “agricultural production did not begin with it the eradication of famine and malnutrition,” but rather its displacement and concentration.⁷⁵ In Sudan, twenty million people are facing acute hunger through droughts and flooding exacerbated by global price shocks in grain and other commodities.⁷⁶ In Yemen, seventeen million people are suffering food insecurity compounded by a cholera outbreak, intensified by Saudi Arabia's blockade.⁷⁷ These examples represent the manufacturing of widespread hunger, a so-called natural disaster, spurred by the valorization needs of the ruling class and its colonial and neo-colonial state enforcements. In 2024, the price of a bag of flour in the Gaza Strip sells for \$1,000.⁷⁸ Following a thirty-two-year air, land, and sea blockade, Israel bombed Gaza's last operating flour mill on November 14, 2023. One in four people are currently experiencing extreme, weaponized, hunger (not to mention thirst) amid relentless airstrikes. Newborns are dying, not only from a dearth of medical care (as hospitals are rendered military targets) but due to the widespread unavailability of milk.⁷⁹ This is the present-day material reality of ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation*.

In *Section 8 of Capital Volume I*, Marx spoke of how “15,000 inhabitants, about 3,000 families, were systematically hunted and rooted out. All of their villages were destroyed and burnt, all of their fields turned to pasturage,” between 1814 and 1820.⁸⁰ In four months, eighty-five percent of Gaza's population has been forcibly displaced, suffering levels of systematic ‘hunting and uprooting’ that far exceed what Marx observed in Scotland at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁸¹ Between October 7th, 2023, and February 10th, at least 28,064 (documented)

⁷⁴ Part 2 of this paper deals extensively with the issue of technology and capitalism's false ideology of historical progress.

⁷⁵ István Mészáros, 2010, *Beyond Capital*, p.176.

⁷⁶ Relief web, 2022, “One in Four People Face Severe Hunger in Sudan as Food Crisis Deepens,”

⁷⁷ WFP, 2022.

⁷⁸ Jabalia Refugee camp, Northern Gaza. Al Jazeera, 2023, “Palestinians Stock Up on Essentials Amid Surge in Gaza Food Prices.”

⁷⁹ One video shows a mother feeding her baby dates wrapped in cheese cloth, attempting quell its hunger, while suffering such a nutrient deficiency that she cannot feed herself. Babies cannot process whole food before the age of 6 months.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 891.

⁸¹ Nina Lakhani, 2024, “Emissions from Israel's war in Gaza have ‘immense’ effect on climate catastrophe.”

Palestinians were killed in Gaza, including over 11,500 children, while being forced to flee their homes with no promise of return.⁸² *So-called primitive accumulation* is alive and well today and the environmental impact of its colonial violence is measurable. The planet-warming gasses emitted during the first two months of Israel's war on Gaza alone were reported to be greater than the annual carbon footprint of "more than 20 of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations."⁸³

History makes it clear that the scale of devastation wrought by contemporary natural disasters is often a product of profit accumulation elsewhere. Financial motivation is another unique feature of the *climate collapse* that defines our current moment. Before the delicate bodies of Gaza's children can even be retrieved from under their rubble-torn homes, Israel has begun a multi-million dollar international ad campaign selling Gaza's land as a tourist destination to the international elite.⁸⁴ On December 11th and 13th, HaZahav Real Estate, a company that builds illegal settlements in the West Bank, posted an ad announcing its plans to build new beach-front houses over Gaza's once lush, leveled landscape.⁸⁵ Other profit incentives surrounding the genocide in Gaza involve the discovery of an estimated \$524 Billion worth of oil reserves in the Levant Basin,⁸⁶ as well as the long-discussed proposal of building a Ben Gurion Canal, which would serve as an alternative trade route to the Suez Canal.⁸⁷ Israel's war on Gaza is nauseating proof of the horrific, active violence that ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation* entails. It shows us the devastating environmental toll wrought by the commodification of land.⁸⁸ Furthermore, it is the imperialist state (Israel and the US) that carries out this carnage on behalf of the valorization that capitalism demands.

The environmental instabilities that characterize today's *climate crisis* are generated structurally through a dependent alliance between capitalists and the imperialist state. Naturally occurring equilibriums are first disrupted along colonial lines, but soon spread damage across the globe. Despite the state's shifting of capitalism's ecological burden onto 'periphery' populations, the Earth remains an integrated system. Capitalism's disruption of humanity's labor *metabolism* is an environmental liability for the entire planet.

3a. The Dependent Agent of So-Called Primitive Accumulation

By 'the state,' this paper refers to Western nation-states of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, which share an imperialist arc as capitalism spread into its higher stages.⁸⁹ If capital is the agent of accumulation by exploitation, the state is the agent of *so-called primitive accumulation*.⁹⁰ In revisiting Marx's original framing of *so-called primitive accumulation*, we

⁸² Likely a gross under-count. Reuters, 2024 "Gaza Death Toll Climbs 28,064 Palestinians Killed, 67,611 Injured since Oct. 7, Health Ministry Says."

⁸³ Nina Lakhani, 2024, "Emissions from Israel's war in Gaza have 'immense' effect on climate catastrophe."

⁸⁴ Such ads have been run on massive media outlets, including Hulu, and shown twice during the U.S. 2024 Superbowl. Kendra Barnett, 2024, "Pro-Israel Super Bowl & Hulu Ads Labeled 'propaganda' by Some Media and PR Pros."

⁸⁵ HaZahav Real Estate (hareyzahav), 13 Dec. 2023, "בית על החוף זה לא חלום, !תתעוררו," Instagram.

⁸⁶ UN, 2019, "The Unrealized Potential of Palestinian Oil and Gas Reserves."

⁸⁷ Frontier India, 2021, France 24, 2021, New Arab, 2022.

⁸⁸ Racism and capitalism have long been close bedfellows.

⁸⁹ China, for example, as a contested "semi-periphery" with different lending practices from Western Nation States, would not be considered an imperialist "state" under the definition of this paper.

Minqi Li, 2021, "China: Imperialism or Semi-Periphery," Monthly Review.

⁹⁰ More on Lenin's "Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism" in Part 2.

are brought to examine a critical dialectic between capitalism and the state. William Claire Roberts writes that, “according to Marx, the state pursues policies of primitive accumulation because it has become dependent upon capital accumulation... for its own existence and functioning.”⁹¹ The capitalist state, while strategic, exists within a limited realm of self-preserving (and therefore capital-preserving) action. I propose that its incapacity to foreground environmental concerns is located in this dependence. While the state shares the goal of economic growth in common with the capitalist, it has a unique ability to operate beyond the confines of a typical free market actor. I argue that the state carries out *so-called primitive accumulation* across three dimensions. The first two are drawn from Marx’s writing directly and the third, I have inferred from the expansionary logic of capitalism. The close reading of footnotes is strongly encouraged in this section.

First, and most widely recognized, the imperialist state uses property rights to legitimate the incorporation of new land into the capitalist system. This land is acquired first through violent dispossession and validated by property law. This is exemplified by Marx in the legitimization of land theft in Scotland by the British state. Other examples include present-day Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico. It also takes on neo-colonial forms, such as the U.S. and U.A.E.’s funding of carbon credit initiatives in the global south.

Second, and less widely recognized, Marx writes that during the genesis of capitalist production, the state works “to *keep* the worker himself at a normal level of dependence” and that “this is an essential part of so-called primitive accumulation.”⁹² This aspect of *so-called primitive accumulation* involves social intervention via domestic state policies regarding labor,⁹³ crime,⁹⁴ education,⁹⁵ social services,⁹⁶ and migration.⁹⁷ While Marx astutely included such indirect domestic policies in his definition of *so-called primitive accumulation*, he failed to anticipate their continuation beyond capitalism’s ascending phase. Today, however, at the height of capitalist development, such state regulations proliferate the capitalist core. Some contemporary examples include labor laws, tax exemptions, predatory policing, media censorship, austerity measures, border protections, the “revolving door” between corporations and politics, and the FHA’s role in redlining in the U.S.

⁹¹ William Clare Roberts, 2022, “What Was Primitive Accumulation? Reconstructing the Origin of a Critical Concept,” p. 2.

⁹² Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 900.

⁹³ “The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to ‘regulate’ wages, i.e. to force them into the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day...” “English Parliament... held the position of a permanent trade union of capitalists against the workers throughout five centuries.” Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, pp. 900, 903.

⁹⁴ People were turned into vagabonds and tried as voluntary criminals. “Bloody legislation against vagabondage was enforced across Europe...” Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 895.

⁹⁵ “The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.” Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, 1992, p. 889.

⁹⁶ Austerity measures, poor laws, and the law that “all persons have the right to take away the children of vagabonds and keep them as apprentices.” Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, 1992, p. 897.

⁹⁷ “In the eighteenth century the Gaels were both driven from the land and forbidden to emigrate, with a view to diving them forcibly to Glasgow and other manufacturing towns” Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, pp. 90, 91.

Third, I propose that the imperialist state actively reproduces capitalism's 'outside,' without which, capitalism could not exist. This is exemplified by the limitation of technology transfers between imperial entities and smaller countries, the state-sponsored destabilizing distribution of drugs domestically and abroad, and the slew of color revolutions that the U.S. has notoriously staged across the global south. Capitalism's reliance on a periphery is twofold. *First*, materially, the capitalist's initial sum of wealth assumes the appropriation of raw materials and free labor of an 'exterior' population. *Second*, structurally, as The General Formula for Capitalist Exchange suggests, the 'core' requires new markets into which it can continuously expand. Capitalism is oriented towards its ultimate extension over the whole of the planet, and yet, if it were to achieve this, there would be nowhere left for capital to expand into.

In Alexander Bogdanov's 1913 novel, *The Engineer Menni*, this tension between capitalism and its 'outside' catalyzes a science fiction "struggle in and against nature."⁹⁸ Bogdanov imagined a material context in which, "markets must expand, but there's nowhere left to grow."⁹⁹ In the story, Menni the engineer responds to this problem by proposing a building project that would lead to a new planetary form. Over a century later, a similar, very real problem confronts capitalism today. Yet the economic system's mitigation approach relies far less on innovation than it does a recourse to longstanding methods of dispossession.

Despite misleading bourgeois claims of liberal democracy 'lifting the world out of poverty,' the appearance of progress in the capitalist core rests on deliberate limitation of development elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ Marx himself recognizes that:

"If it (the state) destroys these (non-capitalist economies) in one form, in particular branches at certain points, it resurrects them again elsewhere, because it needs them to some extent for the production of raw material. It produces, therefore a new class of small villagers who cultivate the soil as a subsidiary occupation, but find their chief occupation in industrial labor..."¹⁰¹

This cyclical dynamic appears clearest in the cultivation of raw materials abroad, as the imperialist state (The U.S., most prolifically) wages proxy wars, stages international coups, funds terrorist groups, and orchestrates debt traps to secure its interests and destabilize economies abroad. In addition to this, the state also generates new outsides domestically, often involving the establishment and enforcement of new identity groups such as racial minorities, genders, criminals, and illegal aliens. Such groups experience vastly different labor regulations than other populations in the imperial core and often suffer a greater environmental burden.

Recently, an incarcerated man in California went viral for donating \$17.74 to relief efforts in Gaza. The sum represented 136 hours of prison labor working as a porter/janitor, making 13 cents per hour. The Palestinian Youth Movement reflected that, "some of the deepest solidarity with Palestine in the US lies in the US prison system."¹⁰² MAMAS, a Chicago-based organization of Black and Latinx mothers advocating for police abolition and Black liberation, see their struggle against state violence as deeply connected to that of Palestinian mothers who have been separated from their children abroad. 'Periphery' populations within the capitalist state and outside of its official borders have more in common than it appears. Both incarcerated

⁹⁸ McKenzie Wark, 2016, *Molecular Red*, EPUB.

⁹⁹ McKenzie Wark, 2016, *Molecular Red*, EPUB.

¹⁰⁰ Part II of this paper elaborates on the dilemma of historical progress, given the destruction that gives way to 'advancement' under capitalism.

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 911.

¹⁰² Palestinian Youth Movement, February 27, 2024, Instagram.

Americans and occupied Palestinians experience state-sponsored violence directed at maintaining their exclusion from a ‘free labor’ system. Both populations also suffer from remarkably high levels of pollution. In Gaza, sanitation and water treatment systems have been destroyed while thousands of Israel and U.S.-supplied bombs pollute the air, leaving a new layer of toxic chemicals in Gazan soil. In the U.S., one-third of state and federal prisons are located within three miles of a federal Superfund site, contributing to increased rates of illness and lower life expectancies for inmates.¹⁰³

The citizens most likely to be brutalized by the police have been spatially zoned along racial and economic lines into neighborhoods that have disproportionately higher rates of disease, flooding, heat waves, and pollution than historically segregated white neighborhoods. A study of 108 U.S. urban areas found that formerly redlined neighborhoods are on average 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than non-redlined neighborhoods.¹⁰⁴ The economic development of Black Americans has been repeatedly and deliberately violated by the state in the U.S., from the Tulsa Massacre to the CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy. As the capitalist ‘core,’ or those who benefit from the imperial state’s super profits, expand into new territory, the state works to create more zones of *so-called primitive accumulation* to support the ‘core’s increasing labor, raw material, and market demands.

In capitalism’s higher stages, the geographic partitions between the ‘core’ and the ‘periphery’ have begun to overlap.¹⁰⁵ It is increasingly common for those who make up capitalism’s periphery to participate in ‘doubly-free’ wage labor, in addition to serving as a source of raw materials or unwaged labor. While the prison was an institution that originally served *so-called primitive accumulation* by punishing forced vagabondage, it has since emerged as a multi-billion-dollar private industry.¹⁰⁶ From McDonalds to Victoria’s Secret, the labor of incarcerated people is now a well-integrated part of the global capitalist economy. Women, who were forced into unwaged labor roles in capitalism’s ascension phase, now often also work a ‘second shift’ as wage laborers out of necessity. Meanwhile, upper class women who have assimilated into the capitalist ‘core’ hire a more vulnerable class of women, often immigrants, under the table to take care of their domestic spheres. In urban areas, forty percent of the poorest households are also headed by single women.¹⁰⁷

Saito offers that capitalism ‘shifts’ the ‘rift’ it causes in humanity’s labor metabolism with the Earth across spatial, temporal, and technological lines. I have added to Saito, through a close reading of Marx on *so-called primitive accumulation*, that the state is a primary enactor of such shifts. Capitalism, however, cannot delay its damage indefinitely. Marx, for example, studied how the collection of Guano from seabirds in Latin America that was used to improve soil fertility in nitrogen-depleted Europe, eventually led to war and resource exhaustion. While the state’s continuous creation of new outsides temporarily mitigates the contradiction between capitalism’s ‘core’ and its ‘periphery,’ its interventions do not necessarily keep pace with that of capitalist expansion.

¹⁰³ Prison Policy Initiative, 2022, “Prisons are a Daily Environmental Injustice.”

¹⁰⁴ Meg Anderson, 2022, “Racist Housing Practices from the 1930s Linked to Hotter Neighborhoods Today,” NPR.

¹⁰⁵ Naoki Okada, 2007, “The System Theory of Karl Marx.”

¹⁰⁶ Equal Justice Initiative, 2021, “Prison Conditions.”

¹⁰⁷ United Nations, 2009, “Women in the Shadow of Climate Change.”

“The more capitalism is developed, the more strongly the shortage of raw materials is felt throughout the whole world, the more desperate is the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.”¹⁰⁸

In the *climate crisis*, labor’s material basis (which *exchange value* obscures) eventually catches up with capitalism. As more peripheries are integrated into capitalism, new outsides spring up inside the imperial core, slowly bringing ‘natural disasters’ closer to home for imperial elites.¹⁰⁹ In this way too, the division between capitalism’s interior and exterior is becoming increasingly thin. The contradiction between capitalism’s ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ poses a threat to the free market system, particularly when compounded with the material consequences of humanity’s estrangement from its *species being* or labor *metabolism*. In the state’s threefold mitigation of this contradiction, *so-called primitive accumulation* is rendered a cyclical process.

“We always find that this peasantry turns up again,” domestically and internationally, “although in a diminished number and in a progressively worse situation.”¹¹⁰ – Karl Marx

[Diagram of Dynamic Interior and Exterior Available for Possible Inclusion]

Conclusion

Marx’s writing on *so-called primitive accumulation* draws attention to a cyclical process of encroachment and disenfranchisement, motivated by capitalism’s expansionary form of motion, which ruthlessly demands infinitely increasing *exchange value*. This portion of Marx’s writing foregrounds the land, while his later scientific inquiries in the MEGA foreground the soil. The environmental turn of Marx’s research towards the end of his life can be read as an extension of his earlier insight that capitalism fundamentally demands humanity’s estrangement from the Earth.

I have established that for Marx, *so-called primitive accumulation* denotes an ongoing process that relies on the dependent agency of the modern state. I have added to this that the state’s *second* axis of so-called primitive accumulation extends at a pace beyond the “full development” of the capitalist mode of production in a given region. Finally, I have used Marx’s logic to arrive at a third aspect of so-called primitive accumulation that the state carries out; the constant creation of new exteriors to capitalism from which it can draw free labor and resources, and into which it can expand once more.

Ongoing *so-called primitive accumulation* not only reveals a fruitful contradiction for theoretical investigation but foregrounds Capitalism’s material reality of extraction, displacement, and confinement. *Climate crisis* is a problem that involves the whole of humanity. Yet, the ruling class deceptively defers its burden spatially, temporally, and technologically, to the lower classes instead of addressing its root cause (namely, the organization of labor under capitalism). Marx’s critique of political economy helps systematize the uneven pressures of climate change on select populations. The majority of those who sit in air-conditioned offices

¹⁰⁸ Vladimir Lenin, 2021, “Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism,” p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ “Under capitalism the home market is inevitably bound up with the foreign market.” Vladimir Lenin, 2021, “Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism,” p. 24.

¹¹⁰ Karl Marx, 1992, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics, p. 912.

and enjoy free two-day shipping have yet to feel the full consequences of humanity's estrangement from its *species being*. However, the line between capitalism's core and its periphery is thinning. As wage labor proliferates across the globe, new outsides spring up in increasingly small patches; sometimes separated from the core by as little as a city block, and at other times directly overlapping with it. As capitalism grows, so too do its material contradictions.

Part 1 of this paper has probed the socio-spatial lines along which capitalism, and its dependent agent, the imperial state, shifts its climate burden. Part 2 will investigate the temporal and technological aspects of Saito's ecological shift through the lens of *so-called primitive accumulation*.

“For a colonized people: the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.”

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

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