

Capitalism and Robbery

The Expropriation of Land, Labor, and Corporeal Life

John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Hannah Holleman

The expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil constitutes the basis of the capitalist mode of production. —Karl Marx¹

The power of abstraction, Karl Marx noted, is absolutely crucial to the theoretical analysis of historical systems, as exemplified by his critique of capitalist political economy.² But while the force of abstraction is indispensable to any attempt to grasp the inner character of capital, also implicit in Marx's historical materialism is the notion that capitalism can never be reduced simply to its internal logic.³ Rather, it is also the product of numerous contingent historical conditions that form the empirical boundaries and limits within which the system operates and are integral to its functioning. Thus, historical capitalism cannot be understood aside from its existence as a colonial/imperialist world system in which the violent exercise of power is an ever-present reality. In order to uncover the material conditions governing concrete capitalism, including its interface with land, non-wage labor, and corporeal life, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the inner reality of exploitation, and address expropriation, or the process of appropriation without equivalent (or without reciprocity) through which capital has sought to determine its wider parameters.



Daytime in Indian Creek, the Sixshooter Peaks in Bears Ears National Monument. By US Bureau of Land Management - Tumblr, Public Domain, [Link](#).

¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 934.

² ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 90.

³ ↪ This issue is perhaps best taken up in Kozo Uno, *Principles of Political Economy: Theory of a Purely Capitalist Society* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

The concept of expropriation is commonly seen on the left as a mere synonym for the notion of primary accumulation—a category derived from classical liberal political economy that Marx subjected to ruthless critique.⁴ In fact, even in those instances where he referred to “so-called primitive [primary] accumulation”—taking this concept directly from Adam Smith, who had introduced the notion of previous accumulation (or previous stock)—Marx immediately sought to transform this into the altogether different question of expropriation, seeing this as constituting the essential precondition of capitalism, as well as its continuous reality.⁵

The preconditions of capitalism, Marx explained, were to be found in a brutal system of robbery, manifested in the form of enclosures, the usurpation of the land, the dispossession of the peasantry, and the pillage of the colonised world—giving rise to proletarianisation, genocide, and slavery.

For Marx, the expropriation on which capitalism was based had nothing to do with “so-called” previous accumulation, or the “nursery tale,” propounded by classical political economy, that the capitalist system had its origin in abstinence and the consequent buildup of savings.⁶ Indeed, Marx, as Marxian political economist Michael Perelman writes, adamantly “dismissed Smith’s mythical ‘previous’ accumulation, in order to call attention to the actual historical experience,” characterised by rampant expropriation.⁷ The preconditions of capitalism, Marx explained, were to be found in a brutal system of robbery, manifested in the form of enclosures, the usurpation of the land, the dispossession of the peasantry, and the pillage of the colonised world—giving rise to proletarianisation, genocide, and slavery. All of this involved the transfer of claims to existing property/wealth, along with the wholesale expropriation of populations, who were subjected to some of the worst forms of forcible oppression, removing them from the land and ownership of the means of reproduction, and transforming them into proletarians who had no way to live except by selling their labor power. This extended as well to capitalism’s expropriation of the soil itself. Such violent expropriation, characterising the entire mercantilist era, was not merely a predatory precursor to capitalism proper—as thinkers like Max Weber and

⁴ ↪ The term *primitive* in Marx’s reference to “so-called primitive [primary] accumulation” was a mistranslation from German into English. Marx was referring to *original* or *primary* accumulation, as this was understood in British political economy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through a process of translation into German and then translation from the German back into English, the term *original*, *previous*, or *primary* was rendered incorrectly into *primitive*. Moreover, Marx himself explicitly referred to “so-called primitive [primary] accumulation” of classical political economy—with the “so-called” here signaling his recognition that what was involved in reality was expropriation, and not accumulation (capital formation) at all—a crucial point of his whole analysis. These theoretical subtleties have been lost in most later analyses, though recognized by as important a Marxian economist as Maurice Dobb. See Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 178.

Ironically, Marx has been frequently criticized in English language literature for use of the term *primitive*, in this respect, and for denying that these relations existed throughout the history of capitalism—criticisms that are completely at odds with his own analysis, as opposed to bourgeois political economy. David Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession” introduced in his book *The New Imperialism*, was therefore intended to get around this criticism by providing a substitute for the notion of “primitive accumulation,” so as to avoid this common criticism that “primitive accumulation,” for Marx, related only to the early modern era in Europe in the Americas. But since Marx himself in his critique had indicated his objection to the notion of original or primary accumulation, and was concerned rather with the primary *expropriation* that made industrial capitalism possible—and since there is no difficulty in seeing this as related to expropriation more generally—far less confusion is generated, we believe, by utilizing Marx’s own historically concrete and theoretically incisive terminology, focusing on expropriation. This is especially the case insofar as Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession” (like the term *primitive accumulation* itself) confuses dispossession or expropriation with actual accumulation, while for Marx they were separate categories—so much so that capitalism’s confusion of primary expropriation with primary accumulation was for him the subject of his critique in this part of *Capital*. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137–82.

⁵ ↪ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 260; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 873–75; Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret of Primitive Accumulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 26. On the fact that Marx’s “so-called primitive accumulation” was a continuous reality of capitalism for Marx, requiring that the preconditions of the system be constantly remade through renewed expropriation or separation of workers from the means of production, see Massimo De Angelis, “Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital’s ‘Enclosures,’” *The Commoner* 2 (2001): 1–22. The version used for this article was available on ResearchGate.

⁶ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 874. Marx explicitly criticized such views as constituting “the abstinence theory.” See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 298–99. The essence of “so-called primitive accumulation” for Marx was expropriation. It was, as Dobb says, not accumulation proper, but “an accumulation of capital claims” related to the “ownership of assets,” and thus a “transfer of ownership,” and did not involve capital formation or an increase in “the quantity of tangible instruments of production in existence.” See Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, 178

⁷ ↪ Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism*, 26.

Joseph Schumpeter asserted in the twentieth century—but was integral to historical capitalism and colonialism, determining the very boundaries of the system, and carried forward into the modern era.⁸

Thus “expropriation of the masses of the people from the soil,” the dispossession of indigenous populations, and the pillage of the Americas, Africa, and Asia by colonial conquest set the stage for the rise of industrial capitalism and the new system of accumulation.⁹ It was this, Marx stressed, not previous accumulation based on abstinence, that led to “the genesis of the industrial capitalist.”¹⁰ “Expropriation” constituted “the starting point of the capitalist mode of production.”¹¹ Such ruthless expropriation did not end with the mercantilist era. Rather, the bloody usurpations of land, labor, and corporeal life on a world scale has continued to form the boundary conditions of capitalism up to the present day.

Although Marx’s key concepts of exploitation and expropriation necessarily overlapped to some extent, they were nonetheless analytically distinct, forming an identity-in-difference and at the same time difference-in-identity, or a

“there can be no [real historical] separation between exploitation and expropriation.” While the former allows us to understand the specificities of the appropriation of unpaid labor from workers in the production process, the latter brings to the fore “racism, patriarchy, environmental catastrophe,” and imperialism.

dialectical relation. Exploitation related primarily to the appropriation of surplus value through a formal process of equal exchange in which surplus value was extracted from the direct producers. Conversely, expropriation was directed at those conditions where a quid pro quo did not operate, even formally, and where outright robbery or “profit upon expropriation” occurred.¹² In late capitalism and late imperialism, equal exchange is increasingly a veil concealing

a robbery system—with widening spheres of unequal exchange. This system of robbery, implemented by monopolistic multinational corporations, encompasses natural conditions of production and life itself.

As Michael D. Yates argues in *Can the Working Class Change the World?*, “there can be no [real historical] separation between exploitation and expropriation.” While the former allows us to understand the specificities of the appropriation of unpaid labor from workers in the production process, the latter brings to the fore “racism, patriarchy, environmental catastrophe,” and imperialism.¹³ Hence, Marx’s concept of expropriation, seen in a complex dialectical and historical relation to exploitation, is the key to understanding the multiple oppressions that constitute capitalism as a historical system and its overall relation to its material environment.

The concept of expropriation in Marx’s analysis had its locus classicus in his critique of James Stewart’s eighteenth-century treatment of profit upon expropriation (as opposed to profit upon accumulation), which was to influence his two

⁸ ↪ Max Weber, *General Economic History* (New York: Collier, 1961), 221–24; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1951). On Marx’s argument that such expropriation of laborers and the land was an ongoing reality of capitalism, see Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism*, 28–32.

⁹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 873, 934.

¹⁰ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 914–15.

¹¹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 571.

¹² ↪ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 11, 14.

¹³ ↪ Michael D. Yates, *Can the Working Class Change the World?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018), 55–56; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Expropriation of Nature,” *Monthly Review* 69, no. 10 (2018): 1–27.

major discussions of primary expropriation in the Grundrisse and Capital. For Marx, expropriation was appropriation without equivalent or appropriation without reciprocity.¹⁴

Although there is a vast literature on the concept of primitive accumulation, the term primitive was a mistranslation, as Marx was referring to what in classical political economy was designated as previous or primary accumulation.¹⁵ Moreover, Marx treated the phrase pejoratively, entitling his discussion “So-Called Primitive [Primary] Accumulation,” and indicating in a number of places his disdain for the term, which in classical political economy had been designed to justify the current order.¹⁶

For Marx, the inner logic of capital was explained as a product of exploitation in a theoretical context that specified equal exchange. Yet, he never failed to stress that the background conditions of the system, along with its external development and expansion, were governed by force and fraud.¹⁷ This aspect of his critique was meant to be taken up systematically later on as he moved from the abstract to the concrete, from the pure logic of capital to the ground of the world economy and crisis (that is, imperialism).¹⁸ An underlying perception of the role of expropriation in determining the historical boundaries of capitalism informed his and Frederick Engels’s discussions of slavery, patriarchy, and the metabolic rift, or the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself.”¹⁹

A renewed focus on expropriation is therefore essential today if we want to understand the historical relation between

In the ruling liberal ideology, such expropriation, whether in the form of slavery, war, genocide, unequal exchange, or the exercise of monopoly power, is treated as either an accident unrelated to the capitalist system or as an inevitable product of human nature raised to the level of society as a whole.

the accumulative society/processes associated with exchange value, and capital’s continuing robbery of various non-accumulative societies/processes related to use value.²⁰ The issue here becomes not simply one of the exploitation of labor, but the expropriation of household economies (and household/subsistence labor), corporeal life, the periphery, and the planetary environment. Historically, appropriation without equivalent is the most common form of class-hierarchical relations, manifested in complex ways in various tributary modes of production.²¹ However, serving to distinguish capitalist society historically

¹⁴ ↪ On expropriation defined as appropriation without equivalent or without reciprocity, as conceived in the work of Marx and Karl Polanyi, see Foster and Clark, “The Expropriation of Nature,” 3–11. Marx often used the term *appropriation without exchange*, by which he meant *appropriation without equivalent* (a term also employed by him), as all exchange was by definition equal, otherwise it was a form of robbery. Today, however, we sometimes refer to *unequal exchange*, understanding this as a form of expropriation.

¹⁵ ↪ Marx had translated Adam Smith’s “previous” as *ursprünglich* (original), which was then translated back into English by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling as “primitive,” forgetting that the German was simply a rendering of an English term. Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism*, 25. Marx wrote that “it may be called primitive accumulation [*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*], because it is the historical basis, instead of the historical result, of specifically capitalist production”—however, he later explained that such “so-called primitive accumulation” was in fact (primary) expropriation rather than accumulation proper. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 775.

¹⁶ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 871, 873, 939.

¹⁷ ↪ Commenting on Benjamin Franklin’s statement that “war is robbery, commerce is cheating,” Marx, insisted that this of course could not be taken literally to mean all was fraud and robbery; rather even under mercantilism the “intermediate steps” in commodity production had to be taken into account and a wider theory of *profit upon expropriation* had to be developed. Nevertheless, the distinction between mercantilism and the era of free competition based on exploitation within the context of equal exchange was vital to the understanding of capitalism’s industrial take-off. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 267.

¹⁸ ↪ Ernest Mandel, introduction to *Capital*, vol. 1, by Marx, 27–28.

¹⁹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 949.

²⁰ ↪ On accumulative versus nonaccumulative societies/processes and the relation of this to exchange value versus use value, see Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, one-volume ed. (London: Verso, 2014), 609–33; Henri Lefebvre, *Toward Architecture of Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 128–35.

²¹ ↪ Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

from its precapitalist precursors, in this respect, is the greater systematisation and scale assumed by profits upon expropriation, beginning with the mercantilist period, but extending into all the later stages of capitalist development.

In the ruling liberal ideology, such expropriation, whether in the form of slavery, war, genocide, unequal exchange, or the exercise of monopoly power, is treated as either an accident unrelated to the capitalist system or as an inevitable product of human nature raised to the level of society as a whole. Violence and robbery, despite their pervasiveness in global capitalism, are thus commonly portrayed as disconnected from the inner nature and logic of the economic system rooted in quid pro quo. Nevertheless, the sordid history of capitalism is hard to pass off as a series of accidents or anomalies. The last five centuries involve a dismal chronology of colonialism/imperialism, racial capitalism, wars of aggression, and patriarchal expropriation of household labor. These particular social ills of capitalism are accompanied by the systematic violation of what the great German chemist Justus von Liebig called the “law of compensation,” or the need to replenish the constituent elements taken from the earth.²²

While Marx devoted the greater part of his critique of political economy to analysing capital’s inner dynamic of exploitation, the wider reality of expropriation was thus never far from his mind, and it was revealed in the margins of his analysis. It was clearly slated to be taken up more fully in his planned volumes on landed property, wage labor, the state, international trade and the world market, and crises—all of which represented successively more concrete levels of analysis. In Marx’s view, colonisation was never simply about the expropriation of the land, but also encompassed the “extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population.”²³ It was this recognition of the role of expropriation of the land and people that accounts for much of the extraordinary richness and power of Marx and Engels’s historical observations. The revolution against capital necessitated “the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people,” or, in other words, the expropriation of the expropriators.²⁴

Crucial investigations into the role expropriation played within Marx’s critique of capitalism and the application of this to the historical analysis of capitalist development have emerged recently in a number of places, including: social reproduction theory (for example, the work of Nancy Fraser), analyses of racial capitalism (as in the writings of Michael Dawson and Sven Beckert), and Marxian ecological theory (particularly treatments of Marx’s theory of metabolic rift).²⁵ Glen Sean Coulthard has argued in *Red Skin White Masks* that examination of the violent expropriation of indigenous peoples requires that we see “dispossession as a co-foundational feature of our understanding of and critical engagement with capitalism, open[ing] up the possibility of developing a more ecologically attentive critique of colonial capitalist accumulation.”²⁶

²² ↪ Justus von Liebig, *Letters on Modern Agriculture* (London: Walton and Maberly, 1859), 179, 254–55; Justus von Liebig, *The Natural Laws of Husbandry* (New York: Appleton, 1863), 233.

²³ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 915.

²⁴ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 930.

²⁵ ↪ Nancy Fraser, “Roepke Lecture in Economic Geography—From Exploitation to Expropriation: Historic Geographies of Racialized Capitalism,” *Economic Geography* 94, no. 1 (2018): 10; Michael C. Dawson, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 149; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton* (New York: Vintage, 2014), xviii, 37–39; Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland: PM, 2014), 73; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Robbery of Nature: Capitalism and the Metabolic Rift,” *Monthly Review* 70, no. 3 (July–August 2018): 1–20.

²⁶ ↪ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 14.

Our analysis, in what follows, is designed to illustrate the crucial importance of the theoretical insights stemming from activation of Marx's concept of expropriation. We focus on three historical moments of massive expropriation of people

If Marx famously said that the main (internal) barrier to capital was capital itself, he also indicated that capital's main external limit was its refusal to accept any limits whatsoever, turning all boundaries into barriers to be transgressed by the capitalist juggernaut.

and the earth: Moment I: The Industrialisation of Agriculture and the Metabolic Rift; Moment II: Dust Bowls of Empire; and Moment III: Imperialism in the Anthropocene. The intention here is obviously not to provide a detailed, much less comprehensive, analysis of any of these critical phases of development, but rather to highlight in each case how a historical-materialist method encompassing expropriation as

well as exploitation can help capture the various contradictions and conflicts of capitalism within a wider lens.²⁷ If Marx famously said that the main (internal) barrier to capital was capital itself, he also indicated that capital's main external limit was its refusal to accept any limits whatsoever, turning all boundaries into barriers to be transgressed by the capitalist juggernaut. Faced with capitalism's destruction of the Irish ecology in the nineteenth century, he raised the question of "ruin or revolution"—a question even more relevant in the twenty-first century in the context of capitalism's disruption of the entire Earth System.²⁸

Moment I: The Industrialisation of Agriculture and the Metabolic Rift

The industrialisation of agriculture in the nineteenth century rested upon the long historical emergence of capitalism as a distinct socioeconomic order. As Beckert details in the Empire of Cotton, "imperial expansion, expropriation, and slavery" were critical to its formation.²⁹ Throughout the age of mercantilism, from the mid-fifteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries—a period Beckert refers to as "war capitalism"—earlier property forms and productive relations were dissolved via the enclosure of the commons and imperialism, formally transferring title of land to the bourgeois class. The racialised characteristics of capitalism were embedded from the start as Africa, Asia, and the Americas were colonised while genocidal campaigns were waged against indigenous peoples and Africans were enslaved to work on plantations.³⁰ These conditions contributed to the massive transfer of wealth to England and other European nations. Marx explained that this process of primary expropriation was pivotal to the English Industrial Revolution.³¹ Cotton was associated with the robbery of nature and non-waged labor, as well as the exploitation of waged labor, providing the cheap materials essential to the rising textile factories, where industrial labourers subsisted on imported potatoes from the increasingly exhausted fields of Ireland.

The First Agricultural Revolution in the capitalist age coincided with the enclosures, from the late fifteenth to early

all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil.

nineteenth centuries, and the formal transfer of land titles. Peasants and small land holders were driven from the land, pauperised, proletarianised, and forced to sell their labor power for wages to purchase the means of subsistence. These changes ushered in a

heightened alienation from nature, a more distinct town-country division, and specialised food and fibre production. The

²⁷ ↪ David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 228–32.

²⁸ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 358; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 409–10; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question* (Moscow: Progress, 1971), 142.

²⁹ ↪ Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 32–39.

³⁰ ↪ Dawson, "Hidden in Plain Sight," 149; Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2014); Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 914–36.

³¹ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Colonialism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages, no date).

Second Agricultural Revolution, from 1830 to 1880, was characterised by the development of soil chemistry, the growth of the fertiliser trade and industry, the increase in the scale and intensity of agricultural production, and “land” improvements, such as imposing uniformity across fields, making them easier to apply modern technologies. Additionally, intensified agricultural production required massive fertiliser inputs in order to enrich the soil.³² In numerous ways, this period is the embodiment of appropriation without equivalent and without reciprocity.

Liebig played a pioneering role in studying the changing soil chemistry in relation to the advancing capitalist industrial agriculture. He noted that the production of crops depended on the soil containing essential nutrients—such as, but not limited to, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. He explained that a rational system of agriculture must be governed by the “law of compensation” or the law of replacement.³³ The nutrients that are absorbed by plants as they grow must be restored to the soil to support future crops. But this was far from the case in Western Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. Liebig noted that the British high-farming techniques constituted a “robbery system,” leading to the despoliation of the soil.³⁴ Marx, who studied Liebig’s work, detailed how the application of industrial practices to increase yields and the transportation of food and fibre to distant markets in cities were generating a rift in the soil nutrient cycle. In *Capital*, he famously observed that capitalist agriculture progressively “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth,” preventing the “return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil.” As a result, “all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.”³⁵

Marx thus presented a systematic analysis of how industrialised agriculture robbed the land of necessary nutrients. But

Former slavers used coercion, deceit, kidnapping, and questionable contracts to set up this new racialised regime of bonded labor, which supplied workers for colonies and former colonies throughout the world. Over ninety thousand Chinese workers were shipped to Peru during the heyday of the guano trade.

he also recognised and provided the basis for assessing the interlocking oppressions and processes of expropriation that accompanied this soil crisis. As the nutrients from the countryside accumulated as waste in the cities or were washed away to sea as part of urban refuse, a variety of means were sought to replenish the land.³⁶ In particular, between 1840 and 1880, an international fertiliser trade was established, which involved shipping millions of tons of

guano and nitrates from Peru and Chile to the Global North. The mining of guano was largely rooted in expropriation of land, labor, and corporeal life, all of which were necessary to make this fertiliser so profitable. Initially male convicts and slaves worked as forced labor on the guano islands, using picks, shovels, wheelbarrows, and sacks. As the availability of slaves declined, Chinese workers were imported as part of the “coolie” labor system.³⁷

³² ↪ M. L. Thompson, “The Second Agricultural Revolution, 1815–1880,” *Economic History Review* 21, no. 1 (1968): 62–77. We have narrowed the time frame of the second agricultural revolution, which captures the specific transformations listed, especially those associated with soil chemistry.

³³ ↪ Liebig, *Letters on Modern Agriculture*, 179, 254–55; Liebig, *The Natural Laws of Husbandry*, 233.

³⁴ ↪ Justus von Liebig, “1862 Preface to *Agricultural Chemistry*,” *Monthly Review* 70, no. 3 (July–August 2018): 146–50.

³⁵ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 637–38.

³⁶ ↪ Ian Angus, “[Cesspools, Sewage, and Social Murder: Ecological Crisis and Metabolic Rift in Nineteenth-Century London](#),” *Monthly Review* 70, no. 3 (July–August 2018): 33–69; Brett Clark and Stefano B. Longo, “[Land-Sea Ecological Rifts: A Metabolic Analysis of Nutrient Loading](#),” *Monthly Review* 70, no. 3 (July–August 2018): 106–121.

³⁷ ↪ Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, “[Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift](#),” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 3–4 (2009): 311–34; Brett Clark, Daniel Auerbach, and Karen Xuan Zhang, “[The Du Bois Nexus: Intersectionality, Political Economy, and Environmental Injustice in the Peruvian Guano Trade in the 1800s](#),” *Environmental Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2018): 54–66.

Former slavers used coercion, deceit, kidnapping, and questionable contracts to set up this new racialised regime of bonded labor, which supplied workers for colonies and former colonies throughout the world. Over ninety thousand Chinese workers were shipped to Peru during the heyday of the guano trade—approximately 10 percent died in passage due mainly to poor treatment and malnourishment. The most unfortunate unfree labourers were sent to the guano islands, where the total workforce fluctuated between two hundred to eight hundred workers at any given moment, but where lives were used up rapidly—considered of less value than the guano that they dug up.³⁸ Only men were sent to these islands, where over “one hundred armed soldiers” kept guard, preventing workers from committing suicide by

Here we see how expropriation works at the boundaries of the capitalist system. Guano, which had been used for thousands of years to enrich the fields of Peru, was quickly being exhausted to replenish the fields of the Global North. The sea birds that deposited hundreds of feet of guano on the islands were often killed, as they were deemed a nuisance to extractive operations.

running into the ocean.³⁹ Marx described this “coolie” system as a form of “disguised slavery.”⁴⁰ Eye-witness accounts noted that these Chinese workers were treated as expendable, regularly flogged and whipped if they did not fulfil the demanding work expectations. They laboured in the hot sun, filling sacks and wheelbarrows with guano, which they then transported to a chute that loaded the boats. Guano dust coated their bodies and filled their lungs. The smell was overwhelming. One account

described the conditions as “the infernal art of using up human life to the very last inch,” as the lives of the workers were very short.⁴¹ Several British shipmasters were “horrified at the cruelties...inflicted on the Chinese, whose dead bodies they described as floating round the islands.”⁴²

Here we see how expropriation works at the boundaries of the capitalist system. Guano, which had been used for thousands of years to enrich the fields of Peru, was quickly being exhausted to replenish the fields of the Global North. The sea birds that deposited hundreds of feet of guano on the islands were often killed, as they were deemed a nuisance to extractive operations. Guano was being removed at a much faster rate than it accumulated. The new racialised labor system that was imposed was largely predicated on brutally expropriated bonded labor, enhancing accumulation at the core of the system. The conditions resulted in a corporeal rift, which undermined living conditions, leading to poor health and an early death for many of the workers, who were simply replaced by other imported labourers. All of this, moreover, was meant to make possible a continuation of a robbery system where the soil in Europe and North America was being systematically robbed of its nutrients.

These conditions of expropriation were a central component of supporting the Second Agricultural Revolution accompanying the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution, in which cotton was so integral, had been based on the triangular slave trade. It was after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which formally abolished slavery within most British colonies, that the British turned to the “coolies” from Asia, a disguised form of slavery as a way of replacing open slavery, with new forms of bonded labor. Guano, in this sense, was part of a second triangular trade, geared to the

³⁸ ↪ Charles Wingfield, *The China Coolie Traffic from Macao to Peru and Cuba* (London: British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1873), 3–5; Michael J. Gonzales, “Chinese Plantation Workers and Social Conflict in Peru in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21 (1955): 385–424; Peter Blanchard, “The ‘Transitional Man’ in Nineteenth-Century Latin America,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 15, no. 2 (1996): 157–76; Stephen M. Gorman, “The State, Elite, and Export in Nineteenth Century Peru,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 21, no. 3 (1979): 395–418; Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Coolies, Shopkeepers, Pioneers,” *Amerasia Journal* 15, no. 2 (1989): 91–116; Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Huagong and Huashang,” *Amerasia Journal* 28, no. 2 (2002): 64–90; Gregory T. Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55.

³⁹ ↪ Alanson Nash, “Peruvian Guano,” *Plough, the Loom and the Anvil* 10, no. 2 (1857): 73.

⁴⁰ ↪ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 112.

⁴¹ ↪ “Chinese Coolie Trade,” *Christian Review* (1862); George W. Peck, *Melbourne and the Chincha Islands* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1854), 207; Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994).

⁴² ↪ Wingfield, *The China Coolie Traffic*, 5.

industrialisation of agriculture, British high farming, and the need to restore the impoverished soil by means of an imperial system, involving the worst extremes of labor exploitation and the expropriation of corporeal life.

In the nineteenth century, women were at the centre of the Industrial Revolution, constituting the majority of the core industrial workforce in England, especially in the cotton, silk, wool, and lace sectors of textile production.⁴³ Marx took

Women in this period were super-exploited, producing a large share of surplus value in factories, while at the same time they were compelled to produce use values, which served as a free gift to capital, through their work in the home in the process of reproducing labor. Under these conditions, which threatened the very existence, and they could scarcely maintain their own existence.

detailed notes regarding their positions within the workforce and the conditions under which they laboured. Along with Engels, he documented the specific types of hazards that these women were exposed to, which created an array of health problems that shortened their lives, such as respiratory issues from inhaling fibres. Both working-class men and women experienced forms of corporeal degradation associated with their working conditions, but the specifics varied according to the types of work in which

they were concentrated.⁴⁴ Additionally, women received much lower wages than men and had a disproportionate responsibility for social reproductive work to support whole families, to the extent that this additional activity was possible, given the long working hours.⁴⁵

Women in this period were super-exploited in the industrial workforce, producing a large share of surplus value in factories, while at the same time they were compelled to produce use values, which served as a free gift to capital, through their work in the home in the process of reproducing labor.⁴⁶ Under these conditions, which threatened the very existence of the working-class family, women, though responsible for the social reproduction of the family and the labor force, could scarcely maintain their own existence. The double day was not a creation of late capitalism, but rather was present at the very birth of industrial capitalism—at a time when the working day (including the time necessary to get to and from work) for women was often twelve hours or longer, six days a week.

For the working classes, wage exploitation was also in a sense nutritional exploitation, as wages were mainly expended

the working class subsisted on poor-quality and inadequate diets, consisting largely of bread and very few vegetables. To make matters worse, the food, drink, and medicine that was available was adulterated, containing a vast array of contaminants, such as mercury, chalk, sand, feces, and strychnine.

on the most basic foods necessary for survival. Intensive agricultural production in England, which was supported by imported fertiliser, contributed to the creation of a new international food regime after the Irish potato famine and the end of the Corn Laws in 1845–46. What Marx himself called the new food regime involved a shift toward more of a meat-based system, in which additional land was being devoted to animal production, geared to serving the upper classes.⁴⁷ In contrast, as

Marx and Engels detailed, the working class subsisted on poor-quality and inadequate diets, consisting largely of bread

⁴³ ↪ Maxine Berg, “What Difference Did Women’s Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?,” *History Workshop* 35 (1993): 29; Maxine Berg, “Women’s Work and the Industrial Revolution,” *ReFresh* 12 (1991): 3; Joyce Burnette, “Women Workers in the British Industrial Revolution,” *Economic History Association*, March 26, 2008, available at <http://eh.net>.

⁴⁴ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 364–66, 574–75, 595–99, 796–97.

⁴⁵ ↪ Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto, 2017); Martha Gimenez, “Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited,” *Science and Society* 69, no. 1 (2005): 11–32; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Women, Nature, and Capital in the Industrial Revolution,” *Monthly Review* 69, no. 8 (January 2018): 1–24.

⁴⁶ ↪ Berg, “What Difference Did Women’s Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?”; Berg, “Women’s Work and the Industrial Revolution.”

⁴⁷ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “Marx as a Food Theorist,” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 7 (December 2016): 12–14.

and very few vegetables.⁴⁸ To make matters worse, the food, drink, and medicine that was available was adulterated, containing a vast array of contaminants, such as mercury, chalk, sand, feces, and strychnine. Regular consumption of these materials contributed to various health ailments, chronic gastritis, and death. Women tended to be the most malnourished, as they consumed less food and ate last within families. Conditions were worse in England's colony of Ireland, which was forced to export its soil (nutrients) and its capital to England.⁴⁹

The industrialisation of agriculture was intimately connected to the transgression of natural limits, given the interlocking

The Iroquois Confederacy, so admired by Marx and Engels, was swept aside. Almost all of their land was expropriated and they were forced onto a few small reserves. Washington termed the Indians "beasts of prey" and ordered his troops to invade the Iroquois villages, killing men, women, and children, and destroying their crops in a war of absolute extermination.

expropriation of land, labor, and corporeal life that shaped the social metabolism and that constantly expanded capitalism's intensive creative destruction. The new system required the exponential growth of external inputs from the environment. Metabolic rifts, the imperial draining of wealth from the Global South, and a system of exploitation that had expropriation as its background condition defined the

rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century.

The Moment II: Dust Bowls of Empire

The age of "so-called primitive accumulation" or primary expropriation was the era of early colonialism, including the development of white settler colonialism, of which the United States was a prime example. The United States was seen

As Marx emphasised, plantation slavery with its mono-crops and brutalised slave labor was ecologically inefficient (however successful it was in terms of capital accumulation).

from the beginning, in the words of George Washington, as a "rising empire." The American Revolution was induced in part by the British Proclamation of 1763, which limited the movement of settlers into the Ohio Valley to the West. With the victory of the thirteen colonies, the land in the Ohio

Valley was opened to land speculators and settlers. The Iroquois Confederacy, so admired by Marx and Engels, was swept aside in around a dozen years. Almost all of their land was expropriated and they were forced onto a few small reserves. Washington termed the Indians "beasts of prey" and ordered his troops during the American Revolution to invade the Iroquois villages, killing men, women, and children, and destroying their crops in a war of absolute extermination.⁵⁰

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the demand for U.S. cotton boomed to feed the textile industries of England, giving new life to the slave system. As Marx emphasised, plantation slavery with its mono-crops and brutalised slave labor was ecologically inefficient (however successful it was in terms of capital accumulation). It rapidly exhausted the soil, generating a westward movement as plantation owners sought to bring virgin land into cultivation.⁵¹ Agriculture

⁴⁸ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 750, 809–11; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 370; Foster, "Marx as a Food Theorist."

⁴⁹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 860. See also Eamonn Slater, "Marx on Colonial Ireland," *History of Political Thought* 39, no. 4 (2018): 719–48; Eamonn Slater, "Marx on the Colonization of Irish Soil," Maynooth University Social Science Institute Working Paper Series no. 3, January 2018.

⁵⁰ ↪ Richard Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (1960; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 1–27, 69, 78; John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 46–49. On Engels and the Iroquois, see Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Moscow: Progress, 1948), 88–93.

⁵¹ ↪ See Foster and Clark, "The Expropriation of Nature," 15–16; Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 114–15; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 89; Daniel D. Richter Jr. and Daniel Markewitz, *Understanding Soil Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43–48..

in New England was only marginally less destructive to the soil and forests, pushing populations and capital ever further to the West, while much of the grain produced (following the abolition of the Corn Laws in Britain in 1846) was being exported to England in a global environmental rift.⁵² In his excerpts from agricultural chemist J. W. Johnston's Notes on North America, Marx emphasised the former's observation with respect to "the common system...of North America of selling everything for which a market can be got [hay, corn, potatoes, etc.]; and taking no trouble to put anything into the soil in return."⁵³

The building of railroads, the Industrial Revolution in the United States in the 1830s and '40s, and the opening up of the far West (partly through the seizure of lands from Mexico), all went hand in hand with a process of genocide and

"everything that stands in the way of capitalistic culture is being crushed." The subjection of the land along with the indigenous population pointed to the socioecological catastrophe that was to ensue.

displacement of Native Americans, while coupling ecological destruction with capitalist development. In 1890, the Bureau of Census declared the frontier closed (while the Indian Wars were declared over with the massacre at Wounded Knee that same year), after which figures such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt argued for the extension of the U.S. frontier abroad,

leading to the Spanish-American War.⁵⁴ The coming of monopoly capitalism and the age of the giant corporation only expanded the realm of expropriation of people and nature into entirely new spheres.

In visiting Indian Territory in Oklahoma at the very beginning of the twentieth century, where the extractive petroleum industry was booming next door to expropriative farming practices, Weber documented some of the destruction wrought on the earth and the indigenous populations. "With almost lightning speed," he observed, "everything that stands in the way of capitalistic culture is being crushed."⁵⁵ The subjection of the land along with the indigenous population pointed to the socioecological catastrophe that was to ensue.

The Dust Bowl in the 1930s is known as the drought of record in the United States, in many ways symbolising ecological crisis in the twentieth century. As environmental historian Donald Worster wrote in the 1970s: "In no other instance was

Today, similar conditions are emerging on a more planetary level, with the result that the Dust Bowl is becoming a prominent historical referent of the climate change era.

there greater or more sustained damage to American land, and there have been few times when so much tragedy was visited on its inhabitants. Not even the depression was more damaging, economically. And in ecological terms we have nothing in the nation's past...that compares."⁵⁶ Almost everyone has heard of the Dust Bowl and can picture the billowing dust storms on the Great Plains and the mass migration of the Okies. Millions of

acres were affected and some counties in the heart of the region lost a third of their population, while in Oklahoma almost a third of the farmers were dislodged from their farms.⁵⁷ The plight of the Dust Bowl region became emblematic of the enormous hardship associated with the Great Depression and rapacious capitalism.

The Dust Bowl Era, despite its vast impact, remains in some contemporary accounts a localised, unforeseeable, and even purely natural disaster—one that occurred at a particular time and that is unlikely to ever happen again, as it was simply

⁵² ↪ Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 186–88, 196–97.

⁵³ ↪ Karl Marx, "J. W. Johnston. Notes on North America," in *Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2019), 311.

⁵⁴ ↪ Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet*, 70–72.

⁵⁵ ↪ See John Bellamy Foster and Hannah Holleman, "Max Weber and the Environment," *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 6 (2012): 1653–55.

⁵⁶ ↪ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

⁵⁷ ↪ Hannah Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 113.

an event irrevocably of the past. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The Dust Bowl was the social-historical product of expanding capitalism, empire, and white settler colonialism, all of which contributed to the destruction of land cover and soil erosion. It arose out of the expropriation of indigenous lands, the indigenous peoples themselves, and the fertile soils. Every aspect of the Dust Bowl Era was connected to imperial advance. It was international in nature—the result of a widespread rift in the metabolism between human beings and nature, brought on by capitalist production and culminating in the age of monopoly capital. Today, similar conditions are emerging on a more planetary level, with the result that the Dust Bowl is becoming a prominent historical referent of the climate change era.

To get a concrete sense of the historical underpinnings of the Dust Bowl, it is useful to turn to Thorstein Veblen, whom C. Wright Mills called “the best critic of America that America has produced.”⁵⁸ For Veblen, writing in 1923 in *Absentee*

“the American plan or policy [as implemented on the frontier],” Veblen wrote, was “a settled practice of converting all public wealth to private gain on a plan of legalised seizure.”

Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times, the United States was built on “the seizure of the fertile soil and its conversion to private gain.” There was no question whom it had been seized from, since it was a product of the “debauchery and manslaughter entailed on the Indian population of the country.” Aligned with this was the turning of people into “assets” to be held in usufruct through the practice of

systematic slavery. In all, “the American plan or policy [as implemented on the frontier],” Veblen wrote, was “a settled practice of converting all public wealth to private gain on a plan of legalised seizure.”⁵⁹

A key element in this rapacious advance was the destruction of forests and land cover. “Capitalising on natural resources by treating them as a source of free income,” Veblen argued, encouraged waste and destruction on a vast scale, constituting the normal practice of colonisation and empire. For instance, the wasted timber associated with logging and land-clearing practices was so great “that this enterprise of lumber-men during the period since the middle of the nineteenth century has destroyed very appreciably more timber than it has utilised.”⁶⁰ Most important of all was “the sclerosis of the soil” brought on by processes of expropriation of the earth, without the least attention to conservation.⁶¹ In this respect, developments in the United States were similar to other white settler colonies, where indigenous populations were displaced and a process of unlimited ecological destruction was unleashed, resulting in the detachment of people from any form of ecological culture related to being settled inhabitants of a place. Veblen stressed that this problem stemmed from absentee ownership, which was endemic to capitalism.

The Dust Bowl crisis in the 1930s was a product of the historical factors raised by Veblen. The seizure of the land, the genocidal approach to Native Americans, the effects of slavery, the denudation of the land, the “sclerosis of the soil” due to soil exhaustion and soil erosion, and the devastating effects of all this on the working population were all evident. In their 1930s book, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion*, Graham Vernon Jacks and Robert Orr White wrote:

⁵⁸ ↪ Wright Mills, introduction to *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, by Thorstein Veblen (New York: New American Library, 1953), vi.

⁵⁹ ↪ Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1923), 168–71. Veblen here was referring to the famous Lauderdale Paradox. See John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 53–72.

⁶⁰ ↪ Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 186–91.

⁶¹ ↪ Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 169.

The history of erosion in the United States is bound up with the pioneer phase in the nation's development, through the stages of deforestation for agricultural land, timber, fuel, and potash in the east, the development of the monoculture system of agriculture for maize in the Corn Belt and cotton to the south, overstocking and ploughing of the natural grassland areas of the Great Plains, gross overstocking and maltreatment of the range country, overgrazing and over-cultivation on the Pacific coast, and deforestation in the Pacific north-west.⁶²

Hence, it is abundantly clear that dust storms on the plains “were not freaks of Nature” but products of conditions that had long been developing as a result of the robbery and abuse of the land, exacerbated by a shift from subsistence to commercial cash-crop agriculture.⁶³

The colonial history that shaped and propelled these developments also determined their differential effects across communities in the Dust Bowl region and elsewhere. On top of previous losses, including repeated dispossessions and forced relocation, Native American communities in the Great Plains Dust Bowl region lost some 90 percent of their remaining landholdings between 1890 and 1933 and had among the highest poverty rates in the country. In the Oklahoma region with its historic Indian Territory, whites were doing everything they could to wrest the better part of the

despite the movements' significant accomplishments and all the relief measures associated with the New Deal, economic and environmental injustice prevailed given the racialised structure of power in the U.S. political economy.

lands originally set aside for Native Americans. As the new era of crisis descended, appeals for relief went unanswered and then inadequately answered. Black and Hispanic farmers too were hit particularly hard by the Dust Bowl and Depression, and New Deal programs were intentionally discriminatory with the result being that black and Hispanic farmers did not receive the same relief as white farmers, and migrant farmworkers were often the targets of racist deportation laws and other forms of abuse.⁶⁴ This led to further concentration of the land, primarily in the hands of white inhabitants and wealthy absentee landlords.

Oklahoma had been the epicentre of a powerful, and in some parts, multiracial and multiethnic progressive movement in the southeast and southwest. The movement pushed for economic, social, and land reform. Some called for revolution. Significant multiracial alliances were sustained into the 1930s, even in the face of organised and violent forces of reaction. Yet, despite the movements' significant accomplishments and all the relief measures associated with the New Deal, economic and environmental injustice prevailed given the racialised structure of power in the U.S. political economy.⁶⁵

In all, the efforts to engineer more stable relations between human beings and the environment on the Great Plains following the Dust Bowl were plagued by the persistent, fundamental problem: a voracious system of expropriation of the earth for profit, rooted in “the progressive seizure of natural resources and their conversion to private gain.”⁶⁶ Its operations widened the rift between human beings and nature, accumulating in a potential for larger catastrophes. The

⁶² ↪ Graham Vernon Jacks and Robert Orr Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 17. Jacks and Whyte, while recognizing the devastation wrought on indigenous populations, nonetheless argued somewhat along “white man’s burden” lines as to the necessary tasks for the future. See Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire*, 52.

⁶³ ↪ Jacks and Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth*, 36.

⁶⁴ ↪ Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire*, 113–16.

⁶⁵ ↪ Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire*, 113–16.

⁶⁶ ↪ Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 171.

social relations of expropriation that lay behind the economic and ecological contradictions of the period were extended rather than transcended in the decades that followed.

Dust Bowl-like conditions, or what is now sometimes called dustbowlification, did not occur only in the United States in the 1930s, but also in other colonial frontier regions. In 1923, the South African Drought Commission reported “that, as a result of conditions created by the white civilisation in South Africa, the power of the land, as a whole, to hold up and absorb water has been diminished.... Herein lies the secret of our ‘drought losses.’”⁶⁷ A leading South African botanist and critic of the destruction of South Africa’s soil, as well as a leading opponent of apartheid, was the South African

Racial and class divisions, as well as the metabolic rift, continued to reinforce each other within capitalist relations of production.

Marxist ecologist Edward Roux, author of both *The Veld and the Future: A Book on Soil Erosion for South Africans* (1946) and *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man’s Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (1948). In *The Veld and the Future*, he wrote: “To save the soil we must all work together, the black man and the white man, the man and the woman.... The soil does

not really belong to this person or that who has the right to use a bit of land. It belongs to the nation,” that is, the people as a whole, especially, he insisted, the indigenous African population struggling for freedom “and the children who are yet unborn.”⁶⁸ Yet, Roux’s ecosocialist vision dominated neither in South Africa nor in the United States. Racial and class divisions, as well as the metabolic rift, continued to reinforce each other within capitalist relations of production.

These problems persist today as a consequence of agribusiness production and hence society is increasingly vulnerable in the face of climate change and land degradation. This is especially evident in the original Dust Bowl region, prompting questions regarding what was learned by the crisis. In 2016, scientists from the University of Chicago and the

Today, both the scale of production and the field for the accumulation of catastrophe are much vaster, intensifying the expropriation of land, labor, and corporeal life, without any regard for reciprocity.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration published a study in *Nature Plants* entitled “Simulating Agriculture in a Modern Dust Bowl Drought,” investigating the potential for drought-induced agricultural losses from global warming. They concluded that the advent of conditions similar to those in the 1930s Dust Bowl would have “unprecedented consequences” despite the growth of ecological

science. Joshua Elliott, a research scientist and coauthor of the article, declared in an interview: “We expected to find the system much more resilient because 30 percent of production is now irrigated in the United States, and because we’ve abandoned corn production in more severely drought-stricken places such as Oklahoma and west Texas.... But we found the opposite: The system was just as sensitive to drought and heat as it was in the 1930s.” Today, both the scale of production and the field for the accumulation of catastrophe are much vaster, intensifying the expropriation of land, labor, and corporeal life, without any regard for reciprocity.⁶⁹

Moment III: Imperialism in the Anthropocene

The Dust Bowl crisis of the 1930s was the culmination of a series of ecological crises associated with the era of early monopoly capitalism, assuming particularly acute forms in white settler colonies and colonial frontier regions around

⁶⁷ ↪ South Africa Drought Investigation Commission, *Final Report of the Drought Investigation Commission* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Government Printer, 1923), 5.

⁶⁸ ↪ Edward Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); Edward Roux, *The Veld and the Future: A Book on Soil Erosion for South Africans* (Cape Town: African Bookman, 1946), 59.

⁶⁹ ↪ Robert Mitchum, “[Dust Bowl Would Devastate Today’s Crops, Study Finds](#),” *UChicago News*, December 19, 2016.

Today in the era of monopoly-finance capital and late imperialism, vast regions of the planet are being converted into dust bowls, not through the action of the climate itself, but as a result of the logic of a global economic system that promotes the “conquest” of nature as a means to the exploitation and super-exploitation of the world’s population. The reality is thus one of a growing planetary ecological holocaust, bearing down especially on the most vulnerable populations, particularly frontline communities and in the Global South.

the globe.⁷⁰ Today in the era of monopoly-finance capital and late imperialism, vast regions of the planet are being converted into dust bowls, not through the action of the climate itself, but as a result of the logic of a global economic system that promotes the “conquest” of nature as a means to the exploitation and super-exploitation of the world’s population. The global commons are being destroyed everywhere, as reflected in the burning of the Amazon, the bleaching of coral reefs, the depletion of the oceans, the mass extinction of

species, and the drying up and contamination of the world’s freshwater sources. The reality is thus one of a growing planetary ecological holocaust, bearing down especially on the most vulnerable populations, particularly frontline communities and in the Global South.

Nearly half a century ago, in 1971, Barry Commoner warned that

Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by the social organisation which they have devised to “conquer” nature: means of gaining wealth that are governed by requirements that conflict with those which govern nature. The end result is the environmental crisis, a crisis of survival. Once more, to survive, we must close the circle. We must learn to restore to nature the wealth that we borrow from it.... The world is being carried to the brink of ecological disaster not by a singular fault, which some clever scheme can correct, but by the phalanx of powerful economic, political and social forces that constitute the march of history. Anyone who proposes to cure the environmental crisis undertakes thereby to change the course of history.⁷¹

The contemporary rift between humanity and the earth’s metabolism, to which Commoner alluded, is signified by the designation of the new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, which represents a quantitative and qualitative break with all previous epochs.⁷² A scientific consensus is emerging that the Anthropocene began around 1950, marked by the introduction of artificial radionuclides from thermonuclear bomb testing, mass production of plastics, and, in particular,

Under the dominant economic order, the earth is merely the source of “free gifts of Nature to capital,” justifying what amounts to a robbery economy.

the Great Acceleration of capitalist development. The ferocious growth imperative of capital, which recognises no limits, has led to the socioeconomic system transgressing an array of planetary boundaries, associated with climate change, ocean acidification, ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity, freshwater depletion, pollution, the disruption of nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, and chemical pollution.⁷³ The very operations of late capitalism and imperialism are

⁷⁰ ↪ Holleman, Dust Bowls of Empire.

⁷¹ ↪ Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1971), 298–99.

⁷² ↪ Alluding to Marx’s conception of metabolic rift, Commoner in *The Closing Circle* noted that Marx had pointed to capitalism’s “destructive effects on the cyclical ecological process that links man to the soil.” See Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 280.

⁷³ ↪ Anthropocene Working Group, “Results of Binding Vote by AWG,” May 21, 2019, available at <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org>. See also Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), 44–45; Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?,” *Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 67; J. R. McNeill, *The Great Acceleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, and Colin P. Summerhayes, *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit: A Guide to the Scientific Evidence and Current Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

today generating a global ecological crisis, undermining the conditions that support life, raising the issue of omnicide: the destruction of life in general.

Under the dominant economic order, the earth is merely the source of “free gifts of Nature to capital,” justifying what amounts to a robbery economy.⁷⁴ In this system of generalised commodity production, “quantity rules absolute” as exchange value is deemed the universal measure.⁷⁵ “The essence of capitalism,” Michael Parenti explained, “is to

Following the Second World War, industrial fishing fleets underwent a major transformation... these ships harvest tons of fish in a single haul—a third of which are unwanted species, including marine mammals, which are killed and discarded.

convert nature into commodities and commodities into capital, transforming the living earth into inanimate wealth. This capital accumulation process wreaks havoc upon the global ecological system. It treats the planet’s life-sustaining resources (arable land, groundwater, wetlands, forests, fisheries, oceans, rivers, air quality) as dispensable ingredients of limitless supply, to be consumed or toxified at will.”⁷⁶ The ongoing growth of this system is predicated on

expanding and deepening the scope of expropriation of the environment, labor, and the corporeal life of all species. These lethal contradictions are clearly evident throughout the Earth System, including the world ocean.

Following the Second World War, industrial fishing fleets underwent a major transformation, as part of the great acceleration of capitalist operations. Over time, massive ships, equipped with state-of-the-art technologies such as sonar and GPS systems for locating fish, became the norm for industrial fishing operations. Trawlers and longlines are able to capture a record number of target fish (those species that are desired for the market). Using lines that are miles long with hundreds of hooks, as well as nets that are over a mile in circumference, these ships harvest tons of fish in a single haul—a third of which are unwanted species, including marine mammals, which are killed and discarded.⁷⁷ On large ships, which are really factories at sea, the fish are processed onboard.

Combined with habitat destruction due to the Earth System crisis as a whole, fisheries scientists are predicting a collapse of all marine species currently being fished by the middle of the century.

Despite the effects of overfishing in all ocean systems in reducing fish populations, global captures of marine fish, by means of this new technology of expropriation, increased from twenty million tons in 1950 to about ninety million tons in 2000.⁷⁸ While there are currently 3.5 million fishing vessels, only 1 percent of these ships

account for 60 percent of seafood catch, highlighting the significant role of monopoly capital in this sector.⁷⁹

These operations are extremely efficient at capturing fish, leading to widespread depletion of fish populations, as they are harvested at rates faster than they can reproduce. The scope of these actions has only worsened oceanic conditions, because as one species is fished out, firms simply move onto the next species in a process known as “fishing down the

⁷⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37, 732–33.

⁷⁵ ↪ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 41, 107.

⁷⁶ ↪ Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts and Reds* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997), 154–55.

⁷⁷ ↪ Callum Roberts, *The Ocean of Life* (New York: Penguin, 2012); Jennie M. Harrington, Ransom A. Myers, and Andrew A. Rosenberg, “Wasted Fishery Resources,” *Fish & Fisheries* 6, no. 4 (2005): 350–61; Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, *The Tragedy of the Commodity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, “Capitalism and the Commodification of Salmon: From Wild Fish to a Genetically Modified Species,” *Monthly Review* 66, no. 7 (2014): 35–55.

⁷⁸ ↪ UNFAO, *State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2012* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2012), available at <http://fao.org>.

⁷⁹ ↪ Florian Doerr, “Blue Growth and Ocean Grabbing” (Colloquium Paper No. 18, International Institute of Social Studies, International Colloquium, February 4–5, 2016), 1–20.

Despite these natural limits, imperial nations are engaged in aggressive “ocean-grabbing” campaigns to expropriate as much as possible from the oceans.

marine food webs.”⁸⁰ Combined with habitat destruction due to the Earth System crisis as a whole, fisheries scientists are predicting a collapse of all marine species currently being fished by the middle of the century.⁸¹

Despite these natural limits, imperial nations are engaged in aggressive “ocean-grabbing” campaigns to expropriate as much as possible from the oceans. Through a variety of management arrangements and trade agreements, the Global North is progressively enclosing the oceans, gaining access to fisheries around the world, including those within the exclusive economic zones of nations in the South. Increasingly small-scale fishers are being blocked from access to traditional fisheries, undermining the subsistence of their families and communities.⁸²

For many nations in the Global South, seafood is a major export to the North, supplying food for people and pets, as well as valued fertiliser to enrich depleted soils.⁸³ For example, Thailand is the third largest global exporter of seafood

Thailand is the third largest global exporter of seafood commodities, which amount to over \$7 billion per year. Many fishing operations in Thailand use slave labor, which is estimated to be between 145,000 to 200,000 people... are forced to work long hours, sleep very little, receive minimal nourishment, and are bound in chains and restraints to the ships... they are physically beaten if they are working too slowly or make mistakes handling the fish. From time to time, they are sold to other fishing operations.

commodities, which amount to over \$7 billion per year.⁸⁴ In order to keep costs low, especially given the additional expenses associated with ships, such as the equipment and fuel required to chase depleted fish stocks, many fishing operations in Thailand use slave labor, which is estimated to be between 145,000 to 200,000 people.⁸⁵ These enslaved workers are forced to work long hours, sleep very little, receive minimal nourishment, and are bound in chains and restraints to the ships. Like the Chinese workers on the guano islands in the nineteenth century, they are physically beaten if

they are working too slowly or make mistakes handling the fish. From time to time, they are sold to other fishing operations. Many of these workers migrated from places such as the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia, searching for employment, but ended up being trafficked into slave labor.⁸⁶

Some of the fish being captured on these ships are being directed to shrimp aquaculture operations in order to supply needed feed for this thriving industry, which is leading to widespread marine pollution and contamination. These conditions are undermining small-scale fishers, creating a situation where the “shrimp eat better” than they do.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ ↪ Daniel Pauly, Villy Christensen, Johanne Dalsgaard, Rainer Froese, and Francisco Torres, “Fishing Down Marine Food Webs,” *Science* 279, no. 5352 (1998): 860–63; Daniel Pauly, *Vanishing Fish* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2019).

⁸¹ ↪ Boris Worm et al., “Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services,” *Science* 314, no. 5800 (2006): 787–90; Éva Plagányi, “Climate Change Impacts on Fisheries,” *Science* 363, no. 6430 (2019): 930–31.

⁸² ↪ Doerr, “Blue Growth and Ocean Grabbing”; Transnational Institute Agrarian Justice Program, *The Global Ocean Grab: A Primer* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2014).

⁸³ ↪ Brett Clark, Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Daniel Auerbach, “From Sea Slaves to Slime Lines: Commodification and Unequal Ecological Exchange in Global Marine Fisheries,” in *Ecologically Unequal Exchange: Environmental Injustice in Comparative and Historical Perspective*, ed. R. Scott Frey, Paul K. Gellert, and Harry F. Dahms (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 195–220.

⁸⁴ ↪ United Nations, *State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture, 2010* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014).

⁸⁵ ↪ Dean Irvine, Saima Mohsin, and Kocha Olarn, “Seafood from Slavery: Can Thailand Tackle the Crisis in its Fishing Industry?,” *CNN*, May 17, 2015.

⁸⁶ ↪ International Labour Organization, *Caught at Sea: Forced Labour and Trafficking in Fisheries* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2013); Ian Urbina, “Tricked and Indebted on Land, Abused or Abandoned at Sea,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2015; Ian Urbina, “‘Sea Slaves’: The Human Misery that Feeds Pets and Livestock,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2015.

⁸⁷ ↪ Wilma A. Dunaway and M. Cecilia Macabuac, “‘The Shrimp Eat Better Than We Do’: Philippine Subsistence Fishing Households Sacrificed for the Global Food Chain,” *Review* 30, no. 4 (2007): 313–37.

The commodity fetishism associated with seafood obscures not only the expropriation of fish and the slave labor used to capture them, but also the super-exploitation in the processing plants. In Thailand, these extensively Taylorised plants increase profits through the employment of low-wage children and women who head, gut, skin, fillet, peel, clean, and sort the fish. International organisations have documented the poor working conditions, the injuries, and the lack of schooling that thousands of children are receiving while employed in this industry.⁸⁸

The current Earth System crisis extends from oceans to freshwater and beyond. The dynamic of imperialism and

As climatologist James Hansen indicates, under a continuation of business as usual over the next several decades, “low latitudes during the warm seasons could become so hot and inhospitable to human livelihood as to generate an unstoppable drive for emigration.... sea-level rise and extreme weather in general will force hundreds of millions of people in low latitudes in the Global South to migrate from their homes, either in the form of internal migration within countries or mass emigration abroad.

omnicide in the Anthropocene is associated with alterations in the earth’s hydrological cycle, including changes in precipitation, the drying up (and contamination) of freshwater sources, and the melting of mountain glaciers with their indispensable “water towers.”⁸⁹ As climatologist James Hansen indicates, under a continuation of business as usual over the next several decades, “low latitudes during the warm seasons could become so hot and inhospitable to human livelihood as to generate an unstoppable drive for emigration. That potential future is emerging into view for regions as populated as India, Bangladesh, Southeast Asia and huge swaths of Africa.”⁹⁰ Under these conditions, sea-level rise, dustbowlification, and extreme

weather in general will force hundreds of millions of people in low latitudes in the Global South to migrate from their homes, either in the form of internal migration within countries or mass emigration abroad. In 2017, 68.5 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes, approximately one third of these due to extreme weather. According to a World Bank study, internal migration alone in the three regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia—accounting for a little more than half the population of the Global South—will rise to 143 million by 2050.⁹¹ Meanwhile, wealthy countries, while frequently super-exploiting populations in the Global South via multinational corporations, are already building walls, enhancing the militarisation of borders to keep refugees (including climate refugees) out.

We live in an era of capitalist globalisation without end where the struggle for diminishing freshwater runs parallel to the

There is a desperate worldwide competition to control the last remaining sources of freshwater and fossil fuels along with other scarce resources.

search for new sources of fossil fuels, which in turn heighten the carbon emissions behind climate change, resulting in the rapid heating up of the earth and increasing drought. In a kind of frenzy driven by a capitalist system that knows no restraint, there is a desperate worldwide competition to control the last remaining sources of freshwater and

fossil fuels along with other scarce resources.⁹²

⁸⁸ ↪ “International Expert Meeting on Labour Exploitation in the Fishing Sector in the Atlantic Region,” International Labour Organization; M. F. Jeebhay, T. G. Robbins, and A. L. Lopata, “World at Work: Fish Processing Workers,” *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 61 (2004): 471–74.

⁸⁹ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark, “Imperialism in the Anthropocene,” The Jus Semper Global Alliance, January 2021.

⁹⁰ ↪ James Hansen, “Saving Earth,” June 27, 2019, available at <http://columbia.edu>.

⁹¹ ↪ John Podesta, “The Climate Crisis, Migration, and Refugees,” Brookings Institution, July 25, 2019; World Bank, *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018).

⁹² ↪ Foster, Holleman, and Clark, “Imperialism in the Anthropocene,” The Jus Semper Global Alliance, January 2021.

Conclusion: Beyond the Robbery System

Profit upon expropriation was the key economic category that Marx used in his critique of Smith's notion of previous stock/accumulation.⁹³ "Smith's theology of previous accumulation," Perelman writes, "suggested that capitalists' commanding position was due to their past savings"—a view that Marx debunked.⁹⁴ "So-called" previous accumulation was thus for Marx simply an ideological device of classical political economy meant to disguise the reality of "the

From this perspective, capitalism was only possible due to the alienation or expropriation of nature, and the self-alienation or expropriation of human powers and corporeal life.

expropriation of the immediate producers."⁹⁵ From this perspective, capitalism was only possible due to the alienation or expropriation of nature, and the self-alienation or expropriation of human powers and corporeal life. Expropriation was characteristic of all previous class civilisations, but it took on a far more systematic character and assumed a vastly greater scale under capitalism, where it became part of a dyad,

together with exploitation, giving rise to the capitalist juggernaut as a whole, the drive to endless exponential expansion, and finally the movement toward socialism, the negation of the negation.

In the new capitalist bourgeois society, expropriation was not the essence of the system as in tributary modes of production. Instead, it was to give rise to a whole new inner dynamic of exploitation that had its own self-propelling logic, manifested in the accumulation of capital. Exploitation in turn created the demand for ever-wider circles of expropriation, expanding the boundaries of the system. The dialectic of exploitation and expropriation that constituted capitalism was thus all the more a vicious spiral, associated with the logic of the accumulation of capital. Arising in the

capitalism led to the most brutal systems of expropriation the world has ever seen: slavery, misogyny (wife selling, burning of witches, the super-exploitation of women and children), land grabbing, genocide, and the destruction of the earth, extending to the entire planet.

early modern era, capitalism led to the most brutal systems of expropriation the world has ever seen: slavery, misogyny (wife selling, burning of witches, the super-exploitation of women and children), land grabbing, genocide, and the destruction of the earth, extending to the entire planet. Acutely aware of these contradictions, Marx wrote: "If money, according to Augier, 'comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one

cheek,' capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt."⁹⁶

It is customary in mainstream political circles (as well for some further to the left) to treat these horrors associated with the development of capitalism on a world scale as mere "birth pains," if they are acknowledged at all. Too often, they are treated as phenomena of the distant past to be forgotten, to be papered over by a triumphalist story of capital's inevitable rise, or to be hidden away by the "nursery tale" of so-called primitive accumulation, whereby individual capitalists rose to riches by virtue of their own abstinence, pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.⁹⁷

Yet, the horrors of the expropriation of the direct producers (including non-waged workers) and the earth are not simply an "original sin," but a constant reality of capitalism, by which it establishes its earthly domination and "polices the suffering on its borders."⁹⁸ In twenty-first-century late capitalism and late imperialism, this expropriation is in some ways

⁹³ ↪ Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 260; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 873.

⁹⁴ ↪ Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism*, 29.

⁹⁵ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 927.

⁹⁶ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 925–26.

⁹⁷ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 873–74.

⁹⁸ ↪ Zoé Samudzi, "Policing the Borders of Suffering," *Jewish Currents*, June 21, 2019.

the entire development of oppression in history was rooted in the subjugation of women, which gave rise via private property to what he called “three basic forms of slavery” of slaves, serfs, and wage slaves.... of which the capitalist system of exploitation was to be the most developed and most barbaric form.

going further than ever before with the deepening of imperialist value chains, whereby much of the surplus value of the entire world is siphoned off via a process of value capture, to feed the coffers of multinational corporations and the wealthy at the center of the system.⁹⁹ This is accompanied by renewed battles over the misogynistic basis of private property, involving the control

of women’s bodies; the resurgence of racial capitalism; and the destruction of the planet as a place of human habitation, breaking the “chain of human generations.”¹⁰⁰

Many attempts to advance theory and practice on the left have sought to connect the Marxian theory of exploitation to other intersecting oppressions that are integral parts of the reality of historical capitalism. Our analysis suggests that making these connections requires understanding both the significance of the concept of expropriation in classical historical materialism, and the dialectic of expropriation and exploitation. In saying that the patriarchal family was the basis of all class development and of private property institutions, Engels was not going against the critique of exploitation at the center of the theory of capitalism, but recognising that the entire development of oppression in history was rooted in the subjugation of women, which gave rise via private property to what he called “three basic forms of slavery” of slaves, serfs, and wage slaves.¹⁰¹ This was a history of expropriation of land, labor, and corporeal life, of which the capitalist system of exploitation was to be the most developed and most barbaric form. The various historical moments of expropriation that we have described—the industrialisation of agriculture and the global metabolic rift, the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, and the imperialism of the Anthropocene—are all particular historical moments reflecting the “barbaric heart” of the system.¹⁰²

“The Justice of nature,” Epicurus wrote in antiquity, “is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness [i.e.,] neither to harm one

It is here in multiple hidden abodes that we discover the secret not only of capitalist exploitation, but also of racial capitalism, misogynistic capitalism, and the creative destruction of nature.... As Henri Lefebvre pointed out, given the scope and scale of the planetary ecological crisis, it is now a matter of “revolution or death.”

another nor be harmed.”¹⁰³ Capitalism in its pursuit of abstract value destroys such reciprocity and justice at every level, going so far as to threaten the very basis of planetary existence. In fact, behind capitalist exploitation lies a wider set of inequities, consisting of various forms of expropriation or robbery that establish the boundary conditions of the system. It is here in multiple hidden abodes that we discover the secret not only of capitalist exploitation, but also of racial capitalism, misogynistic capitalism, and the creative destruction of nature.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ ↩ Intan Suwandi, [Value Chains: The New Economic Imperialism](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 754.

¹⁰¹ ↩ Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress, 1934), 328–29; Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 56–58, 65, 160, 172; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 314.

¹⁰² ↩ Curtis White, *The Barbaric Heart* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint, 2009).

¹⁰³ ↩ Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 35.

¹⁰⁴ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 279; Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 86 (214): 55–72.

All of this highlights the fact that it is impossible to understand the totality of capitalist relations apart from the conditions of both exploitation and expropriation, which together generate the ensemble of oppressions that characterise the system. It is here too that we begin to understand the various interlocking aspects of capitalist domination, which require a co-revolutionary praxis in response. As Henri Lefebvre pointed out, given the scope and scale of the planetary ecological crisis, it is now a matter of “revolution or death.”¹⁰⁵

Epicurus’s “justice of nature,” requiring genuine reciprocity, is nowhere to be found within the logic of the capitalist system, despite its pretence to quid pro quo or equal exchange, which merely disguises the extremes of exploitation and expropriation that lie within it and that define its historical boundaries. In the twenty-first century, this dialectic of exploitation and expropriation without end, striving to intensify the rate of exploitation, while treating the boundaries of life as mere barriers (or frontiers) to be transgressed by capital, has led to the creative destruction of the earth, the basis of life itself. For the chain of human generations, there is only one possible response: the expropriation of the expropriators and the co-revolutionary creation of a new epoch of sustainable human development—ecological socialism.¹⁰⁶

For the chain of human generations, there is only one possible response: the expropriation of the expropriators and the co-revolutionary creation of a new epoch of sustainable human development—ecological socialism.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Monthly Review
- John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman and Brett Clark: [Imperialism in the Anthropocene](#)
- John Bellamy Foster and Alejandro Pedregal: [The Return of Nature and Marx’s Ecology](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marx’s Open-ended Critique](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [The Long Ecological Revolution](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marxism and Ecology](#)
- John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark: [The Expropriation of Nature](#)
- John Bellamy Foster, R. Jamil Jonna and Brett Clark: [The Contagion of Capital](#)
- Intan Suwandi: [Labour Value Commodity Chains — The Hidden Abode of Global Production](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia — the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
- Paul Burkett: [An Eco-Revolutionary Tipping Point? — Global Warming, the Two Climate Denials, and the Environmental Proletariat](#)
- Ian Angus: [When Did the Anthropocene Begin... and Why Does It Matter?](#)

¹⁰⁵ ↪ Henri Lefebvre, “Leszek Kolakowski and Henri Lefebvre: Evolution or Revolution,” in *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed. Fons Elders (London: Souvenir, 1974), 261.

¹⁰⁶ ↪ Paul Burkett, “Marx’s Vision of Sustainable Human Development,” *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (October 2005): 34–62; Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 228–32.8

- ❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.
- ❖ **About the authors: John Bellamy Foster** is editor of Monthly Review and a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. **Brett Clark** is associate editor of Monthly Review and a professor of sociology at the University of Utah. **Hannah Holleman** is a director of the Monthly Review Foundation and an associate professor of sociology at Amherst College.
- ❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review magazine in December 2019. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher.
- ❖ **Quote this paper as:** John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Hannah Holleman: Capitalism and Robbery – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, May 2021.
- ❖ **Tags:** Capitalism, Ecosocialism, Marx, Engels, Epicurus, Slavery, Ecological Fracture, Marxist Ecology, Metabolic Social and Environmental Fracture, Exploitation, Expropriation, Imperialism, Anthropocene.
- ❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2021. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussempor.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussempor.org