

Primitive Accumulation from Feudalism to Neoliberalism

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Modern mainstream economists typically regard their discipline as a scientific analysis of their belief that markets are naturally the best way to organize the production of goods and services. They also tend to view classical political economy, which flourished between the late 17th century and early 19th century, as little more than the first steps toward the scientific recognition of the efficiency of markets.

In reality, the classical political economists, who wrote from the late seventeenth century until the early nineteenth century, recognized that the evolution of market society was not at all the natural process that later economists imagined. They understood that market society required strong measures in order to coerce large numbers of people to join the market revolution. When this period began, the vast majority of people had at best only a peripheral relationship with the market. Most of the classical political economists devoted significant thought to considering the most effective measures to force people to engage in the market and to free up resources so that the ruling class, of which they were a part, could control those resources for commerce. Karl Marx named this process primitive accumulation.

The classical political economists placed their writings outlining the less attractive, coercive side of classical political economy in their less famous works, especially in their correspondence. In all likelihood, these early economists were not eager to advertise the harsh nature of the supposedly benign program they advocated. In any case, this material rarely found its way into the core theoretical writings of the time, which generally attempted to show how market forces could benefit people. Later economists never acknowledged this crucial aspect of the work of their predecessors, an omission that was possibly—but not necessarily—intentional.

The classical political economists were particularly interested in remaking the social division of labor in agriculture. These early economists were in agreement that the peasant system of self-provisioning—people providing for themselves in growing or hunting their own food, making their own clothes, building their own houses, etc.—had to be destroyed in order to create a labor force. But they displayed a sophisticated understanding that the destruction had to be gradual for two reasons: First, and most obviously, the capitalist employers were not prepared to absorb the entire subsistence sector; second, self-provisioning subsidized wage labor.

The early primitive accumulationists clearly understood how such matters worked: workers create *surplus value*, the difference between the value of what the working class produces and the value of the goods that they receive, what Marx called *variable capital*. By reducing the cost of variable capital, self-provisioning means that workers have to spend less time producing their own wage goods, leaving more time to produce surplus value. Self-provisioning means that the working class has to spend time to provide for itself outside of the market. As a result, the time spent in self-provisioning is, in effect, an extension of the working day.

How to deal with the question of labor time presented the classical political economists with a vexing challenge. Early capitalist technology was almost identical to the traditional methods of production,

which meant that the early capitalists had nothing to contribute to the production system. Therefore, they had only two ways to extract surplus value from the population in the countryside. Either they could reduce the workers' standard of living or lengthen the working day, a ploy that Marx called *absolute surplus value*. Needless to say, the early economists understood that neither of those options were particularly attractive to the potential working class. Although relying on self-provisioning created absolute surplus value, it did so surreptitiously—the capitalists merely left part of the existing system in place. The challenge was to make workers accept the destruction of their way of life, which left them dependent on wages to purchase much of what they were already producing for themselves.

For example, famed 18th-century English author, critic and lexicographer, Samuel Johnson, observed that a pair of traditional Scottish brogues could be made at home in one hour. On the market, shoes sold for one-half crown per pair. According to Adam Smith's estimates of wage rates for labor in the vicinity of Edinburgh, where workers were undoubtedly paid more than in the countryside, a citizen of that city would have to work for three full days to earn enough money to purchase a pair of shoes. Commercially produced shoes would need to have a great deal of appeal to induce people to work for almost three days to purchase them when they could make their own brogues in an hour, assuming that they could obtain leather cheaply. Such a transaction would make no more sense than for a Chinese peasant to come to work in a Nike sweatshop where she earned \$2 a day in order to purchase a \$100 pair of Nike sneakers.

Given the unfavorable exchange between wages and purchased commodities, not surprisingly, people in the Highlands generally preferred self-provisioning to wage labor. In light of this resistance, members of the privileged class realized that primitive accumulation was necessary to jumpstart the transition to capitalism. The prominent British naturalist, Thomas Pennant, for example, approved of whatever restricted people's opportunity for self-provisioning. He commended the practice of the Earl of Bute, whose

farms were possessed of a set of men, who carried on at the same time the profession of farming and fishing to the manifest injury of both. His lordship drew a line between these incongruent employes, and obliged each to carry on the business he [Bute] preferred, distinct from the other.

In other words, Bute insisted that if his workers wanted to continue working for him, they must give up farming their own fields and fishing to provide food for themselves. Thus, he praised the management of the Breadalbane estate, where tenants could stay rent free “on the condition that they exercise some trade”—rather than practice self-provisioning. Consequently, he noted that Breadalbane “has got some as good workmen, in common trades, as any in his Majesty's kingdom.”

Calibrating the Model of Primitive Accumulation

Because absolute dependence by peasants on the market for their nourishment was not desirable, primitive accumulationists paid considerable attention to the effect of varying the extent of dependence, or what we might term, “relative primitive accumulation.” They wanted to make sure that workers would be just self-sufficient enough to raise the rate of surplus value but not so independent that they would or could forgo wage labor. The classical primitive accumulationists agreed that capital had to exert great care lest the worker become “a little gardener instead of a labourer.” Explicit calculations about the appropriate extent of

household production were exceedingly common in the 18th century, as this proposal in an 1800 issue of *Commercial and Agricultural Magazine* makes clear:

... a quarter acre of garden-ground will go a great way toward rendering the peasant independent of any assistance. However, in this beneficent intention moderation must be observed, or we may chance to transform the labourer into a petty farmer; from the most beneficial to the most useless of industry. When a labourer becomes possessed of more land than he and his family can cultivate in the evenings ... the farmer can no longer depend on him for constant work, and the hay-making and harvest ... must suffer to a degree which ... would sometimes prove a national inconvenience.

Even the 19th-century Scottish reformer Robert Gourlay, an advocate for poor farmers whom he viewed as exploited by landlords and the system of government, made a similar point:

... the half acre of land is condescended upon as being such a quantity as any poor man could make the most of at his spare hours, and from which he could raise sufficient food for a cow, along with his liberty of pasturage on the common; but there are reasons which would make it politic and right to diminish both the extent of the common and the garden plot. A quarter of an acre is the proper size for a garden, and 25 instead of 50 acres of common would be quite sufficient. A rood of land, under good garden culture, will yield a great abundance of every kind of vegetable for a family, besides a little for a cow and pig. It is not the intention to make labourers professional gardeners or farmers! It is intended to confine them to bare convenience. The bad effect of giving too much land to labourers was discovered more than thirty years ago, in the lowlands of Scotland [The] bad effects of the little potatoe farms in Ireland are well known; and nothing but dirt and misery is witnessed among the Crofters of the Highlands of Scotland. A tidy garden, with the right of turning out a cow in a small, well-improved and very well fenced field, would produce efforts of a very different kind indeed.

The Earl of Winchilsea, G. Finch, offered another example of the calculus of primitive accumulation. In a letter to Sir John Sinclair, president of the British Board of Trade, he wrote:

[N]othing is so beneficial both to them [the laborers] and to the Land Owners, as having Land to be occupied either for the keeping of Cows, or as gardens, according to circumstances. By means of these advantages, the Labourers and their families live better, and are consequently more fit to endure labour; it makes them more contented, and more attached to their situation, and it gives them a sort of independence which makes them set a higher value upon their character [W]hen a Labourer has obtained a Cow, and Land sufficient to maintain her, the first thing he has thought of, has been, how he could save money enough to buy another.

The earl estimated that four-fifths of the labor put into a garden will come “at extra hours, and when they and their children would otherwise be unemployed.” As might be expected, he cautioned against allowing a laborer access to even several acres of arable land, because that much land “would occupy so much of his time, that the Take would, upon the whole, be injurious to him.”

In this spirit, the British Board of Agriculture attempted to assist those who employed farm labor to benefit from a more self-sufficient labor force. It offered a gold medal “to each of the five persons, who shall, in the most satisfactory manner, prove, by experiment, the practicability of cottagers being enabled to keep one or two milch cows on the produce of the land cultivated with spade and hoe only.”

However, the board had no intention of returning to precapitalist subsistence farming. Its president,

Sir John Sinclair, wanted small farming to operate under three principles:

1. That a cottager shall raise, by his own labour, some of the most material articles of subsistence for himself and his family;
2. That he shall be enabled to supply the adjoining markets with the smaller agricultural productions; and
3. That both he and his family shall have it in their power to assist the neighboring farmers, at all seasons, almost equally as well as if they had no land in their occupation.

Sinclair had two objects in mind, both of which pertained to primitive accumulation. First, he thought that the provision of a small plot of land would make peasants accept enclosures more readily. Second, a glance at Sinclair's three points indicates that he thought that if small-scale farms could be properly proportioned, agricultural employers could profit from a cheaper labor force. Sinclair calculated that the cottagers would earn slightly more than half their income from wages. The rest was expected to come from their sales of agricultural produce. Moreover, in excess of one-third of their money wages was expected to return to the landed gentry in the form of rents paid for their tiny plots of land.

Many later primitive accumulationists adhered to Sinclair's vision. By the 19th century, most of the very small farmers were wage earners who supplemented their earnings with agricultural pursuits. A similar arrangement in East Asia enabled the transition to modern capitalist development after World War II, when land reform allowed workers, who along with their families farmed rice paddies, to earn very low wages. The prominent Marxist sociologist, Harold Wolpe, discovered that similar strategies were employed in South Africa. He quotes documents from the South African Chamber of Mines dated 1944:

It is clearly to the advantage of the mines that native labourers should be encouraged to return to their homes after the completion of the ordinary period of service. The maintenance of the system under which the mines are able to obtain unskilled labour at a rate less than ordinarily paid in industry depends upon this, for otherwise the subsidiary means of subsistence would disappear and the labourer would tend to become a permanent resident upon the Witwatersrand, with increased requirements.

Calibration must necessarily adjust with changing technology. For example, during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, spinning, which was traditionally an agricultural sideline, could not keep pace with the increase from the mechanized capacity to weave cloth. Accordingly, the textile industry needed to move more people from part-time farming into full-time spinning. A key factor in forcing this shift was the Game Laws.

Game Laws

The Game Laws, which restricted hunting, are one of the most interesting aspects of primitive accumulation. Though the restriction of hunting in Africa as a tactic of forcing people into wage labor is widely known, in Great Britain, the Game Laws represented a strange convergence of capitalism and feudalism. As everyone familiar with the Robin Hood legend knows, the British Game Laws began during feudalism. But their usefulness to the ruling class was not fully appreciated until the transition to capitalism was underway, and by the end of the 16th century, the English state had ceased to enforce them. However, they still remained on the books. When Charles I tried to revive them in 1630 to raise revenue, both

Parliament and Civil War conditions prevented him from doing so.

Game Law proponents started to gain ground in the late 1600s, and the modern English Game Laws began in 1671. Though written before capitalism was firmly entrenched, the wording of the preamble sounds far more like the handiwork of avaricious capitalists intent on maximizing surplus value than an appeal to a feudal tradition:

Whereas great mischief do ensue by inferior tradesmen, apprentices, and other dissolute persons neglecting their trades and employments who follow hunting, fishing and other game to the ruin of themselves and their neighbors, therefore, if any such person shall presume to hunt, hawk, fish or fowl (unless in company of the master of such apprentice duly qualified) he shall...be subject to the other penalties.

One scholar claims that the legislation grew “out of a desire to enhance the status of country gentlemen in the bitter aftermath of the Civil War. Their message was that “land was superior to money.” But something else was going on. Were the gentry really so concerned about people neglecting their trades? Probably not. While an anti-bourgeois sentiment may have motivated the Game Laws to begin with, these laws also represented a direct response to the rural poor’s refusal to accept the landlords’ assertion of unprecedented property rights, which challenged the traditional rights of the poor in the countryside. So both groups, aristocrats and the growing capitalist class, benefited from this legislation.

These traditional rights were far from inconsequential, since the rural poor depended on hunting as an important source of nutrition, as well as a pleasant recreation. The Game Laws, in this sense, became part of the larger movement to cut off large masses of the rural people from their traditional means of production.

Once English leaders recognized the unexpected benefits of the Game Laws, the people in power went well beyond merely embracing the acts as they found them. During the period of classical political economy, they passed increasingly restrictive measures with even more inhumane penalties. By 1844, Engels reported that the British Game Laws became the harshest in the world.

Although the spirit of the Game Laws may have been in tune with modern capitalism, the British system of justice often administered them in a decidedly feudal style. The case of the unfortunate Richard Dellers became a particularly famous example. On the basis of information from his game keeper and a servant, the Duke of Buckingham convicted Dellers. The duke, presiding over the trial in his own drawing room, informed Dellers that if he uttered a single impertinent word, he would be taken to jail or the stocks. Henry Brougham, speaking in 1828 when the Dellers affair was still fresh in the minds of the British public, roared: “There is not a worse constituted tribunal on the face of the earth.” Nonetheless, despite the feudal execution and intent of the modern Game Laws, their effect was decidedly capitalistic insofar as they succeeded in accelerating the process of primitive accumulation.

The Oppressive Nature of the Bourgeois Game Laws

Although the feudal administration of the Game Laws was harsh, the paternalistic obligations that

society still expected of the gentry had often tempered the severity with which they were enforced. Generally, those most in need would expect some modest generosity from the superior orders; however, the social mores were changing. With the decline of feudal relations, land ownership was becoming more of a business and less a way of life. As the economic value of land rose, the gentry became more bourgeoisified. Landlords' relations with their tenants became both more distant and more exploitative; long-term leases became less common; rental income was on the rise; cottagers were being eliminated; and casual labor was replacing full-time workers and servants.

Within this context, any good-will was fast disappearing from the countryside, and the Game Laws became increasingly brutal. The Waltham Black Acts of 1722 were among the earliest of the severe measures to punish poachers. This legislation was devised at a time when venison had become a prized delicacy, perhaps because of the great expanse of land required for raising a deer. More and more, poachers began to see the quarry as a commodity rather than as an object of direct consumption. A century later in 1826, a journalist lamented that it was "difficult to make an uneducated man appreciate the sanctity of private property in game [when] ... the produce of a single night's poach was often more than the wages for several weeks' work."

The penalties for taking small game initially were less severe than for poaching deer until landowners began to take measures to increase the population of deer on their land. In order to make it clear that trespassing for hunting anything would not be tolerated, the scope of the Game Laws expanded rapidly. During the first six decades of the 18th century, only six acts were directed against poachers of small game. The next 56 years saw the enactment of 33 such laws. As a result, "Meat virtually disappeared from the tables of the rural poor."

Since the taking of game was tantamount to challenging property rights, such acts had to be punished severely. After all, the Game Laws represented an essential bulwark for the social order. Poaching was taken so seriously that it was, on occasion, even equated with treason. The British courts enforced these laws with shocking ferocity, and several poachers were actually executed under the infamous Black Acts.

Although the imposition of draconian penalties for infractions of the supposedly feudal Game Laws at such a late date might seem anomalous for an advancing capitalist economy, they were an important part of the intensifying class struggle that was engulfing the countryside during the age of classical political economy. One pamphleteer exclaimed that "the article of game [is] productive of more *disquiet*, *popular discontent* and *local animosity* than any other law ever established in this kingdom."

The conviction rates indicate the sharpening of this conflict. Between 1820 and 1827, nearly a quarter of those committed to prison were convicted of poaching. The Duke of Richmond told the House of Lords in 1831 that one-seventh of all criminal convictions was for violations of the Game Acts. In the southern English county of Wiltshire, more than 1,300 persons were imprisoned under the Game Laws in the fifteen years after the battle at Waterloo in 1815—more than twice the number for the previous 50 years. These numbers undoubtedly understate the conviction rates, since the Justices of the Peace who heard cases frequently neglected to record convictions. In addition, the state convicted a good number of poachers for other crimes that grew out of their poaching, such as resisting arrest-

Despite the reform of the Game Laws in 1831, the number of convictions for poaching still continued to increase dramatically. During the 1840s in some rural counties, violations of the Game Laws accounted for 30 to 40 percent of all male convictions. In addition, historians agree that the majority of convicts that Britain exiled to Australia were convicted of poaching (though social critic Robert Hughes maintains that most of the transported Australian convicts were guilty of more serious crimes). That disagreement aside, evidence supports the view that the Game Laws were used to rid the labor market of people whom the authorities deemed to be undesirable.

Economic conditions, rather than feudal history, explain the upswing in conviction rates. For example, the historians, John Lawrence Hammond and Barbara Hammond, who wrote a groundbreaking trilogy on the history of the working class in England, asserted that poaching became more intensive when unemployment was high. After the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1812, some 250,000-400,000 men were demobilized. During the war, many of their traditional jobs in the countryside were replaced with threshing machines. Just as the people's means of providing for themselves were diminishing along with the opportunity for jobs, the cost of purchasing food on the market was rising substantially. Hence, many unemployed workers poached, because they had no other option for survival.

The Game Laws and Bourgeois Hegemony

Over time, the Game Laws reflected an emerging hegemony of property relations in which the interests of capital and the gentry coincided. The gentry could enjoy the prestige of hunting, while the capitalists could profit from the labor of people who were forbidden to hunt as a means of subsistence.

The implications of the Game Laws were not lost on either the gentry or the bourgeoisie. Many privileged observers recognized that people would resist drudgery so long as they could hunt instead. As an early writer from the United States warned his readers, "once hunters, farewell to the plough." Similarly, John Bellers, the famed Quaker philanthropist of the early 18th century, remarked: "Our Forests and great Commons make the Poor that are upon them too much like the Indians being a hindrance to Industry, and are Nurseries of Idleness and Insolence." The legal theorist, William Blackstone, agreed, observing: "the only rational footing, upon which we can consider it a crime [to violate the Game Laws], is, that in low and indigent persons it promotes idleness and takes them away from their proper employments and callings." William Pitt the Younger, who was Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time, concurred.

The Game Laws also prohibited the rural poor from keeping weapons, thereby diminishing their ability to resist the onslaught on their means of subsistence. Blackstone noted, "the prevention of popular insurrection and resistance to the government, by disarming the bulk of the people; which last is a reason oftener meant, than avowed, by makers of forest or Game Laws." Later research has confirmed Blackstone's contention, finding that the level of exploitation was greatest against those who lacked access to weapons.

The British took note that in France, one of the earliest acts of the French Revolution was the repeal of this hated legislation. Remarking at the time on the depth of popular animosity against the French Game Laws, the English writer and social critic, Arthur Young, exclaimed, "One would think that every rusty gun in Provence is at work." After commenting on the speed with which the French Game Laws were

eliminated after the revolution, the English writer and politician, Horace Walpole, confided his reservations about their hasty elimination to the Countess of Ossory: “I never admired game-acts, but I do not wish to see guns in the hands of all the world, for there are other *ferae naturae* besides hares and partridges—and when all Europe is admiring and citing our constitution, I am for preserving it where it is.” Lord Milton expressed even more enthusiasm for the Game Laws in correspondence to Lord Kenyon in 1791:

The Republican party has made the Game Laws the object of their abuse and detestation; in France, the instant they began to overturn the constitution and level all distinctions, these were the first they pulled down. It therefore seems to me that they should be most respectfully guarded.

The Game Laws also seem to have stiffened the resolve of many of the common people as well. William Cobbett, the radical journalist and publisher of the *Political Register*, the main newspaper of the working class in early 19th-century England, wrote in the March 29, 1823 edition of the paper that a gentleman in Surrey asked a young man how he could live on a half crown per week:

“I don’t live upon it,” said he. “How do you live then?” “Why,” he replied, “I *poach*; it is better to be hanged than to be starved to death.”

The Destructive Nature of the Game Laws

The maintenance of the Game Laws had enormous impacts beyond the direct consequences for the poor. Animals protected by the laws ravaged the nation’s crops. Other zealously hunted animals, such as the little foxes and martens, were valuable predators that previously kept the population of rodents from exploding. In the 1840s, protected game destroyed an estimated quarter of the crops in the southern English county of Buckinghamshire. A letter to the editor of the *London Magazine* in 1757 reveals rural dwellers’ frustration:

The present scarcity is owing to an evil, felt by the industrious husbandman, who has in many places in this kingdom, seen all his care, labour, and industry sacrificed to the caprice and humors of those who have set their affections so much on game. Numberless are the places and parishes of the kingdom which have had at least one third part of their wheat crop devoured and eat[en] up by hares.

A modern student of the Game Laws observed, “Pheasants, if anything, were more destructive” [than hares].

The destruction of crops by game was disastrous. In France, for example, on the eve of the revolution, people were given the chance to register their concerns with the government. In almost every case, the people of the countryside demonstrated their exasperation at the devastation caused by game and hunters. The grievances of the English peasants were no doubt just as strong as those of the French.

To make the situation worse, hunters and their horses trampled much of what the game left growing in the fields. One notorious fox hunt carried its riders 28 miles through the British countryside. A recent study points out that ruined crops were not the only casualties of the legally sanctioned hunts:

Sportsmen, it was said, continually broke fences, beat down unharvested corn, trampled turnips, disturbed sheep “big with lamb” and generally pursued game with little concern for the damage they

caused. The quantity and volume of these complaints suggest that such conduct was common and deeply resented.

Indicative of the arrogance typical of the wealthy, the upper classes were outraged that the poor farmers did not welcome the destruction of their crops by hunters. Anthony Trollope reflected this attitude in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1865 when he described how a small farmer's attempt to protect his crop inconvenienced the hunters:

[I]n England two or three hundred men claim the right of access to every man's land during the whole period of the winter months! ... Now and then, in every hunt, some man comes up, who is indeed, more frequently a small proprietor new to the glories of ownership, than a tenant farmer who determines to vindicate his rights and oppose the field. He puts up a wire-fence round his domain...and defies the world around him. It is wonderful how great is the annoyance which one such man may give, and how thoroughly he may destroy the comfort of the coverts in his neighborhood.

Trollope rationalized the hunters' antics with this explanation:

Farmers as a rule do not think very much of their wheat. When such riding is practicable, of course they like to see men take the headlands and furrows; but their hearts are not broken by the tracks of horses across their wheat fields. I doubt, indeed, whether wheat is ever much injured by such usage.

Perhaps the owners of some large farms were not aggravated by the loss of their grains. But then the losses to a swath of destruction by the hunters would be proportionately less on large farms than on small farms, which could see their entire harvest destroyed.

Although Trollope wrote long after the controversies about the Game Laws had subsided, he reflected a mentality that had been common in earlier years. One anonymous writer voiced the futility of discussing the issue with people of this persuasion:

It is in vain to argue with a man who will maintain, that the wealth of his country, and the advancement of cultivation, is of no concern, when compared to the pleasure of fox-hunting; or, that the farmers and tenants, instead of following the plough, are much better employed when after the hounds, and while neglecting the culture of their own grounds, laying waste and ravaging the improvements of their industrious neighbours.

Only on one occasion following a bad harvest in 1795 did the British Parliament indicate any interest in the damage to crops by the hunt. In that case, early in 1796, it voted to delay the start of the partridge shooting season a mere two weeks, from the first of September to the fourteenth. But even that inconsequential remedy proved to be too much for the ruling class, and the provision was repealed the following year.

The Game Laws also throw a critical light on the role of the gentry. On the infrequent occasions when Parliament did take notice of the Game Laws during the late 18th century, the ruling strata used a curious rationale to defend them. Although hunting was deemed to be an improper diversion for the poor, members of Parliament commended hunting for the rich, since for that class, hunting was regarded as an encouragement to agricultural production. But that argument made no sense whatsoever, since running horses and hounds through the fields, trampling grain and destroying fences, could not possibly improve

agricultural production.

One explanation for such a ludicrous proposition was that the gentry were an idle lot who spent much of their time enjoying the pleasures of the city, and the opportunity to hunt seemed to be the only means of bringing the wealthy into contact with their land. In keeping with the myths that the ruling class promulgated about itself, in 1826 a leading journalist commented that the gentry, “the most useful and valuable class,” was “entitled to properly regulated ... amusement and relaxation after the performance of their public duties.” Moreover, the periodic visits to the countryside supposedly contributed to the “virtue and civilization of the English peasant,” which saved Britain from the horrors of the French Revolution.

When Parliament debated the Game Laws again in 1830, not one prominent spokesperson for political economy called for their abolition. Instead, two-time British Prime Minister Robert Peel, who at the time was British Home Secretary and the leader of the House of Commons, cautioned Parliament not to act with undue haste: “we are apt to be too sanguine in our anticipations of advantages to be derived from a particular change. Peel’s family wealth, it should be noted, had come from the employment of those who were leaving the land.

Classical Political Economy and the Game Laws

The use and enforcement of the Game Laws was strongest between 1776, the same year that Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was published, and the 1840s, a timespan often used to mark the age of classical political economy. Although political economy offered efficiency and progress as a justification for a regime dominated by the logic of property relations, the classical political economists never noticed the feudal nature of the property relations inherent in the Game Laws. Political economists of the time took great interest in all matters pertaining to the functioning of the economy. Why should classical political economy have taken note of so much of the minutiae of society, while remaining oblivious to the monstrous impact of the Game Laws?

Classical political economy, for example, devoted an enormous amount of energy to protesting the inefficiencies resulting from the Corn Laws. These laws put a sliding tariff on the import of corn, which increased during years when the harvest was large. The economists protested that the extra expense of the tariff would raise the cost of labor, which in turn would decrease surplus value. Surely the damage that the Game Laws inflicted on the harvest must at a minimum have been of the same order of significance as the economic distortions caused by the Corn Laws. Yet, consequent loss of grain from the Game Laws passed without comment from the ranks of classical political economists, whose keen vision rarely let any opportunity for increased productivity pass unnoticed.

Why didn’t the classical political economists broach the subjects of trampled grain or the crops lost to the protected wildlife? Certainly, the classical political economists had to know about the human costs of the Game Laws. Even if they were entirely ignorant of the realities of rural life, they had to know that “transportation,” or exile, was a common punishment inflicted on poachers in the early 19th century. Yet, after carefully noting the attendance and voting patterns of political economists in Parliament during that period, American economist Frank Whitson Fetter observed: “transportation was not an issue in which many political economists were concerned.”

Here was a set of laws that created substantial hardships for an enormous number of people. They allowed large numbers of workers to be incarcerated or forcefully removed from their homes. They condoned the destruction of valuable crops. Yet, these arbiters of efficiency remained silent regarding the inefficiencies of Game Laws. The only logical conclusion one can draw from their silence about the repression and destruction associated with the operation of the Game Laws is that they supported them.

Primitive Accumulation Today

Primitive accumulation is most often associated with history, but it has ongoing importance today. Classical primitive accumulation seems to have three different dimensions: First, it involves the direct expropriation of people's means of providing for themselves. Second, it purposefully forces people into wage labor. Finally, primitive accumulation intentionally manipulates the social division of labor. Though it is not likely that we will see all these conditions met very often in the contemporary economy, one ominous exception is expropriation.

After a long period when expropriation in Western democratic nations seemed to be a thing of the past, today it is on the rise. In the United States, local governments have recently begun to use the right of eminent domain to take over peoples' homes to give land to private corporations. Most blatantly, multinational corporations are taking over resources—for example, water, forests, land for mining operations, and even the ownership of food by privatizing its genetic codes—in a manner that would have made earlier primitive accumulationists proud. Their primary objective, however, is not to deprive people of their means of production but rather to grab wealth directly via privatization.

Privatization has much in common with classical primitive accumulation. We might think of public services as a form of social self-provisioning. As we have seen, a social dimension—the recognition that allowing peasants to provide some of their food needs for themselves—was undoubtedly present during the period of classical primitive accumulation. With privatization of necessities today, the imposition of markets forces families to get out to the way and succumb to the dictates of capital or put themselves at severe risk. People deprived of clean water die just as tragically as peasants shot by the game wardens of old.

Like imperialism, privatization expands the field of business. When the government rather than the public is the client, the opportunity for special favors is almost unlimited. In United States, for example, privatization is expanding in the schools, prisons, and even the military, and it may only be the beginning. The forces behind the administration of George W. Bush are promoting something they call “the ownership society.” This benign-sounding expression is a cynical cover for a plan to demolish every existing social support. The idea is that leaving individual citizens to fend for themselves puts them at the mercy of the job market in a manner reminiscent of the dispossessed peasants. Like the classical primitive accumulationists, their modern disciples are clear about the outcome. They gloat that in the ownership society people will have to work harder and save more.

Unlike the early primitive accumulationists, their modern counterparts are rabid ideologues who have no patience with moderation or the sophisticated calibration that occupied people like Sinclair. Yet the modern primitive accumulationists put on a benevolent face, pretending that privatization will serve the

interests of ordinary people: According to the market mantra, only business is capable of providing efficiency and modern technology.

When economic historians look back at the history of primitive accumulation, they see a part of the larger process of the Industrial Revolution, which, overall, represented an enormous material advance. While early capitalism was brutal, it still furthered society's potential for creating a better life. This new variant of primitive accumulation offers nothing more than a callous redistribution of wealth and income without any promise of compensating technological advances that will benefit society as a whole.

One of the great lessons of *Capital* is to show how under capitalism responsibility becomes diffused. Unlike primitive accumulation, where a vicious feudal lord may bear individual responsibility, the capitalist is, in Marx's wonderful expression, merely the "character mask of capital." The capitalist has little choice but to compete aggressively or cease functioning as a capitalist. The results can be equally brutal, but the fault lies with the system, not the individual. In order to minimize the danger of analyzing the world in terms of justice or unfairness, Marx left the discussion of primitive accumulation for the final section of Volume 1.

But putting aside the apparent unfairness of individual capitalists, capitalism gives the appearance that the system is somehow objective, especially within the context of classical political economy. Marx, however, insisted that we pierce the misleading facade of objectivity in recognizing the exploitation of wage labor, and—more importantly—how capitalism puts limits on the ability of people to fulfill their potential. Like the capitalist system, privatization calls for clear political analysis. We can gain insight into current practices of primitive accumulation by looking back at how the ruling classes employed it historically.