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2009

# Primitive accumulation and re-appropriation of the information commons

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## Primitive Accumulation and Re-appropriation of the Information Commons

**Abstract:** This paper suggests that LIS might benefit from critical political economy as a way of theorizing and responding to enclosures of information commons. The autonomist Marxist re-invigoration of ‘primitive accumulation’ offers a register for apprehending contemporary erosions of the commons. Autonomist Marxism also helps conceptualize resistance to enclosures.

**Résumé:**

### 1. Introduction

As most in Library and Information Studies are aware, capitalist strategies and tactics of terrestrial enclosure have been paralleled, if perhaps not even surpassed, by acts of appropriation of information and knowledge commons. Indeed, in our field we increasingly hear laments about the erosion of the public domain as corporate interests lock down more and more information and knowledge. Despite the implicit appeal to unfettered access to information that is couched in such lamentations, I do not think that we, as a discipline, have been particularly strong in articulating anything beyond normative statements about the value of an information and knowledge commons. There are, of course, notable exceptions, including Dan Shiller’s (2007) work on the commodification of information and John Buschman’s (2003) use of Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. The contributions of these scholars notwithstanding, I believe that we can look to critical political economy as a source of fresh insight into how our discipline might theoretically situate and respond to the enclosure of information and knowledge commons. In particular, I suggest that the autonomist Marxist re-invigoration of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation offers a suitable theoretical register for apprehending contemporary erosions of informational and knowledge commons. In order to make my case, I want to first offer a schematic outline of the main elements of the concept of primitive accumulation and then discuss the dialectic tension between enclosures, as a component of primitive accumulation, and commons. The main point I want to make in this paper is that critical political economy, informed by Marxist thought, can help theoretically situate the corporate capture of information and knowledge while simultaneously opening-up points of resistance to challenge capitalist enclosures in favor of commons.

### 2. Conceptualizing Primitive Accumulation

While there is a varying array of literature that elaborates particular examples of capital’s enclosure of the commons<sup>1</sup> that might be interpreted as instances of contemporary primitive accumulation, it is only recently that a small number of scholars have begun to engage in systematic theorization of this phenomenon and its critical importance to the production and reproduction of capital. Basic to this emerging line of theory is a rejection of the traditional genealogical accounts of primitive accumulation. Sharing the autonomist Marxist conception of capital as a

social force that must exist in society alongside opposing forces, which, through their own autonomous struggles, seek to limit it, these scholars interpret primitive accumulation and its attendant enclosures of the commons as continuous characteristics and strategies that are integral to capital accumulation. Depending upon the theorist to whom one refers, the nominal term employed to reflect the phenomenon of primitive accumulation differs. Glassman (2006) discusses “primitive accumulation,” “accumulation by dispossession,” and “accumulation by extra-economic means,” though he seems to favor the original term coined by Marx, “primitive accumulation,” while McCarthy (2004) speaks of accumulation by “extra-economic means.” David Harvey (2003, 2006) prefers to substitute the updated predicate “accumulation by dispossession” for what he believes is the dated “primitive accumulation.”

Regardless of the difference in nomenclature, most writers tend to agree on the basic points about this concept as a theoretical framework for comprehending contemporary capitalist development. First, primitive accumulation must be understood as a continuous process that remains vital for capitalist accumulation. Second, primitive accumulation assumes a variety of forms, including the privatization of public goods that had been made public through prior social struggle. Although not through the analytical lens of primitive accumulation, commentators like Ruth Rikowski (2002b, 2002a), John Buschman (2003), and Herbert and Anita Schiller (1988) have offered important work on this point in respect of the increasing privatization of library services. De Angelis (2007) labels “social commons” those areas of social existence that emerged as commons through active social movements in the past and that were subsequently formalized through institutional norms and practices. For example, the rights and provisions typically associated with the welfare state, such as health, education, pension, and unemployment benefits provide access to social wealth without a corresponding labor requirement. Of course, the neo-liberal state has been systematically attacking and decimating the provisions of the welfare state for the past quarter-century. As both Harvey (2003) and McCarthy (2004) point out in respect to this aspect of primitive accumulation, international trade regimes, which impinge on domestic governance, facilitate capital’s appropriation of the conditions of production. International trade agreements, particularly the WTO and TRIPs, and their associated administrative bodies increasingly circumscribe the ability of sovereign states to enact laws and regulations within their territories. That is, international trade agreements that employ private adjudication bodies that focus solely on neoliberal accumulation imperatives offer transnational corporations a back door to circumvent national regulators who are “forced” to respond, even if nominally, to broader societal interests. For example, the contemporary intellectual property system functions as an important mechanism for accumulation by dispossession by stripping indigenous populations of their rights to natural resources that have been developed in common over centuries. In what can only be regarded as blatant acts of biopiracy, a few transnational corporations are instead appropriating rights of control over and access to such resources and the information and knowledge embodied in these physical artefacts. In fact, Harvey (2003, 148) speaks of “the wholesale commodification of nature in all its forms.”

The rolling back of regulatory frameworks designed to protect labour and the environment from degradation has entailed the loss of rights. The reversion of common property rights won through years of hard class struggle (the right to

a state pension, to welfare, to national health care) to the private domain has been one of the most egregious of all policies of dispossession pursued in the name of neo-liberal orthodoxy (Harvey 2003, 148).

In this constructed environment (not the result of naturally functioning free markets), the rights of trade and investment enjoy precedence over all other rights (McCarthy 2004). In addition to the privatization of information, which, given the way it is implicated in so many forms of production today, can be understood as primitive accumulation (understood as a process rather than an historical period) of the means of production, capital, in our contemporary epoch, is engaging in a primitive accumulation of the conditions of production. Put another way, capital is capitalizing the right to reconstruct and valorize social nature in a manner that is detrimental to the rest of society (McCarthy 2004; Harvey 2003).

The third feature of primitive accumulation relates to its spatial ambition. Though long a feature of capitalist expansion in the global South, primitive accumulation is today assuming an integral role in capitalist accumulation processes in the global North, particularly given the vital importance that information and knowledge play in value generation for corporations in the developed countries. This suggests that primitive accumulation is fundamental to global capitalist development across the globe. Primitive accumulation in the twenty-first century has become both more extensive and intensive, affecting an enormously broad range of spatio-social activity. Finally, the intensity of this spatial and social diversity encompassed by contemporary practices of primitive accumulation poses substantial challenges for social movements mobilizing against various aspects of capitalist development (Glassman 2006). Both inchoate and often internally contradictory, "...the variety of such struggles was and is simply stunning. It is hard to imagine connections between them" (Harvey 2003, 166). Examples of attempts to develop international solidarities include efforts to facilitate an international social movement unionism (Special issue on labour internationalism 2001; Waterman 2003), global environmental activism that opposes neoliberalism (Special issue on neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism 2004), international feminist activism (Eschle 2001), and anti-corporate global activism, including the so-called "movement of movements," the World Social Forum (Leite 2003; Mertes 2004).<sup>2</sup>

In practice, primitive accumulation motivates efforts by capital to enclose more and more areas of social existence. Given the increasing importance of information to capitalist production processes, as manifested in one instance through increasingly stringent intellectual property protections that have long betrayed any of the original sense of balance between creators'<sup>3</sup> and users' rights, it is perhaps not surprising that information and knowledge commons are under direct threat from contemporary capitalist accumulation strategies. It is to enclosures and resistance to enclosures, commons, that the paper now turns.

### **3. Enclosures, Commons, and (Primitive) Accumulation**

De Angelis (2007) outlines two main modes of capitalist enclosure: enclosure that is achieved through a concerted strategy, such as privatization, public spending austerity, structural adjustment, etc.; and enclosure that emerges as a by-product of a

particular accumulation process, or what economists tend to refer to as a “negative externality.” In both cases, enclosing the commons augments the disciplinary processes of capital because such practices render greater numbers of people dependent upon the market in order to reproduce their livelihoods. The former case is relatively straightforward, with the acts of enclosure in England that began as early as the fifteenth century and reached their zenith between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries offering perhaps the most celebrated historical archetype of this mode of enclosure. The latter case is a little more complex. Negative externalities are those costs associated with the production of a particular product that are borne by actors external to the producer and any transaction involving that product. Pollution is a typical example of a negative externality since it is the environment and people in the surrounding area of a plant, rather than the producers, that suffer the effects of pollution damage. These types of negative externalities pose grave consequences for the survival of independent producers, which, through the analytical lens applied in this paper, can be considered a form of enclosure that separates producers from their means of production.

As discussed above with regard to the second element of the theory of primitive accumulation, enclosures represent the insinuation of the *ex novo* separation between producer and the means of production into fresh realms of social existence. That is, capital appropriates new areas of life and social existence in service of its accumulation priorities. Again, the well-known historical example is the enclosure of common lands in England, with more contemporary instances ranging from water privatization to the enclosure of knowledge through overly restrictive intellectual property regimes. However, the imposition of an *ex novo*<sup>4</sup> separation represents a social process that in practice is susceptible to contestation by oppositional social forces that seek to recover those social spaces appropriated by capital and re-invigorate them as spaces of commons. Capital is thus compelled to wage a two-front war in its battles for enclosure: invading and enclosing new realms of social existence that can be subverted into service of capital’s accumulation priorities in the face of resistance, and defending those enclosed areas governed by accumulation and commodification imperatives against *ex novo* guerrilla movements struggling to liberate enclosures from capitalist control. The point to take from this discussion is that not only does separation occur *ex novo*, but that *ex novo* opposition can also form in response to capitalist enclosure. “Therefore, around the issue of enclosures and their opposite – commons – we have a foundational entry point of a radical discourse on alternatives” (De Angelis 2007, 139).

Enclosures represent strategic problems for capital in that they pose limits that must be overcome if capital is to be successful in colonizing new areas of social existence or in sustaining those areas already enclosed from attacks by alternative social forces seeking to de-commodify such spheres and transform them back into commons. That is, any time capital reconnoitres a new sphere of social existence for enclosure, it must also circumvent any opposition that might be posed by what capital considers ‘enclosable’ subjects. In the case of challenges to current enclosures, any time that capital is confronted with constraints on its production processes, it must respond strategically in order to either raze or co-opt such barriers to accumulation (De Angelis 2007).<sup>5</sup> We see, therefore, that limits to capital are both endogenous and exogenous. In the former, capital itself identifies and defines a limit that it must overcome, and in the latter instance, that limit is defined for capital by the

oppositional social forces that strive to liberate an already enclosed space. Regardless of how limits are identified, it is critical to recognize that counter-enclosures represent alternatives to capital that set limits to accumulation by erecting barriers to enclosure or by liberating existing enclosed areas of social life.

The benefits of informational commons, of course, derive from the fact that they are not confounded by the traditional asymmetric constraints involved in proprietary systems of information control that limit command over the inputs necessary for effective communication. Put another way, commons avoid the objectification of others that flows from the legal mechanisms nested in proprietary information systems (Benkler 2006). The attempt to produce commons problematizes established property relations (both material and immaterial) while efforts to defend existing commons problematize the threat of new enclosures posed by capital and the state. In the case of the latter, such struggles, with their goal of fostering common access to the means of existence, seek to develop new modes of social co-production and value practices that remain autonomous of capital and its market measures that seek to individualize and normalize. Some of the major projects occurring outside the parameters of the capitalist market that engage the collective knowledge and creativity of multiple individuals and which are characterized by openness and sharing include: Linux and other examples of free/open-source software, the GNU Free Documentation Licence, Wikipedia, and Project Gutenberg, among others. As De Angelis (2007) conceives of it, the “beginning of history“ represents a contemporary opportunity to defend and re-appropriate the commons, which include relations between humans, objects, and the natural world, as a means of superseding the individualizing and normalizing tendencies of capital. That is, the “beginning of history“ postulates a struggle between the “life-colonizing force“ of capital that positions individual against individual in pursuit of its *telos*<sup>6</sup> of accumulation and the “life-reclaiming forces“ of people and movements that strive to construct value practices independent of capital, despite claims by many that alternatives are no longer possible (De Angelis 2007). In a dialectical fashion, and similar to the prospects and hopes Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) attach to the “multitude,“ De Angelis (2007) situates the potential for resistance precisely in the contradictions of capital, which relies on individual subjectivities to drive accumulation while simultaneously demanding social cooperation in production. Though capital strives to capture that social cooperation for its own accumulation purposes, these various social forms of cooperation can be subverted to disrupt capital’s circuits of accumulation and open up alternative spaces (De Angelis 2007; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004).

De Angelis (2007) therefore clearly articulates the need to make visible those value practices that are situated beyond the value practices of capital – something that could benefit from increased emphasis in our own discipline, both within and outside of the classroom. Despite the discourse of many neo-liberals that would deny an *outside* to the economic calculus that apparently guides social co-production, social struggle today demands that we open-up these outside dimensions to scrutiny as alternative value practices among of range of possible actions and processes that can compete with those of capital to guide social co-production. John McMurtry (1998) develops similar sentiments with his argument that the market system should be conceptualised as an ethical system that involves value judgements and corresponding relations to the other, although that other is often unseen: “economists explicitly deny that any value judgment is at work in their analyses, even though they presuppose a

value system in every step of the analysis they make” (McMurtry 1998, 13). All market decisions express the values of the market system. Because we, as individuals, are embedded in this system, and to the extent that we accept its codified and normalizing language and conform to its parameters, we are only able to attain cognitive clarity by conceptually exiting the value system given by the market and by refusing to accept its normalization (McMurtry 1998). This conceptual “stepping outside“ of market values finds practical corollaries in the manifest instances of actual social practices designed and executed to oppose the value practices of the market. The conflict between different value practices as “*value struggles* – as constituting an ongoing tension in the social body. This means that there is an ‘outside’ and, to paraphrase Hardt and Negri (2000), it is “in the flesh of the social body,“ in its own practices, and is not confined to the conceptual realm” (De Angelis 2007, 30; emphasis in original).

*The problem of alternatives therefore becomes a problem of how we disentangle from this dialectic, of how within the social body conflict is not tied back in to capital’s conatus, but instead becomes a force for the social constitution of value practices that are autonomous and independent from those of capital (De Angelis 2007, 42; emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup>*

Although capital, as a social force, aspires to appropriate the complete ambit of life practices in service of its accumulation imperatives, the critical perspective that drives the autonomous Marxist position recognizes that discussions of capital must avoid proceeding into the theoretical and practical cul-de-sac that would attribute a fixed state or condition to capital in its actual manoeuvres to colonize the totality of life practices. Instead, we must not only recognize that capital’s attempts at colonization of the life world provoke struggles by opposing subjects, we need to elevate such resistance to a primary position both in theory and practice (De Angelis 2007).

#### **4. Conclusion**

A critical element in Marx’s writings was the recognition that technological development is a contradictory process that gives rise to opportunities for opposing agents. Put another way, labor might find real use-values, including subversive ones, for new technologies in its struggle against capital. This is related to Marx’s concept of the circuit of capital, which postulates that to survive, capital must go beyond the exploitation of the immediate workplace to continually include new series of social sites and activities. However, it is exactly these new sites that open-up additional points of resistance.

As I hope to have demonstrated in this paper, an autonomist Marxist perspective goes further than merely helping to conceptualize and analyze how information relates to prevailing power relations. It also provides a conceptual framework for understanding how information can be appropriated to subvert those same capitalist imposed power relations. I suggest that what we need in Library and Information Studies is to articulate a politics of information and knowledge and to integrate such a politics into the discussion of information and access. We could benefit from a critical analysis of our contemporary context that is capable of offering relevant theoretical and political acuity while simultaneously opening entry points to

social transformation. I propose that we can begin developing such a project by looking to the autonomist Marxist tradition, which avoids a philological analysis of Marx and instead is more interested in interrogating and subverting the power relationships involved in the capitalist appropriation and control of information and knowledge.

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## Endnotes

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- 1 For a few examples, see Vandana Shiva on intellectual property rights and the enclosure of indigenous knowledge: Shiva, V. (1997). *Biopiracy: The plunder of nature and knowledge*. Boston: South End Press.; Shiva, V. (2001). *Protect or plunder?: Understanding intellectual property rights*. New York: Zed Books. Shiva also offers examples of the enclosure of common resources like water: Shiva, V. (2002). *Water wars: Privatization, pollution, and profit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. In addition to the work by the World Development Movement (<http://www.wdm.org.uk/campaigns/past/gats/index.htm>) and GATSwatch.org (<http://www.gatswatch.org/>), see Erik Wesselius for a critique of the way the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) functions as an international agreement designed to both consolidate past and facilitate future corporate enclosures of the commons: Wesselius, E. (2002). *Behind GATS 2000: Corporate power at work*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute. For a poignant discussion of the effects of and struggles against the enclosures imposed on countries and people through structural adjustment policies, see Walton, J., & Seddon, D. (1994). *Free markets and food riots: The politics of global adjustment*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- 2 There is a wide variety of literature that examines the emergence and character of the social movements opposed to neoliberalism. See, for example, Bello, W. F. (2002). *Deglobalization: Ideas for a new world economy*. London: Zed Books.; Brecher, J., Costello, T., & Smith, B. (2000). *Globalization from below: The power of solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.; Gills, B. K. (Ed.). (2000). *Globalization and the politics of resistance*. New York: St. Martin's Press.; Mertes, T. (Ed.). (2004). *A movement of movements*. New York: Verso.; and, Wignaraja, P. (Ed.). (1993). *New social movements in the South: Empowering the people*. London: Zed Books.
- 3 Of course, this itself is not an uncontested notion, as demonstrated by the critiques of the concept of the “romantic author” and other similar constructs based on the idea of the genius of the individual creator. For two well-known examples of such critique, see, Bettig, R. V. (1996). *Copyrighting culture: The political economy of intellectual property*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.; and Boyle, J. (1996). *Shamans, software, and spleens: Law and the construction of the information society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 4 *Ex novo* indicates a new event or object.
- 5 This is similar to Polanyi’s theorization of the “double movement of society,” although without Polanyi’s emphasis on institutions. See, Polanyi, K. (2001). *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time* (2nd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- 6 As De Angelis employs the term, *telos* indicates an aim that is socially constituted. More than just a goal, which are contextually contingent, „teloi are contingent to the social constitution of particular social actors“ (De Angelis 2007, p. 30, emphasis on original).
- 7 This is reminiscent of Negri’s discussion of self-valorisation. See, in particular, Negri, A. (1984). *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (H. Cleaver & M. Ryan & M. Viano, Trans.). Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey.