

THE PLACE OF WAR IN MARXIST ANALYSES OF PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

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Abstract: It has long been understood by Marxists, including Marx himself, that primitive accumulation was not limited to the historical origins of capitalism. Instead, extra-economic processes of capital accumulation continue to be relevant throughout the subsequent development of capitalism. An examination of the classic analyses of primitive accumulation made by Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg suggests that the most significant contemporary interpretation of the concept—David Harvey's accumulation by dispossession—fails to properly account for the role played by war and military power in capital accumulation today. This is the product of both a problematic interpretation of Marx's and Luxemburg's analyses of primitive accumulation as well as a problematic interpretation of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. I argue that Marx and Luxemburg continue to offer a more fruitful foundation from which to address this question.

Key words: primitive accumulation; accumulation by dispossession; imperialism

In the slave and feudal modes of production, the process of accumulation was based on the ruling class's possession of explicitly coercive political—that is, extra-economic—power. In this context, the role of military power as a means of accumulation was especially important. In the slave societies of classical antiquity, for example, the military defeat of “barbarian” peoples was the principal way in which enslaved labor could expand. As for feudalism, the lord's property rights over land and ability to extract surplus from the peasantry were based on a hierarchy of social relations based on the provision of military service. In both cases, accumulation through extra-economic power was clearly visible socially, whether it be through the legal ownership of enslaved labor or through the *corvéé* labor and

rents extracted from the peasantry (Wood 2005). It was with the emergence of the doubly-free labor associated with the capitalist mode of production—free of any means of production, and free to sell its labor power—that the centrality of extra-economic coercion was replaced by the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx 1976, 899). The extraction of surplus from the proletariat by the bourgeoisie was much harder to see, as it took place in the context of an apparently free and equal exchange of labor power for wages. The dialectical nature of this process, however, must be acknowledged, as it was through forms of extra-economic coercion wielded by the state—such as military power—that this transition was accomplished. At the same time, though, this transition does not eliminate the significance of extra-economic power in general, and military power in particular, in the reproduction of capitalism.

The purpose of this article is to examine how Marxists have discussed the role played by war and military power in primitive accumulation. Doing so highlights the essential contribution of the state to the process of capital accumulation. I first examine the classic analyses of primitive accumulation made by Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, and then the contemporary interpretation of the concept—accumulation by dispossession—offered by David Harvey. I argue that the way in which Harvey incorporates war into his analysis of accumulation by dispossession is problematic, and that the perspective of Marx and Luxemburg offers a more fruitful foundation from which to address this question.

Marx and Luxemburg on Primitive Accumulation

In the preface to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx outlined the plan for his analysis of the “system of bourgeois economy in the following order: *capital, landed property, wage-labour; the State, foreign trade, world market*” (Marx 1970, 19; italics original). Having only started but never completed the first part of this outline, his promise of an analysis of the state was left unfulfilled. It is here, presumably, where Marx would have had the opportunity to examine in detail the role played by war in the process of capital accumulation. This is not to say that the state failed to appear in his analysis of capitalism. In Part VIII of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx defined primitive accumulation as “an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure” (Marx 1976, 874).¹ *Capital*, recall, was Marx’s critique of bourgeois political economy. Marx’s pejorative reference to “so-called primitive accumulation” reflected his disdain for the assumptions of Adam Smith and others that capitalism’s “point of departure” was the result of the creation, as a result of the forward-thinking exertions of soon-to-be capitalists, of a hoard of privately-held wealth which could be invested for purposes of earning a profit.² Capital for

Marx was not a *thing* but a *social relation*. It required the creation of the “capital relation,” which could be

nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labor; it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-laborers. So-called primitive accumulation . . . is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. (Marx 1976, 874–875)

This separation of the producer from the means of production was a historical process in which “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part” (Marx 1976, 874). It was only following this “pre-history of capital” (875), one dominated by force, that the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (899) that define capitalist exploitation could be consolidated.

Marx was clear that the process of primitive accumulation was not a universal or mechanical one but rather that it “assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs” (Marx 1976, 876). He did, however, identify the “classic form” (Marx 1976, 876) as having taken place in England,³ and it was in this context that he examined the role of the state as a principal agent of primitive accumulation. The “individual acts of violence” (Marx 1976, 885) by which the peasantry was forcibly removed from the land beginning in the late fifteenth century had, by the eighteenth century, been supplanted by Parliament’s enactment of enclosure laws performing the same function but backed explicitly by the coercive power of the state. This process was accompanied by what Marx labeled “bloody legislation against the expropriated,” which criminalized the poverty resulting from the mass eviction of peasants from the land, with punishments for “vagrancy” ranging from whippings, imprisonment, enslavement and, later, “transportation” to penal colonies abroad, provided for a compulsory extension of the working day and the setting of wage ceilings but no corresponding wage minimums, and prohibited combinations of workers for the purpose of improving their conditions of labor. The result was a population stripped of the means of production and compelled out of necessity to work under whatever horrific conditions and low wages were imposed on them, and it was this population that marked the origins of the proletariat. Such legislation also, by ensuring the eventual destruction of rural domestic industry and creating a home market, facilitated the development of the rising bourgeoisie. These examples illustrate

the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production

into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power. (Marx 1976, 915–916)

The specific role of English military power in this process was never far from Marx's narrative—the legal forms by which the producers were separated from the means of production were always backed up by military power, as his reference to the use of soldiers to enforce evictions in Scotland in the early nineteenth century makes clear (Marx 1976, 897)—but it was not attended to in any detail.

It is in his discussion of primitive accumulation at the global level that Marx demonstrated most clearly the significant role played by war and military power, both directly and indirectly, in this process. The image Marx drew here of primitive accumulation is a truly grim one:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. (Marx 1976, 915)

“The treasures captured outside of Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder,” he continued, “flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there” (Marx 1976, 918). The military power necessary for this process ensured the emergence of “the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield,” one that “begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes gigantic dimensions in England's Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the shape of the Opium Wars against China, etc.” (Marx 1976, 915). We see in *Capital*, for example, how the series of treaties over the course of 1713–1715 that made up the Peace of Utrecht following the War of the Spanish Succession ended up extending England's monopoly of the slave trade to the West Indies to include Spain's colonies in the Americas, as well and how bounties placed by the New England colonies on the scalps obtained as a result of their wars of extermination against the indigenous population contributed to the conversion of collective space into private property. With these and other examples found in *Capital*, Marx was unequivocal in his conclusion that “capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (Marx 1976, 926).

It is worth noting that Marx's other writings concerning colonialism are relevant for understanding his analysis of primitive accumulation, even if these predate his writing of *Capital* or are not framed explicitly in this context (see Pradella 2013).

Marx's commentaries on the British domination of India and China, written during the 1850s, provide examples of this. He noted, for example, that "the brutal interference of the . . . British soldier" (Marx 1979a, 131) played an important role in the extension of the East India Company's power throughout India. Over the course of a series of eighteenth-century wars, most notably the Carnatic Wars from 1746–1763 in which the British defeated the French and their local allies, the Company established itself as the dominant European trading power in India and was transformed "from a commercial into a military and territorial power" (Marx 1979b, 149). During this period, "the treasures transported from India to England were gained much less by comparatively insignificant commerce, than by the direct exploitation of that country, and by the colossal fortunes there extorted and transmitted to England" (Marx 1979b, 154). Marx also noted that the wars during the 1830s and 1840s, in particular those against the Sikhs and Afghans, completed the Company's subjugation of the Indian subcontinent and established "one great Anglo-Indian Empire" (Marx 1979b, 152) by 1849. By 1857, during which time an Indian revolt against British colonial rule was launched and subsequently suppressed bloodily, the costs associated with "the career of endless conquest and perpetual aggression in which the English are involved by the possession of India" (Marx 1986b, 352) had reached such a point that the Company was no longer capable of securing the order necessary to maintain colonial plunder without massive infusions of money from Parliament; the Company's charter was revoked and direct colonial rule assumed by Britain.

With regard to China, Marx argued that British efforts to end its self-imposed isolation "received their full development under the English cannon" (Marx 1979c, 95). The illegal sale of opium to China, he noted, made a significant contribution to the East India Company's revenue as well as to Indian demand for British manufactured goods. Reversing the Chinese ban on the importation of opium was seen as a way to address a longstanding trade imbalance arising from British demand for Chinese luxury goods such as silk and porcelain and reverse what had been to that point a net outflow of precious metals from Britain to China. The First Opium War of 1839–1842, waged by the British in the name of "free trade," not only forced China to purchase opium from colonial India but also opened Chinese ports to British merchants and ceded control of Hong Kong to the British. Subsequent "insults" to British rights of access in China led to the further use of military power in the Second Opium War to reinforce and further expand European control of China's trade. Following the October 1856 boarding by Chinese officials of a Chinese *lorcha* flying a British flag in order to arrest Chinese crew members accused of piracy, British forces shelled and then seized several forts in the port of Canton. In response, Marx wrote that a "most unrighteous war has been waged" (Marx 1986a, 234) by "[c]ivilization-mongers who throw hot shells on a

defenseless city and add rape to murder” (Engels 1986, 281). Canton itself was seized by British and French forces in December 1857, and in May 1858 they captured forts near Tianjin. The subsequent Treaty of Tientsin of June 1858 not only imposed reparations on the Chinese but also opened more Chinese ports to European commerce and allowed foreign traders to travel within China. Later, in June 1859, when Chinese officials denied passage of a naval squadron of British and French ships escorting diplomats on the Hai River at Tianjin, “another civilization war” (Marx 1980, 517) to enforce European access to China was launched, which ended with the October 1860 sacking of the Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing. In both India and China, primitive accumulation had the consequence of transferring extraordinary stocks of wealth to Britain, wealth that was then available to be used as capital by the emerging bourgeoisie. Likewise, in both India and China, local industry, most notably spinning and weaving, was overwhelmed by the forced importation of British textiles. This slow but steady erosion of indigenous patterns of labor facilitated the emergence in China (as in India), for example, of a semi-proletarianized contract labor force that played an important role in the extraction of guano from Peru for export to Britain, a process likened to “disguised slavery” (Marx 1973, 97n); Chinese contract labor also played an important part in the mining of gold in California and Australia and the building of railroads in the US West.

It is in their discussion of Ireland, however, that one can see most clearly how Marx (and Engels) understood the role played by warfare in primitive accumulation. They made note of the confiscation and forced depopulation of Irish land and the subsequent development of English landlordism that accompanied the English conquest of Ireland, beginning with Henry II’s invasion in 1171, extending through the creation of the Plantation of Ulster by James I after decades of war initiated by Henry VII, Cromwell’s subjugation of Catholic Ireland, and ending with William III’s victory over the Jacobites in 1691. Ireland was, according to Marx, “the bulwark of the *English landed aristocracy*,” the exploitation of which “is not only one of the main sources of this aristocracy’s material welfare; it is its greatest *moral strength*” (Marx 1988, 473; emphasis in the original). The English subjugation of Ireland transformed it into what Marx called an “English agricultural district” (Marx 1985a, 192), providing wool necessary for the English textile industry as well as foodstuffs necessary for the reproduction of English labor power. In addition, the patterns of tenant farming imposed by English rule led to the development of a surplus population in Ireland, the portion of which did not succumb to famine migrated to British cities to become a super-exploited source of industrial labor power. As a result, Ireland was “forced to contribute cheap labour and cheap capital to building up ‘the great works of Britain’” (Marx 1985b, 200–201). Of equal if not greater significance for British capital was the fact that Irish diasporic labor was used as a wedge to weaken working-class solidarity against capital.

The English proletariat tended to see Irish labor as an economic competitor driving down wages and as a social inferior: “*This antagonism*,” Marx wrote, “is the *secret of the impotence of the English working class*, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power” (Marx 1988, 475; emphasis in the original). Engels likewise noted how, in particular, the English military victories of the seventeenth century “completely crushed” the Irish people, “their landholdings robbed and given to English invaders, the Irish people outlawed in their own land and transformed into a nation of outcasts” (Engels 1985, 140). The coercive nature of British rule in Ireland was not, however, simply a historical fact, as Engels made clear in a letter to Marx following an 1856 tour of Ireland:

The so-called liberty of English citizens is based on the oppression of the colonies. I have never seen so many gendarmes in any country, and the sodden look of the bibulous Prussian gendarme is developed to its highest perfection here among the constabulary, who are armed with carbines, bayonets and handcuffs. (Engels 1983, 49)

Engels’s discussion of the abject poverty of the Irish, both as tenant farmers in Ireland and as laborers in British industrial centers, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, made clear that while the “English immigration” “has contented itself with the most brutal plundering of the Irish people . . . [the Irish] have little for which to be thankful to the English immigration” (Engels 1973, 310). The result was that “as a result of the English invasion, Ireland was cheated of its whole development, and thrown centuries back” (Engels 1988a, 409). Engels also emphasized just how important the English domination of Ireland was to the subsequent development of British capitalism: “it appears clear to me that things in England would have taken another turn but for the necessity of military rule in Ireland and creating a new aristocracy” (Engels 1988b, 363).

While Marx emphasized that primitive accumulation characterized the prehistory of capital, his writings on the contemporary experience of British colonialism made clear that he did not see it as ending with the emergence of capitalist social relations. The fact that he included the Opium Wars—which occurred well after the consolidation of capitalist social relations in Britain—in his discussion of primitive accumulation in *Capital* is evidence of this. He did not, however, take this point any further. As a result, the question of the articulation of primitive accumulation with the extended reproduction of capital was left unanswered.

This question was posed more directly in Luxemburg’s analysis of the development of capitalism. Like Marx, she pointed to the importance of primitive accumulation for creating the proletariat, both by emancipating the direct producers from serfdom and separating them from the means of production, through such methods

as the English enclosures that began in the fifteenth century (Luxemburg 2014). She also, like Marx, identified the significance of Europe's "first attack on the New World" beginning in the late fifteenth century, "a matter of the speediest plunder of the treasures and natural wealth of the newly discovered tropical lands in terms of precious metals, spices, valuable ornaments and slaves" (Luxemburg 2014, 150–151) and the plunder of raw materials and enslavement of indigenous peoples by Dutch and English trading companies for the subsequent development of capitalism. However, in contrast to Marx, whom she saw as restricting primitive accumulation to the prehistory of capital and who "constantly returns to his presupposition of the universal and exclusive dominance of capitalist production," Luxemburg asserted:

Even in its full maturity, capitalism depends in all of its relations on the simultaneous existence of non-capitalist strata and societies . . . The accumulation process of capital is tied to non-capitalist forms of production in all of its value relations and material relations—i.e., with regard to constant capital, variable capital, and surplus value. (Luxemburg 2016, 262)

Capital accumulation has, she argued, two dimensions: a)

an economic process whose most important phase is played out between the capitalist and the wage laborer, but it is one that moves exclusively within the confines of commodity exchange—the exchange of equivalents—in *both* phases (i.e., both within the sphere of production and that of circulation); (Luxemburg 2016, 329; italics original)

and b) "a process that takes place between capital and non-capitalist forms of production" (Luxemburg 2016, 329) on a global level. The significance of the latter, according to Luxemburg, is that Marx's assumption that "all requisite means of production and consumption should only derive from capitalist production corresponds neither to the daily practice and history of capital, nor to the specific character of this mode of production" (Luxemburg 2016, 257) and so must be rejected. Consumption by both capitalists and workers can never match the unquenchable drive to accumulate capital, and so the *production* of surplus-value will always outstrip opportunities for the *realization* of that surplus-value by capitalists. As a result, Luxemburg pointed to the necessity for non-capitalist outlets to absorb the surplus-value that could not be realized within the capitalist system itself. "In its forms and laws of motion," she argued,

Capitalist production reckons with the whole world as the treasury of productive forces, and has done so since its inception. In its drive to appropriate these

productive forces for the purposes of exploitation, capital ransacks the whole planet, procuring means of production from every crevice of the Earth, snatching up or acquiring them from civilizations of all stages and all forms of society. (Luxemburg 2016, 258)

This was not, for Luxemburg, a purely theoretical argument. It was a reality she could observe over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in her *Introduction to Political Economy*, she noted that the “collision of palpable material interests” between capitalist and non-capitalist social relations grew sharper “[t]he more that the capitalist regime began to establish itself as all-powerful in Western Europe” (Luxemburg 2014, 163). Capital could not bear the existence of any limits in its pursuit of self-expansion, and as such it must wage “a constant war of annihilation everywhere against any historical form of natural economy that it encounters” (Luxemburg 2016, 265). Primitive accumulation is thus “a question of life or death” (Luxemburg 2016, 267) for capital that must be addressed on a continuous basis.

Capital, Luxemburg argued, knows “no other solution to the problem than violence, which has been a constant method of capital accumulation as a historical process, not merely during its emergence, but also to the present day” (Luxemburg 2016, 267). More specifically, she identified militarism as playing historically the “decisive role” in primitive accumulation, first with “the conquest of the New World and the Asian spice-producing countries” and later

in the subjugation of the modern colonies, the destruction of the social forms of organization of primitive societies, and the appropriation of their means of production, the imposition of commodity exchange in countries whose social structures constitute an obstacle to the commodity economy, the forcible proletarianization of the indigenous inhabitants, and the imposition of wage labor in the colonies. (Luxemburg 2016, 331)

Militarism was the basis on which European capital imposed itself on “areas of non-capitalist civilization” (Luxemburg 2016, 331) to ensure access to markets, raw materials and labor and on which the European capitals sought to protect and extend their colonial territories from competing capitals. In Chapter 27 of *The Accumulation of Capital* (“The Struggle against the Natural Economy”), Luxemburg identified the British conquest of India and the French conquest of Algeria as “the classical examples of capital’s application of this method” (Luxemburg 2016, 267), and in Chapter 28 (“The Introduction of the Commodity Economy”) she provided a detailed analysis of how China was opened up to commodity trade “in the face of the most modern war techniques

of the allied great powers of Europe” (Luxemburg 2016, 279) resulting in “streams of blood, carnage, and destruction” (Luxemburg 2016, 285). Her 1902 article “Martinique,” while written a number of years before *The Accumulation of Capital* in response to European reaction to the devastating loss of life following a volcanic eruption on the island, provided a vivid picture of this violence and is worth quoting at length:

France weeps over the tiny island’s 40,000 corpses, and the whole world hastens to dry the tears of the Mother Republic. But how was it then, centuries ago, when France spilled blood in torrents for the Lesser and Greater Antilles? In the sea off the east coast of Africa lies a volcanic island—Madagascar: 50 years ago, there we saw the disconsolate Republic who weeps for her lost children today, how she bowed the obstinate native people to her yoke with chains and the sword. No volcano opened its crater there: the mouths of French cannons spewed out death and annihilation; French artillery fire swept thousands of flowering human lives from the face of the earth until a free people lay prostrate on the ground, until the brown queen of the “savages” was dragged off as a trophy to the “City of Light.”

On the Asiatic coast, washed by the waves of the ocean, lie the smiling Philippines. Six years ago, we saw the benevolent Yankees, we saw the Washington Senate at work there. Not fire-spewing mountains—there, American rifles mowed down human lives in heaps; the sugar cartel Senate which today sends golden dollars to Martinique, thousands upon thousands, to coax life back from the ruins, sent cannon upon cannon, warship upon warship, golden dollars millions upon millions to Cuba, to sow death and devastation.

Yesterday, today—far off in the African south, where only a few years ago a tranquil little people lived by their labor and in peace, there we saw how the English wreak havoc, these same Englishmen who in Martinique save the mother her children and the children their parents: there we saw them stamp on human bodies, on children’s corpses with brutal soldiers’ boots, wading in pools of blood, death and misery before them and behind . . . And all of you—whether French and English, Russians and Germans, Italians and Americans—we have seen you all together once before in brotherly accord, united in a great league of nations, helping and guiding each other: it was in China. There too you forgot all quarrels among yourselves, there too you made a peace of peoples—for mutual murder and the torch. Ha, how the pigtails fell in rows before your bullets, like a ripe grainfield lashed by the hail! Ha, how the wailing women plunged into the water, their dead in their cold arms, fleeing the tortures of your ardent embraces! (Luxemburg 1983, 5)

While an expression of extra-economic power, this violence does not lie outside the extended reproduction of capital. Instead, it

is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process; both sides of capital accumulation are organically bound up with each other through the very conditions of the reproduction of capital, and it is only together that they result in the historical trajectory of capital. (Luxemburg 2016, 329)

The extra-economic accumulation associated with capital's penetration into "non-capitalist" spaces has become a condition for the continued reproduction of capitalist accumulation.

Contemporary Analysis of Primitive Accumulation

David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession, which he defined as "the continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices which Marx had treated as 'primitive' or 'original' during the rise of capitalism" (Harvey 2005, 159), is the most significant contribution to date regarding contemporary forms of primitive accumulation. Among those accumulation practices noted by Marx that were of particular note to Harvey included

the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade and usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system. (Harvey 2003b, 145)

Harvey argues that the assumptions underlying Marx's analysis in *Capital*—that is, that accumulation occurs through the extended reproduction of capital—led him to discount the possibility of primitive accumulation's continued relevance beyond the prehistory of capital; likewise, while recognizing the importance Luxemburg gave to primitive accumulation as a necessity to avoid capitalist crises, he was critical of the way in which she restricted this to a space "outside" of capitalism, arguing that capitalism "can either make use of some pre-existing outside . . . or it can actively manufacture it" (Harvey 2003b, 141). The contemporary forms of primitive accumulation, which Harvey categorizes as accumulation by

dispossession, have taken four major forms (Harvey 2005): 1) commodification and privatization of communal or public assets (e.g., closing off of global environmental commons, WTO's creation of intellectual property rights); 2) financialization of capital (e.g., speculative and predatory practices resulting from financial deregulation); 3) management and manipulation of crises (e.g., debt crises and IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs); and 4) state redistributions (e.g., privatization of social provision). In contrast to accumulation through the extended reproduction of capital, which occurs through capital's ability to extract value in excess of the price it pays for the use of workers' labor power, accumulation by dispossession is largely a function of the capitalist state's "monopoly of violence and definitions of legality" (Harvey 2003b, 145). While accumulation by dispossession "is omnipresent in no matter what historical period" (Harvey 2003a, 76) of capitalism, it becomes especially important during periods in which the extended reproduction of capital is in crisis, for it is during crises of overaccumulation that accumulation by dispossession can unlock previously closed-off social and physical spaces for the investment of surplus capital. More specifically, Harvey argues that accumulation by dispossession has become more significant in the context of the chronic crisis of overaccumulation that began in the early 1970s, accounting for the "main mechanisms" (Harvey 2005, 159) through which neoliberalism could "transfer assets and redistribute wealth and income from the mass of the population towards the upper classes [or between capitalists themselves] or from vulnerable to rich countries" (Harvey 2006b, 43). Indeed, Harvey goes so far as to argue that the "balance between accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction has already shifted towards the former and it is hard to see this trend doing anything other than deepening" (Harvey 2003a, 82). It is this shift in the nature of accumulation that led Harvey to his conclusion that contemporary capitalism has come to be defined by a "new" imperialism.

A critical analysis of Harvey's theory should begin with the assumptions he makes about how Marx and Luxemburg understood primitive accumulation. As I demonstrated earlier, Marx clearly recognized the continued relevance of the techniques of primitive accumulation (more specifically, the continued relevance of military power) for the expansion of British capitalism, even if this received but passing reference in *Capital*. In other words, Marx appreciated the significance of primitive accumulation within capitalism to a degree not acknowledged by Harvey. Turning to his critique of Luxemburg, his assertion that she failed to recognize that non-capitalist spaces could be created within capitalism to address the problem of realization, which she sees as central to capitalist crises, neglects her analysis of militarism as a form of capital accumulation. The production of armaments is in many ways a "non-capitalist" space within capitalism, and given that a principal function of these armaments for Luxemburg was the consolidation of

capitalist power globally, it can be seen as a bridge between the “inside” processes of capital accumulation and the “outside” processes of primitive accumulation. In other words, Luxemburg’s “outside” is not as outside as Harvey suggests. From this we can say that the task Harvey sets for himself—that is, moving beyond the limitations of Marx and Luxemburg’s analysis of primitive accumulation—is based on a somewhat problematic understanding of those limitations. At the same time, Harvey makes a dramatic break from both Marx and Luxemburg, for whom primitive accumulation was an expression of extra-economic power. For Harvey, it is “primarily economic rather than extra-economic” (Harvey 2006a, 159). This allows him to bring together a disparate range of processes—some of which reflect the separation of the direct producers from the means of production, while others are expressions of the extended reproduction of capital or a more parasitic, speculative capitalism—that extends his understanding of primitive accumulation well beyond that of Marx and Luxemburg. This represents a serious theoretical miscalculation that renders Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession incapable of bearing the weight he puts on it (Ashman and Callinicos 2006; Brenner 2006; Das 2017; Fine 2006).

Given that, for Harvey, accumulation by dispossession is principally an economic rather than an extra-economic process, military power as a means of such accumulation is merely “the tip of the [new] imperialist iceberg” (Harvey 2003b, 181). His principal example in this regard is the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, but I am not certain that this is a good example for making his case that accumulation by dispossession is associated with the redistribution rather than generation of capital. Following the 1968 coup which brought the Ba’ath Party to power in Iraq, a program of “Arab socialism” characterized by state planning, the nationalization of natural resources, state ownership of industries in major economic sectors, and limits on the ownership of private property was installed; in addition, the Iraqi state came to subsidize the prices of basic necessities, provide free education and health care, and offer extensive employment guarantees to workers (Research Unit for Political Economy 2003). While the Ba’ath Party was dominated by a pan-Arab nationalist perspective, it saw the Soviet Union and its state socialist system as the appropriate development model for Iraq. Following the US invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, this statist economic system was systematically dismantled and replaced with a thoroughly neoliberal program that opened Iraq’s economy to full penetration by global capital: state property was privatized, labor protections weakened, or abolished, foreign ownership expanded, etc. This “structural adjustment” seems much closer to the primitive accumulation that Marx saw in nineteenth-century India, China and Ireland than many of the contemporary practices that Harvey identifies with accumulation by dispossession. Rather than a simple redistribution of capital, it reflects a deeper dissolution of non-capitalist

processes that allows for the consolidation of capitalist social relations in spaces in which they had previously been non-existent or constrained. It is for the same reason that I take issue with Harvey's inclusion of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which "entailed a massive release of hitherto unavailable assets into the mainstream of capital accumulation" (Harvey 2003b, 149) caused in no small part by the collapse of its economy under the weight of pressure from a US-led arms race, within the rubric of accumulation by dispossession. In keeping with Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation, what should make this a contemporary expression of primitive accumulation is not the volume of assets available for investment but rather the destruction of non-capitalist social relations. The fact that Harvey sees both cases as accumulation by dispossession is thus a concrete expression of the argument that the concept incorporates too many different phenomena to be useful. The problematic nature of these examples would also seem to confirm Wood's more general critique of Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession—that it "seems to be less about the creation or maintenance of social-property relations which generate market compulsions than about the redistribution of assets to enable investment" (Wood 2006, 23).

I would argue that what Kaldor (2012) has labeled "new wars" are a closer fit for Harvey's purposes. These wars, the clearest and most significant example of which for Kaldor is the 1992–1995 civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, express the tension between increasingly globalized economic and political power and more fragmented, localized identities. In contrast to the centralized war economy associated with the "old" wars of the long twentieth century, the war economy of "new" wars is a much more decentralized one. While noting the important role that external support can play in such wars, Kaldor argues that combatants depend to a considerable extent on a variety of forms of internal redistribution in order to finance their military activities: the direct seizure of property from civilians, the imposition of "taxes" on local economic activity (both legal and illegal) and humanitarian assistance, the direct sale of primary goods (e.g., oil, diamonds, gold, cobalt, etc.), and direct or indirect involvement in criminal activity (e.g., drugs, money laundering, smuggling, hostage-taking, etc.), and so on. These accumulation processes fund the military activities of "new" war combatants and thus do not produce new wealth, nor do they have the effect of changing in a fundamental manner the existing social relations of production. They are instead a parasitic form of accumulation that mirrors the non-productive accumulation that is the focus of Harvey's work.

Conclusion: War as Reproductive Accumulation

If we wish to argue that processes of primitive accumulation are relevant beyond the prehistory of capital, we need to define such processes as Marx did—as

productive rather than non-productive accumulation achieved through extra-economic means. There is, however, an important difference between historical and contemporary primitive accumulation: the first was the essential condition for the development of capitalist social relations, while the second occurs in the context of such relations having already been established and consolidated. As a result, capitalism is best seen as a dialectical totality of economic and extra-economic forms of accumulation: the latter is the condition of the former, but once capitalist social relations have been consolidated it contributes to the extended reproduction of capital to the extent that it decreases the cost of either constant capital or variable capital (Bin 2018, 2019). It is for this reason that I label contemporary primitive accumulation as “reproductive accumulation” to distinguish it from historical primitive accumulation.

The role that war plays as a form of primitive accumulation is a function of specific stages of capitalist development, and so we must distinguish between war in the period of historical primitive accumulation and war in the context of reproductive accumulation. During the period of historical primitive accumulation, as demonstrated earlier, military conflicts among the major Western European countries of the time (Spain, Portugal, the Dutch Republic, France, Great Britain) not only led to the accumulation and concentration of great wealth but, more importantly, initiated the separation of the direct producers from the means of production which was to define the capitalist mode of production. This was an uneven process in which some countries (Portugal, Spain) fell away relatively quickly and others, first the Dutch Republic and then Great Britain, emerged as major capitalist powers. With the consolidation of the capitalist mode of production, the inherent contradiction between the global character of capital accumulation and the national character of the capitalist state ensured that war would be an important means of reproductive accumulation. Such wars have taken two major forms. The first is associated with the emergence of imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a process which required the capitalist states to make use of their military strength to overthrow local economic and political structures and to overcome any subsequent resistance to colonial rule that might arise. In these wars, the colonial powers were able to achieve military mastery over colonized peoples relatively easily, but this also intensified competition among the major capitalist states, which in turn led to the inter-imperialist wars of 1914–1945. The second began with the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and the development over the course of the twentieth century, particularly in the period following the Second World War of a world socialist system. Military power was a means for the advanced capitalist states to undermine forms of state or collective—that is, non-capitalist—property that emerged in the course of socialist revolutions or national liberation movements. The fact that such wars occurred in the context of

a world socialist system that, no matter how divided it was over doctrinal matters, could provide support for resistance against such wars and placed limits on how far the advanced capitalist states could go in waging such wars was a highly significant difference between this and the previous historical period. The targets of advanced capitalist military power (e.g., Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua, etc.) could turn to the states of actually existing socialism and the international communist movement for support, and while such support could often be problematic, it was sufficient to provide a safe space for the development of non-capitalist social relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the world socialist system made it much easier for the major capitalist powers to reassert themselves globally, the result being US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and US-led bombing campaigns against the former Yugoslavia and Libya. It is in this context that the identification of China as the principal “threat” against which US military power must be directed in the coming years has to be understood.

War as a means of reproductive accumulation, though, has its limits. The inherently expansionary nature of capitalism compels capital to seek the “liberation” of non-capitalist forces of production and their incorporation into capitalist processes of production and circulation. Once this has occurred, these forces are governed not by extra-economic forms of power but by the laws of capital accumulation outlined by Marx. In other words, such wars *establish and reproduce the conditions* in which value can be produced, but they do not themselves *produce* value; this can happen only after non-capitalist productive forces have been transformed into constant and variable capital.⁴ The extra-economic power through which war serves as a form of reproductive accumulation cannot be wielded by capital itself. Marx, as we saw earlier, defined capital not as a thing but a social relation, one that is defined by the law of value. The capitalist state is an essential means of guaranteeing this social relation. It ensures the extended reproduction of capital by creating and maintaining those conditions necessary for the extraction of surplus-value, which cannot be provided by individual capitals themselves, and it does so through its exercise of extra-economic power. As a result, the capitalist state is part of the capital relation itself, while at the same time “[t]he state ensures the capital relation in that it acts in a non-capitalist manner” (Altvater 1973, 108). The military power of the capitalist state, as an extra-economic expression of power, may not itself produce surplus-value, but the extended reproduction of capital is not possible in the absence of such power.

Notes

1. It should not surprise us that Marx’s examination of primitive accumulation comes at the very end of *Capital*. Since the capitalist mode of production is based on the separation of the direct

- producers from the means of production and the transformation of labor power into a commodity, “the process that created it, namely, primitive accumulation, could only be grasped after the meaning of commodity, and even of capital, were made clear” (Bin 2018, 77).
2. Marx translated Adam Smith’s idea that capitalism required the “previous” accumulation of wealth as *ursprünglich Akkumulation*, which was subsequently translated back into English as “primitive accumulation” (Perelman 2000). While since then different translations have rendered the term differently (e.g., “original” or “primary accumulation”), I will continue to use “primitive accumulation” to maintain consistency.
 3. As a consequence of the uneven development of capitalism, the success of the “classic form” ensured that subsequent experiences of primitive accumulation could not be identical to that experienced in Britain. In these cases, unlike the “classic form,” the transition to capitalism was shaped by the prior existence of capitalist social relations elsewhere (Saville 1969).
 4. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the question of the extent to which capitalist state military expenditures contribute to total social value. While there are considerable differences in how Marxists have examined this question, there seems to be agreement that they do not. For those Marxists associated with the concept of the “permanent arms economy,” such expenditures provide a counteracting factor toward monopoly capitalism’s tendency toward stagnation as they absorb surplus capital—that is, the surplus generated by individual capitals engaged in military production does not reenter the circuit of capital (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Kidron 1967). Others have argued that, for that very reason, military expenditures exacerbate the crisis tendencies of monopoly capitalism (Cogoy 1987; Yaffe 1972).

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