

# ***The Tragedy of Enclosures*** **Rethinking Primitive Accumulation from the Guatemalan Hinterland**

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Paper Presented to the Spring Colloquium, Program in Agrarian Studies<sup>1</sup>  
Yale University, April 27, 2007

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## **Introduction**

The commonness of the “commons” in our everyday language is a constant reminder of our historical roots in these shared agrarian land arrangements. We speak a “common language” and try to reach “common ground” in our agreements for the “common good.” We still assert the importance of “common sense,” privilege information that is “common knowledge,” and root our legal systems in “common law.”<sup>2</sup> The history of the commons and their enclosure continues to resonate deeply with contemporary social movements. Indeed, the idea of the “commons” has become a powerful iconographic image for struggles over shared access to global information and intellectual property via the internet. Common Dreams is one of the most widely read alternative media sites. Experiments in “copylefting by the Creative Commons organization” are revolutionizing alternative intellectual property rights. Wikimedia Commons is a new electronic sharing site for art and writing. Common Cause is a NGO that seeks to hold government more accountable to its citizens. And, with no other manifesto except to be an open, common meeting space, the World Social Forum provides an important new terrain for bringing together hundreds of thousands of people from around the world to discuss how to defend the “earth and people’s common goods.”

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a draft of the introduction to my book manuscript, *Unsettling: The Recurring Disposessions of the Q’eqchi’ Maya and New Frontiers of Enclosure*. I am greatly indebted to my mentor, Laura Nader, for inspiration of many of the ideas shared here. My appreciation goes as well to Aaron Tukey for his comments on a previous draft of this chapter. I, of course, assume full responsibility for the inadequacies herein.

The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity for the global left to develop a fresh critique of capitalism, free from the environmentally-ruinous developmentalism plaguing both East and West. In this new space, social movements (the so-called “anti-globalization” bloc) have begun using the metaphor of the commons to articulate new alliances that cross national lines and classes and move beyond the fractious divisions of identity politics. Under the relentless pressures of neoliberal privatization and the commodification of practically everything (land, the air, water, genes, even human reproduction), “the commons” have emerged yet again as a revolutionary symbol for economic justice, moving in interesting new ways beyond the limits of orthodox Marxism.<sup>3</sup>

With these movements in mind, this book examines the recurring enclosures of the common lands of one indigenous group, the Q’eqchi’ Maya. In my research on the challenges facing Q’eqchi’ farmers in both Guatemala and Belize, it became almost irresistible to see reflections Marx’s classic narrative about the English enclosures. To summarize three phases of their agrarian history: (1) The Q’eqchi’ were first displaced from their highland Guatemalan territory in the sixteenth century by Spanish friars, who forcibly re-congregated them into new towns and land holdings. Unlike neighboring Maya groups, the Q’eqchi’ managed to survive the Spanish conquest and rebuild their society both culturally and demographically until independence from Spain. (2) Under nationalist liberalism, however, the Q’eqchi’ once again lost most of their highland territory to foreign coffee planters at the end of the nineteenth century, forcing them to begin migrating into new ecosystems in the northern lowland Maya forest. (3) Once again today, under neoliberalism, the Q’eqchi’ are losing their homesteads to cattle ranchers in the wake of “market-assisted” land reforms promulgated by the World Bank.

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<sup>2</sup> Or, pejoratively, the sharing of viruses produces the “common cold” and a woman who shares her body too much might be regarded as “common.”

<sup>3</sup> The “terrains” or “clusters” of the World Social Forum (WSF) change are evocative and open-ended transversal themes that move beyond simple sectoral divisions such as education, art, human rights, environment found at global UN forums. For example, the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre highlighted two terrains related to the commons: (A) Autonomous Thought, Reappropriation and Socialization of Knowledge and Technologies and (E) Assuring and Defending Earth and People’s Common Goods — as an Alternative to Commodification and Control by the

Pushed deeper into the forests by cattle encroachment, the Q'eqchi' find themselves clashing with biodiversity conservationists who established protected areas across this region during the 1990s. Caught between parks and ranchers, the Q'eqchi' face even deeper agrarian problems as they get swept into global economic circuits through the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the Puebla to Panama Plan (PPP).

The repeated dispossessions of the Q'eqchi' by the Church, coffee, cattle, conservation, and corporate trade, I suggest, can help us understand other contemporary enclosures of the public "commons." The Q'eqchi' case vividly illustrates how the expansion of corporate capitalism onto new frontiers reinforces older systems of inequality. It also shows how the plunder, or "primitive accumulation," of Q'eqchi' common resources is not exceptional phenomenon, but a process *inherent* to capitalism in all its many varieties. The case of the Q'eqchi' commons is particularly compelling because, like the enclosure of the British commons, their land dispossession catalyzes other corollary social transformations. In both the classic Marxist tale of enclosures and in the Q'eqchi' story, as well, the elite banquet of enclosure is invariably finished with a rich dessert of displaced people willing to work for any wages. In other words, seizure of land is as much about controlling labor as it is a claim upon property. As I shall argue in the conclusion, there are deep connections between the material and social commons—in their mutual degradation and in the possibilities for their renewal.

### **The Tragedy of the Enclosures**

*The law locks up the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common  
But leaves the greater villain loose  
Who steals the common from off the goose.*

*The law demands that we atone  
When we take things we do not own  
But leaves the lords and ladies fine  
Who take things that are yours and mine.*

*The poor and wretched don't escape  
If they conspire the law to break;  
This must be so but they endure  
Those who conspire to make the law.*

*The law locks up the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common  
And geese will still a common lack  
Till they go and steal it back.*

-English folk poem, circa 1764 (Bollier 2002a; Boyle 2002)

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Transnationals. At the decentralized WSF in 2006, the Latin American forum in Caracas focused on "Resources and Rights for Life: Alternatives to the Predatory Civilization Model" as one of its six terrains of discussion.

Marx and his rivals among the early political economists all told very different stories about the English enclosures. These were no small theoretical debates, as they had to explain not only the dissolution of feudalism in Europe, but also the violent formations of capital in the classical age of colonialism. Indeed, how one narrates the history of the English countryside has profound implications for contemporary understandings of the genesis of capitalism. If, as so many scholars have argued, the impacts of “global” information technology and new rights of corporate “personhood” are pushing capitalism through another epochal transition, then revisiting the history of the English enclosures and the “classic form” of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976:876) may give us some clues about how to better understand the potential consequences of new corporate enclosures—that is, the privatization not only of land, but also of education, social services, water, the atmosphere, even genes and life itself.

Despite their overall laissez faire ideology, early political economists like Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus had to admit that some kind of extra-economic force or state intervention was necessary to jumpstart capital accumulation. Smith wrote, “The accumulation of [capital] stock must, in the nature of things, be previous to the division of labor’ (quoted in Marx 1976:873). With ironic reference to Smith, Marx described this process of forced proletarianization as “so-called” primitive accumulation (which others have translated as “previous” accumulation or “original” accumulation from the original German, *ursprünglich*).<sup>4</sup> Contradicting Smith’s simple narrative about the origin of capital, Marx devotes chapters 26-33 of *Capital, vol. 1* to the “secret” history of how capitalism was born ‘from the womb of the feudal economic system’ (quoted in Perelman 2000:27). For Marx, denaturalizing that history was critical for explaining how money gets transformed into capital through the creation of a willing wage force, likening primitive accumulation to role of “original sin” in theology. In political economy literature today, primitive accumulation serves as a shorthand expression for

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<sup>4</sup> Some scholars argue that it would be better translated as “previous” or “primary” but I maintain the more popular translation of “primitive accumulation” because I appreciate the implicit irony of describing the early capitalists as primitives.

describing the brutality and the external political power wielded in the first outbreak of industrial capitalism (Perelman 2000)—or, as Marx put it, how capital entered the world scene “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” in a history written in “letters of blood and fire” (1976:926 & 874-5).

Most of Marx’s corpus is about the exploitation of workers *after* they have become workers, yet somehow he had to explain how English peasants became compelled to sell their labor to capitalists, since they, like the Q’eqchi’ as we will see in this book, generally preferred the leisure, community, and security of subsistence livelihoods. Outsiders might deride as peasant “conservatism,” but peasants are just keenly aware of the economic and ecological efficiencies of their small-scale household production, which they do not lightly abandon for the vagaries of wage labor. After all, what matters to a peasant household is not necessarily average production over ten years, nor even achieving record profits in one particular year, but rather producing enough to eat decade after decade in order to keep the ghouls of famine at bay (Scott 1976). Marx argued that such people would “sell their skins” only after they had been robbed of their previous livelihoods. In his analysis of the English countryside, Marx argues that the most powerful cataclysmic factor in “divorcing the producer from the means of production” were the enclosures of the village commons (1976:873-5).

In England, the enclosure process had already begun as early as the sixteenth century through the dissolution of the monasteries in the Reformation and the destruction of the open field system by the landed gentry to extend their pasture, mostly for sheep. In other words, long before the Industrial Revolution or bourgeois capitalism appeared on the scene, agrarian proletarianization was a side effect of religious struggles during the Reformation and the greed of feudal landlords wanting to expand their territorial holdings. Perhaps even more important than the physical land seized under this first wave of enclosures, I would argue, were the new theories of property that emerged from the process. Enclosure, after all, involved more than just erecting fences; it also required the historical extinguishment of common property rights and

the development of the idea of private property. In particular, the ideological edifice of “improvement” became the critical thread connecting the first wave of enclosures in the fifteenth century with a second wave of enclosures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries directly preceding the rise of industrial capitalism.

The idea of “improvement” was also essential for justifying empire. Beyond collecting some booty that could be invested as industrial capital, early English experiences with colonial rule in both Ireland and the United States introduced the idea of “improvement” in legal conceptualizations of private property. Literally meaning to “make better,” *improvement* became synonymous with enhancing the profitability of agricultural land. As Wood (1999:81) suggests, “we might like to think about the implications of a culture in which the word for ‘making better’ is rooted in the word for monetary profit.” Beyond simply harvesting more from the same amount of ground, improvement also meant the liberation of land from any customary practices and its transformation into a new form of property, as evident in John Locke’s deeply influential treatise on government (1689).<sup>5</sup> Describing colonial relations in the New World as a kind of laboratory of property, Locke observes that Native Americans fail to generate recognizable profit, so therefore even though they clearly mix their labor with the land, their property claims are less valid than those of European settlers focused on “improvement.” Property ownership demands more than proving simple occupancy; it also requires the relative creation of value through “improvement” (Wood 2002).<sup>6</sup> Following this logic, the English colonizers could rationalize the seizure of other people’s land by claiming that they were actually adding value to what they portrayed as “wasteland” (or its Spanish equivalent, “baldíos”) or simply “empty lands” (*terra nullius*, in the case of Australia). Not only did the ideology of

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<sup>5</sup> Locke’s own mentor and patron, the first Earl Of Shaftesbury (who became Lord Chancellor in 1672), was one of the members of the Royal Society most keenly concerned with the challenge of agricultural improvement.

<sup>6</sup> Hernando de Soto’s popular book (2000) *The Mystery Capital* made him the poster-boy of World Bank and other neoliberal lending institutions. His proposition for bringing poor people into the formal market by helping them gain property rights is almost a mirror image Locke’s portrayal of property and profits as mutually interdependent. While De Soto argues that people cannot make a profit without property, Locke argued that without profit, people cannot claim property.

“improvement” legitimize the theft of native land, but it served as the foundation of the European colonizers’ sense of evolutionary superiority.<sup>7</sup>

As Hannah Arendt foresaw, the building of empire abroad also brings tyranny at home, and this was certainly true for the English peasantry. Building upon colonial field tests of these new ideological concepts of property, the British parliament passed a new series of Enclosure Acts at home in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Parliamentary enclosures between 1700 and 1850 “extinguished” the open fields in approximately half of British settlements (Shaw Taylor 2001). Other laws re-intensified the trend towards agrarian proletarianization through:

- The ‘clearing’ of estates, meaning the removal of cottages from these newly consolidated properties (Marx 1976:889).
- New game laws allowing the gentry to ride across farmers fields while hunting foxes, thereby destroying subsistence crops (Perelman 2000).
- The enclosure and privatization of communal village forests and the declaration of peasant hunting for food as illegal poaching. Notably, the first half of the eighteenth century produced six new games laws, but the next half saw the development of thirty three laws against poaching. In 1831, one seventh of all criminal convictions were related to the game laws, and many of the “criminals” convicted of poaching during this time period were sent to Australia (Perelman 2000).
- Restrictions on gleaning practices following a 1788 court case stipulating that the poor would have to acquire permission to claim unwanted harvest leftovers—which previously amounted up to ten percent of a peasant family’s annual income and was traditionally a way for women to strengthen their food security (King 1989).
- Requirements that farmers had to claim plots of contiguous land and build expensive gates and fences around them.
- The suppression of religious festivals and leisure time enjoyed by pre-capitalist English peasants—for example, laws against tending a home garden on a Sunday (Perelman 2000).
- Escalation of the war on the poor through vagrancy laws; workhouses for the poor, sick, and criminal; the flogging of beggars, followed by prison sentences and even capital punishment for repeat offenders (Piven and Cloward 1971)—techniques so vividly condemned by Charles Dickens in his novels set in this time period.

As these companion laws indicate, land enclosures in and of themselves were insufficient for creating a new class of workers. The newly dispossessed peasants also had to be made poor and

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Marx comments on the “Christian character of primitive accumulation” (1976:917) in reference to how Protestant settlers put prices on Native American scalps.

disciplined into becoming willing labor. In other words, there is a critical difference between just ransacking the poor and plundering the poor's resources in such a way that establishes new labor relations and property regimes. Primitive accumulation went beyond money acquisition; it also had to transform the social relations of production in three general ways:

*The first and primary effect of enclosures was to undermine people's ability to provide for themselves.* Whether by direct suppression of the subsistence economy or by manipulation of prices (for example the Corn laws) to discourage peasants from investing in labor-intensive agriculture, the uncomfortable truth of early political economy is that capitalism flourished by disrupting independent agrarian livelihoods. As a result, over the course of the eighteenth century, England went from being a net exporter of grain to a net importer (Perelman 2000).<sup>8</sup> These agricultural shortages, in turn, created a receptive context for Thomas Malthus's (1798) apocalyptic treatise on population, and further justifications for the enclosures, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

*The second part of the process was preventing these newly dispossessed people from finding alternatives to wage labor, while still keeping wages low.* If coercion were not enough to maintain a steady labor supply, the brute force of starvation might force the poor to become diligent workers. As a British commentator Arthur Young put it in 1771, 'everyone but an idiot knows that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious' (Perelman 2000: 980). Following the Black Death (1345-48), the European peasantry had enjoyed a marvelous century of prosperity; as they were so few in number, they could demand the wages they wished, even additional food expenses such as a *viaticum*. It was this population crisis that turned "population growth into state matters, as well as primary objects of intellectual discourse" (2004:86) and also transformed the Inquisition into state-sponsored witch-hunts, which especially targeted midwives, sterile women, widowers, and women who owned property—in other words, women not bound to the privacy of a nuclear home. Starting in the

mid-sixteenth century and concurrent with the slave trade, the state also began to harshly punish contraception, abortion, and infanticide—even turning these into capital crimes.<sup>9</sup> Over three centuries, more than two hundred thousand women stood accused of witchcraft and at least one-hundred thousand were executed. This terror campaign served not only to enslave women to procreation, but also to destroy the foundations of women’s independent economic power by corralling them into the so-called “private” sphere. In turn, the relegation of women’s labor to the unpaid reproduction of the workforce served to subsidize the employment of their husbands in the “public sphere”—thereby cheapening wages (Mies 1986).

*The third part of the process was the criminalization of poverty and the destruction of community ethics ensuring every person’s right to survival.* This involved a new series of laws prohibiting the dispossessed from falling back on the welfare system with particularly brutal punishment for recidivism. For example, a 1572 statute under Queen Elizabeth prescribed flogging and iron branding of the left ear for any persons over fourteen caught begging; any repeat offenders over the age of eighteen could be executed if no one agreed to take them into service; third repeat offenders would be summarily executed (Marx 1976:897-8). E.P. Thompson (1966) notes that in 1785 only one of nearly a hundred people executed in London and Middlesex had been convicted of murder; the rest were primarily crimes against property, for example pulling down fences (Andreasson 2006). That so many vagabonds still risked their own lives by taking to the road to avoid wage labor should indicate something about the brutal conditions of employment. As criminal punishment proved insufficient to prevent “sloth,” the state experimented with new techniques for the disciplining of the poor, the criminal and the infirm. As described by Foucault (1977), work houses, prisons, and hospitals became places for the creation of new subjectivities; and, for the reasons described above, Federici (2004) suggests

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<sup>8</sup> Larger producers began to specialize in grain, while smaller producers were relegated to vegetable production.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in France a royal edict in 1556 required women to register every pregnancy; should any women’s infant die before baptism or after a concealed delivery, she would be sentenced to death regardless of guilt. In fact, excluding witchcraft, more women were executed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for infanticide than for any other crime.

adding the witch's torture chamber to his list of disciplinary technologies. Cleverly disguising this war of the propertied against the poor was new liberal rhetoric about freedom and rights.

This is not to suggest that this process of creating a new labor class was a conspiracy. Rather, the interests of the landed gentry happened to align and reinforce the interests of the emerging capitalist class. As Marx put it, the “new landed aristocracy was the natural ally of the new bankocracy” (1976:885). These processes also coincided with an intense period of state formation—which one might describe as a period of “primitive bureaucratic accumulation” (F. Stepputat, pers. comm. 3/07). In other words, the English game and enclosure laws were feudal in intent (to reinforce the hierarchy of the landed gentry), but the effects were capitalistic by creating wageworkers out of peasants (Perelman 2000). In this sense, the emergent bourgeoisie merely seized opportunities afforded to them by previous systems of exploitation. By turning self-reliant people into beggars, the enclosures effectively became a “revolution of the rich against the poor” (Polanyi 1944:35). The great irony is that the laissez faire economy required deliberate state intervention (Marx 1976:915),<sup>10</sup> as well as the complicity of classical political economists who, based upon the “flimsy foundation of Poor Law conditions” erected “the most formidable conceptual instrument of destruction ever directed against an outworn order” (Polanyi 1944:223).

## **Marxism and Primitive Accumulation**

*You take my life*

*When you do take the means whereby I live.*

-Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1 [quoted in Worthy 2001]

Because Marx presents such a remarkably contingent description of the English enclosures, many Marxist scholars have subsequently interpreted primitive accumulation as a closed, aleatory event in capitalism's distant past (Read 2002). They presume that this particular combination of forces—its peculiar foundations in feudalism, the ideological role of

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<sup>10</sup> Capitalism can work independently of state protection, but it prefers a bourgeois state (Harvey 2003:91).

“improvement,” and the British cultural willingness to use full legal force and punishment to create workers out of peasants, no matter what the suffering—could have unleashed the beast of capitalism in England and only in England. For example, in her book on the origin of capitalism, Ellen Wood (2002) argues that (industrial) capitalism emerged primarily from new agrarian labor relations formed first in the English countryside and which then expanded into other geographic orbits through the force of its own internal logic. Implicit in her argument is the assumption that capitalism can travel ahead of political authority and develop elsewhere without the peculiar violence and state complicity of the English case. Like Wood, many strict Marxists treat primitive accumulation as a closed, historical accident—therefore of little theoretical interest—with two general exceptions over the past century and a half:

- (1) First, vanguardist Russian scholars concerned about class formation often discussed how they might socially engineer “primitive socialist accumulation” (Abdelkarim 1992). In contrast to Lenin who regarded primitive accumulation as a historically closed process, Rosa Luxemburg (2003) saw it as an inherent and continuous feature of imperialism. Nonetheless, she defined primitive accumulation fairly narrowly, as the process of acquiring surplus by “noncapitalist” or “primitive” means and turning them into capital (cf. Abdelkarim 1992).
- (2) Debates about primitive accumulation then reemerged among Marxist scholars in the 1970s in discussions of dependency theory and the role of peasant movements in revolution, for example in the work of Bartra (1975) and Frank (1977), which largely depicted of primitive accumulation as a transitional process until the capitalist mode of production became dominant.

In his path breaking book, Perelman (1983) notes the odd denial of many Marxist scholars about the persistence of primitive accumulation in other places, other times. He suggests that perhaps they are wary of calling attention to the fact that exploitation cannot be solely described in economic terms (Polanyi 1944). Although Marx himself acknowledged that “direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases” (1976:899), his main concern, after all, was to describe how the capitalist wage relations exploited workers as much as more overt forms of violence, and to therefore show why class revolution was necessary. He clearly thought that once capitalism had taken hold, in the “ordinary run of things,” businessmen would discover that the ‘silent compulsion’ of market pressures was more

effective in exploiting labor than violence (Perelman 2000). To recognize that parallel forms of plunder that co-exist with and sometimes might even reinforce capitalist accumulation might draw attention away from the inherent structural violence in capitalist wage relations that Marxists see as their central mission to unveil.

Like the classical political economists who realized that “self-provisioning did not have to be restricted on account of its failure, but rather because of its success” (Perelman 2000:370), Marx shared an antagonism to small-scale, independence producers (whether they be peasants or other small family businesses)—exemplified by his infamous comment in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* describing peasants as “potatoes in a sack.” Marxist literature is embroidered with evolutionist and teleological assumptions about the necessity of moving beyond peasant household production and “progressing” to more complex divisions of labor. Aside from the little that Friedrich Engels wrote about the household economy, Marxist analyses basically ignores women's household labor, and reproductive work. They also deny that the world has always had small markets or what the anthropologist Sol Tax so eloquently described as “penny capitalism,” often managed or patronized by women.

Yet, as Karl Polanyi so brilliantly argued, the problem lies not with markets in and of themselves, but in the ripping away of markets from the social and cultural limits previously placed upon them by the moralities of household and community economies. For him, the critical problem is when markets become so disembedded from society and the society itself becomes structured by raw economic relations that it literally becomes a “market society.” In Europe, this process of transformation from feudalism to capitalism took many messy centuries. Economists working for institutions like the World Bank seem to forget that difficult history when they criticize developing nations as “failed states” for having failed to make a successful transition to “free markets” in just the three or four decades following colonialism. Some Marxists, as well, have tried to use the concept of “primitive accumulation” to criticize this stalled transition. For example, Moore (2004:89) argues that Third World countries remain

“locked in primitive accumulation’s embrace”—as if it were a historical stage from which they could eventually break free.

Ironically both "free-market" economists and orthodox Marxists perceive primitive accumulation as linear and historical, which leaves few alternatives to capitalism, short of revolution. Yet, this "transition" process—or what Marxists might call the "articulation" of capitalism with other "modes of production" may not be so unilineal and evolutionary. Unlike many of Marx’s interpreters who strip away the dialectic of primitive accumulation by construing it as a closed event completed in the distant past, I see it as a continuous process, ripping people from their roots and steadily eroding of any aspect of life lying outside the market. Capital, after all, is not a thing but a dialectical social relationship between those who own property and those stripped of it.

### **Perpetual Primitive Accumulation**

*‘The original sin of simple robbery [must] be repeated lest the motor of accumulation suddenly die down’*  
-Hannah Arendt (Retort 2005:76)

Picking up in some ways where dependency theory broke off, there are renewed conversations today about the ongoing necessity of primitive accumulation for the expansion of capitalist relations onto new frontiers and into new realms. What I find so intriguing about these discussions is how quickly they have moved far beyond tight Marxist circles to reverberate within global social movements—and how in many cases, the social movements (not the academics) are actually leading the discussion. Drawing both from academics and activists, in this section, I describe what I perceive as two major theoretical challenges in conceptualizing primitive accumulation as a permanent, plural process.

The first is how to conceptualize primitive accumulation as a defining feature of various kinds of capitalism—and not just its peculiar Protestant origins in the English countryside. Capitalism itself may have changed so dramatically with the advent of the modern corporation that we that we need to think seriously about how "primitive accumulation" may have changed

since the birth of the "corporation-as-a-person" from within the United States legal system. We simply cannot expect easy answers on contemporary issues from a text clearly written for nineteenth century audiences about nineteenth century problems. Surely we need adaptable and expansive theory to understand better the extraordinary extra-economic powers being accrued by corporate conglomerations in the twenty-first century.

Like Weber (1978), I prefer the specificity of defining capitalisms in plural, historically specific ways partly because those who describe the latest stage of corporate capitalism as "late capitalism" assume that capitalism will somehow end, thereby underestimating the spectacular capacity of capitalism to constantly reinvent itself. We need more research into how primitive accumulation functions in other exaggerated contexts such as: the new "gangster" capitalism of Russia, the "crony" capitalism of white South African elites, the military-corporate capitalism of the United States (which never transitioned out of a war economy), the "dictatorial" capitalism of China, the speculative "dot.com" capitalism of Silicon Valley, in general, the "socialized" capitalism of Europe, or, in my case, the "colonial-cattle" capitalism of Guatemala's frontier. Each, I suggest, would have its own peculiar characteristics of savage accumulation and its own mechanisms for generating consent. Once we understand these particularities, we can then begin tracing continuities in the hidden dynamics of power through transitions among different kinds of economic systems. As Marx put it, "Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one" (1976:916). "A series of forcible methods" (Marx 1976:928) of primitive accumulation—e.g. trickery, chicanery, coercion, subsidies, and political maneuvering—were at work not only in the rise of industrial capitalism, but also in its transformation into corporate and other styles of capitalism. One particularly interesting treatment of the transition from industrial to corporate capitalism is the United States is Dimitra Doukas's (2003) *Worked Over* about upstate New York.<sup>11</sup> As we will see in this book, in

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<sup>11</sup> In Dimitra Doukas's (2003) engaging ethnography of the coercive shift from regional industrial capitalism to corporate capitalism, she relates the history of the Mohawk River Valley of upstate New York. According to Jeffersonian ideals, nineteenth-century mechanics ran independent shops housed within larger factories and

such transitions, the imposition of new forms of property may be both defending an older order and simultaneously creating the groundwork for a new one.

The second challenge would be to analyze primitive accumulation as a recurring process in the expansion of new forms of capitalist relations along new frontiers—both literal and metaphoric. "Enclosure" can be both a physical, synchronic movement (bringing new geographic frontiers into the orbits of capitalism) or a diachronic movement (further deepening people's dependence on the market in places long ago chewed up by the motor of capitalism). Marx's ironic double use of the term "free" in describing the process of proletarianization reflects this duality of spatial and ideological displacement. He suggested that peasants dispossessed by the enclosures would be doubly free—"free" from non-market labor obligations (e.g. the geographic rootedness of serfdom) or their own means of production (e.g. independent peasant holdings), and then "free" to sell their own labor.<sup>12</sup> In other words, in Marx's usage, they would be "free" not in the sense of achieving liberty, but in losing the protections (both positive and negative) of community obligations (Marx 1976:896; cf. Abdelkarim 1992).<sup>13</sup>

As David Harvey argues, because of the "pervasive tendency of capital to produce crises of overaccumulation," the capitalist system is "remorselessly driven" to reduce spatial barriers and to accelerate the turnover of investments by either (a) financing long-term infrastructure projects (e.g. highways, buildings) and social investments (e.g. in the education system or

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maintained intellectual property over each component. They also had the freedom to experiment; in fact, the Remington arms factory developed the mechanical typewriter from the creativity of its independent mechanics. Unlike European capitalism, which was primarily urban and fueled by coal, U.S. industrialization was first developed in rural areas using river water as energy; in that rural setting, when factory orders were low, workers simply returned to farming. (Incidentally, this fits the argument of other Marxist historians [e.g. Wood 1999] who maintain that it was the domestic agrarian sector, not imperialism, that fueled industrial capitalism in Europe). The regional elites, the Remington family, lived and worked alongside their workers—and even kept yard fowl at their estate home. Doukas argues this rural/industrial balance was disrupted at the turn of the twentieth century with the rise of the trusts and robber barons, which eventually matured into formal corporations with subsidiary businesses that we know today. A consortium of New York businessmen colluded to force the Remingtons into bankruptcy and seized the factory with tactics and political greasing worthy of an espionage novel. The new owners brought in Taylorist management, and by studying the work habits of the mechanics, they learned to patent the secrets of the mechanics' inventions. Bit by bit, broken strike by broken strike, the mechanics were disciplined into line workers—and modern-day corporate capitalism took form.

<sup>12</sup> From this we get the myth of employment and employability as liberty (Moore 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Or doubly "free" in the Orwellian sense of George Bush's Operation Iraqi Freedom—"free" from Saddam Hussein and "free" to buy American goods.

through New Deal-style policies for social security) or (b) opening up new markets elsewhere, or (c) some combination of the two (2003:98-108). As Luxemburg writes:

Accumulation, with its spasmodic expansion, can no more wait for, and be content with, a natural internal disintegration of non-capitalist formations and their transition to commodity economy, than it can wait for, and be content with, the natural increase of the working population. Force is the only solution open to capital; the accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon, not only at its genesis, but further on down to the present day (Luxemburg 2003:351)

One of the reasons why primitive accumulation is so brutal in frontiers is that the colonizers have to work doubly hard to “free” labor from its local context (Di Mazio 2004). As Polanyi points out, the “smashing of social structures” by white men to control white labor at home in the eighteenth century created parallel methodologies for extracting labor in remote regions the world (1944:164). Likewise, through a careful analysis of the mechanics of colonialism, we can learn something about the domestic political economy (Marx 1976: Chapter 33).

Yet, even after capitalism holds a firm grip geographically both at home and abroad, primitive accumulation must continue apace along “mental commons.” If control of labor was essential to primitive accumulation under industrial capitalism, then mind-control is emblematic of the brave new world of corporate capitalism that depends so deeply on market and image, as I shall explore more deeply in the conclusion. The methods of primitive accumulation might, indeed, be overt and forcible but they may also be stealthily legitimized. In other words, there is a dynamic Machiavellian interplay between the possession and persuasion—between coercion and consent—in making a property claim legitimate (Gudeman and Rivera 2002).<sup>14</sup> As Marx puts it, capital needs its “Platitudinous Sancho Panza” (1976: 794). In this, I draw heavily from Laura Nader's theory of “controlling processes” (1997)—which envisions the dynamics of power in both centered and de-centered ways, for example drawing upon Foucault's discussion of capillary power and Gramsci's formulation of hegemony. For me, one of Nader's greatest insights concerns the hidden power of incremental change or “drift.”

Drawing upon Norbert Elias's (1982) work on manners, she argues that some of the greatest social revolutions have happened not through epochal bursts<sup>15</sup>, but through changes that happen little by little such that they become normalized and forgotten. Witness for example, the gradual juridical process over a century and a half to create the corporation as a fictional "person" with free speech rights. By contrast, during periods of transition, upheaval, and rapid ideological change, power structures become more recognizably visible. To borrow an analogy from Gramsci, one can best see the outlines of the structure (skeleton) when the skin and muscles move. Part of the reason why primitive accumulation is such an important field of study is that these sudden ruptures give us clues about continuities of power between economic systems than we would otherwise see in the gradual reproduction of capital.

Alas, recent theoretical interpretations of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, too, have tended toward the symbolic and lost its bite of political economy. Some in cultural studies like Raymond Williams write about hegemony as almost synonymous with culture. Such distortions of hegemony reveal, I think, almost evolutionary assumptions about late-capitalist societies . . . that "progress" has somehow been made when hegemony moves from harder to softer forms of "manufacturing consent" (cf. Noam Chomsky's observation that "Propaganda is to democracy what violence is to a dictatorship."). Yet, Gramsci's own writings show an undeniable preoccupation with violence and illustrate a far more complex unity of coercion and consent. Composed under harsh circumstances of incarceration, his notebooks were filled with military metaphors. Hegemony, he clarified was not a state of consent, but the process of producing it. Writing from solitary confinement in a prison cell in fascist Italy, Gramsci was certainly well aware of the violence hovering underneath any placid surface of consent. Drawing an analogy between hegemony and the primitive accumulation of symbolic power, I would suggest that the

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<sup>14</sup> An enemy might simply seize land (as in the Mexican-American war) or, perhaps even more duplicitously over time, simply create such negative economic conditions (e.g. under NAFTA) that farmers in the Mexican countryside will "voluntarily" abandon their land and move to El Norte to become the invisible backbone of the U.S. economy.

<sup>15</sup> Or what Richard Kernaghan might characterize in the Agrarian Studies colloquia as "events."

first phase of persuasion tends to be more heavily propagandized, whereas the maintenance of consent requires simply the routine exercise of symbolic power.

Analyzing the hard and soft facets of Q'eqchi' land dispossession, I have identified four key hegemonic processes that would seem to be characteristic of primitive accumulation more broadly: (1) separation from subsistence and new subjectivities, (2) the rule of law and historical amnesia, (3) the collateral damage of debt and never-ending consumerism, (4) the plunder of resources, disguised as civilized economic development and the banner of "progress." In many ways, the more coercive side of these processes are easier to identify and resist, whereas their consensual cousins are more slippery, residing in the netherworlds of culture. I present them briefly here at some level of abstraction, while promising to return to each more directly in relation to lessons learned from the Q'eqchi' experience in the conclusion of the book. For now, I introduce each with a snippet from my village fieldnotes of how those patterns began to crystallize for me when hearing some borrowed Spanish or English word that had been appropriated into the Q'eqchi' language<sup>16</sup>:

1. *Separation from subsistence and the creation of new subjectivities.*

*Since I know he doesn't have any money, I was confused by Don Sebastian's repeated reference to sending his "mooz," his worker, to the field to fetch corn—until I realized he was actually referring to his son-in-law. How deeply that history of being plantation workers (mozos colonos) has infiltrated kinship relations!*

-Fieldnote 1/13/03, Chimo' village

In reviewing the classic Marxist definition of primitive accumulation, it most fundamentally involves a separation from the "natural economy" (to borrow a phrase from Luxemburg [2003]). Typically this produces both (a) an accumulation of capital and (b) proletarianization of the workforce, after which the expanded reproduction of capital continues

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<sup>16</sup> The Q'eqchi' people, especially among women, have the highest rates of monolingualism of all the Maya groups in Guatemala. This also means they have borrowed loan words from Spanish or English (in the case of Belize) for new concepts or social phenomenon and made them sound Q'eqchi'.

naturally, though not always.<sup>17</sup> As I have discussed in the case of the English enclosures, the creation of a docile workforce required not only separation of peasants from the land, but parallel governmental and ideological reinforcements that served to criminalize poverty and discipline workers (Piven and Cloward 1971). “Thus were the agricultural folk forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage labour” (Marx 1976:899). In other words, following separation, processes of primitive accumulation fashion new subjectivities until the new state of separation (or privatization, as it were) has become normalized or the normalization of separation is no longer challenged (De Angelis 2004).<sup>18</sup>

## 2. *The rule of law and historical amnesia.*

*Listening to the elders' ceremony in the cave at daybreak, I was struck how repeatedly they asked permission from the gods, the Tzuultaq'a, for their "liseens" (meaning license, obviously borrowed from the Spanish, licencia) for planting the corn crop. Afterwards the elders explained to me that they had burned so much incense in order to send up with the smoke the message of their petition so it would reach deep into the mountain where the Tzuultaq'a live.*

-Fieldnote 8/23/03, Sehalaw village

In all these processes, manipulations of law and the creation of new categories of crime are essential for enclosing new kinds of property. Like the English enclosures which were supported by dozens of parliamentary acts, the new enclosures are obsessively legal—an absurdly dramaturgical enactment of the “civilized rule of law” and the legalizing of illegalities (Nader and Mattei, forthcoming).<sup>19</sup> Despite the obsession with law, in the new privatizations, corruption and graft seem habitual—indeed, almost structural (Zibechi 2004). As Arundhati Roy suggests, Rumpelstiltskin, the gnome transforms straw into gold has come back, but he has “metamorphosed into an accretion, a cabal, an assemblage, a malevolent, incorporeal,

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<sup>17</sup> If there are migration outlets, for example, de-agrarianization may not lead to the creation of a local wage force or industrialization.

<sup>18</sup> As Silvia Federici (2005) points out, these processes may occur differently for men and women. She argues that the witch-hunts served to help the state enclose women's independent reproductive power, resulting in a dramatic transformation of women from economically-independent subjects in the Middle Ages to the legally-infantilized housewives of the Victorian era.

transnational multignome” (2001:129)—and, I would add, he has a slick legal team. He is no less ruthless today, but has a shinier happier face, scrubbed carefully by public relations managers. Yet, by definition, law leaves a paper trail. Hence, the manipulation of law as a tool of enclosure requires a simultaneous tendency towards historical amnesia.<sup>20</sup> The public must forget the socialization of costs and the privatization of benefits made possible by property (Perelman 2002). As Balzac put it in *Le Père Goriot*, “Le secret des grandes fortunes sans cause apparente est un crime oublié, parce qu’ il a été proprement fait” (“The secret of great wealth with no obvious source is some forgotten crime, forgotten because it was done neatly”). As Rousseau saw it, the propertied classes did this by turning clever usurpation into an inalienable right: ‘The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, This is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society’ (quoted in Andreasson 2006:3). Most private property, in other words, was the result of past enclosure done so “neatly”, both legally and ideologically or carried out by economic mercenaries so far away that it has been forgotten. As the corporate barons and World Bank bureaucrats grow ever more distant from the consequences of their decisions, floating higher on the clouds of luxury far removed from earth’s squalor, they themselves may not even realize what they have done. The boring details of trade and business help sanitize their less than boring results.

### 3. *The collateral damage of debt and never-ending consumerism.*

*Mr. Santiago Asij told today me he was wary of taking a loan for his cacao production because of the long-time period before fruiting begins. Speaking mostly in Q’eqchi’, he explained that with a loan you had to be able to make “fast money” [the only phrase spoken in English] with something like a vegetable crop. Otherwise, you could lose everything....*

-Fieldnote 3/2/04, Sehix village

David Harvey succinctly summarizes the complexities of primitive accumulation by describing it as accumulation “at other people’s expense.” (2004, Kreisler interview:2, cf. McCarthy 2004).

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<sup>19</sup> See Piven and Cloward (1971) for a similar conceptualization of the theatricality of regulating the poor.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Tsing eloquently writes, “Some things seem too terrible to tell. Yet watching while History quietly forgets them seems even more terrible” (2002:94).

In some cases, however, primitive accumulation occurs at one's own expense through the “collateral damage” of credit forced onto people. This may happen on a personal, family, community or even national scale—witness, for example, the massive debt crisis of the Third World of excess capital foisted on them by “economic hit men” for projects doomed to fail (Perkins 2004). Marx himself comments that public debt (e.g. treasury bonds) and the international credit system were “the most powerful levers of primitive accumulation,” working like an “enchanters wand” to turn non-existent money into capital (1976:919). Debt can be coercive—either forcing credit onto people who cannot possibly repay it or making life too expensive to survive without debt. Acceptance of debt can also be manufactured as “consensual” through the creation of new consumer needs, which may on the surface appear innocuous, but they incrementally and inexorably deepen our collective dependency on wage labor. For example, described in Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* (1985), the shift from trade in luxury to survival goods became an essential part of transformation in the culture of wage relations and production—and thereby, one of the critical factors in the shift from mercantilism to capitalism.<sup>21</sup> As he shows, the point at which commodity production and wage labor shifts from a *choice* to a *necessity* becomes blurred by desire, as globalization turns inward—“mapping and enclosing the hinterland of the social, and carving out from the detail of human inventiveness an ever more ramified and standardized market of exchangeable subjectivities” (Retort 2005:20). Certainly the more people want to buy, or have to buy, the more dependent they become on their wages and the less likely to rebel. With middle class citizens saturated with debt and properly bonded to their jobs, marketers and lenders have begun to prey on the poorest of the poor for expanded sales. For instance, a session at a recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland was devoted to “Finding Profitable Ways to Deliver Affordable

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<sup>21</sup> As many scholars have argued (Wood 1999, Pomeranz 1999, Mies 1986), international trade long existed but was dependent on extra-economic factors like control of the seas and focused primarily on the circulation of luxury goods, not on changing the terms of production of basic products like grains or other commodities necessary for survival. Merchants function perfectly well in non-capitalist systems, taking advantage of fragmented markets by buying cheap and selling dear (Wood 1999: 95).

Goods and Services to the Poor.” Professors C.K. Prahalad and Stuart Hart recently made national headlines by advising corporations of ways they can begin to market to the world’s four billion poor—an argument later revised by Prahalad (2004) into a book, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*. After all, economic globalization not only adds more workers to the available labor pool (recruiting them to the “reserve army of labor” in Marx’s terms)—thereby driving down wages—but it also draws more of the global poor into the pool of consumers.

4. *The perpetual plunder of new commons, disguised as by the complementary myths of economic development, efficiency, growth and progress.*

*This afternoon I was making shellfish tamales (with “jutes” collected from a nearby stream) with the ladies from the extended Caal family. They were amused by my formal vocabulary for the word radio—which I described as an “ab’eb’aal ch’üich”, literally the “metal hearing device,” which I had learned from the linguist in Cobán who taught me Q’eqchi’. He and other linguists from the Academy of Maya Languages are trying to invent Q’eqchi’ words for many modern inventions by adding the suffix “ch’üich” meaning “metal” or “machete” to the end. For example, they have decided to call airplanes “metal birds.” Since the “radio” word had amused the ladies, I decided to try out the word I had learned for “computer” by explaining that I might marry a man who works with a “metal brain” or “ulul ch’üich’.” Doña María, the matriarch of the family, fired back rapidly with a joke, “I bet he works with his ‘ch’üich’!” From the bawdy laughter that ensued among all the women, I gathered that these metal symbols of progress are suffixed with a word that has the double entendre of “penis.” How fitting. These women understand well the patriarchy of progress.*

-Fieldnote 12/13/04, Sehalaw village

“Economic development” and “progress” have long been the mantras of capitalism, presuming that the earth and its resources constitute an ever expanding pie. Opposing these powerful myths of modernity, dependency theorists pointed out the global South was not merely undeveloped, but underdeveloped as a consequence of the overdevelopment (or more precisely, the greed) of the global North. In other words, there is a continued connection between increased poverty and accelerating accumulation of wealth (Goldman 2004), but recognition of this schism gets muted by the economists’ penchant for emphasizing national averages. This is due in large part to an autistic global economic system focused on a bizarre subset of quantitative variables such as the GNP which measure the amount of money circulating in an economy, but fail to take into account subsistence or informal economies, women’s and

household labor, and also fail to subtract the plunder of natural resources. Nor have Marxists paid much attention to these “extra-economic” variables, since they usually do not perceive indigenous, environmental, and women’s issues as real class struggles since the goals of the movements are not to seize state power, but simple to be left alone. Rather than throwing out this obviously flawed accounting system which reveals so little about countries’ real development (Waring 1988), neoliberal economists counter-argue that these “externalities” must merely be quantified, commodified, and drawn into the market. The problems of privatization can be solved with more privatization, they say.

This last characteristic of primitive accumulation—the plunder of areas not formally valued in economic accounting systems—reveals something paradoxical about capitalism. Partial self-provisioning by workers is good for capitalists because it allows them to pay lower wages. As discussed in the material feminist literature (e.g. Mies 1986; Waring 1988; Zaretsky 1975), the boundaries between the public and private are constantly shifting as part of this double-movement of disembedding and re-embedding of the market. As Engels (1959) pointed out, labor gets reproduced in the domestic sphere and then inserted into the formal economy in a process remarkably similar to primitive accumulation (Kearney 1986; Meillassoux 1991). Through the reproduction of labor, the drudgery of the domestic economy provides a permanent, unpaid subsidy of both physical and emotional support to the formal economy. The domestic economy also provides flexibility to modern capitalist systems, which need only pay for the direct support of workers while avoiding the indirect costs of labor maintenance when work is unavailable (‘periods of enforced idleness’) (Portes 1978:14; Meillassoux 1991). Yet, domestic labor remains externalized to the market economy, in other words “freely” available like natural resources (Waring 1988; Mies 1986).<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, early industrialization was coupled

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<sup>22</sup> Mies (1986) adds a feminist twist with a historical analysis of the origins of what she labels “capitalist-patriarchy.” Informed by Sombart’s (1922/1967) thesis that modern capitalism derived from luxury consumption, Mies argues that early merchant capitalism had no connection with the growing needs of the masses, but was instead based entirely on trade in luxury items stolen or looted from the colonies for consumption by European elites in the

with strategies for indoctrinating women about how to use lowered family wages more efficiently. For example, new principles of management (a.k.a. Taylorism) in the early twentieth century leaked into the domestic economy through the idea of “scientific housekeeping” (Mies 1986; Hayden 1981). These feminist insights, I would argue, offer a more nuanced vision of primitive accumulation as more than just the multiplication of the *rural* proletariat.<sup>23</sup> The grand duke of corporate capitalism himself, Henry Ford, encouraged his workers to plant sub/urban home gardens to supplement their factory incomes, and as late as the 1930s sent inspectors on home visits to enforce this (Perelman 2000). In this sense, we might say that capitalism simultaneously maintains and destroys the domestic economy through manipulations in the mix of wage and non-wage labor (Kearney 1986; Meillassoux 1981; Mies 1986; Perelman 1983).

I would suggest that the grand secret of capitalism is that as a system it may significantly undermine, but will never entirely destroy these hidden “extra economic” supports—be they civic structures, cultural heritage, natural resources, social networks, subsistence economies, women’s labor, the inheritance of future generations, traditional knowledge, culture, and life itself. Because the separation between older and newer modes of production is never complete, new economic forms can overlay and reinforce older ones in brutal and unexpected ways. Were all these “commons” and previous economic systems drawn into the “creative destruction” of capitalism, to borrow a phrase from Schumpeter, the whole amalgamation would self implode.

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seventeenth century—spices, sugar, cacao, textiles, dyes, perfumes, stimulants, and metals—much of which coupled with the slave trade (cf. Mintz 1985). For example, the major trading companies, e.g East India Company, the Hudson Bay Company, and the French Compaignie des Indes Orientales, conveniently combined spice production and procurement with slave trading (Mies 1986:90). The demand for these luxury goods, in turn, was fueled by new ideologies of domesticity, constructing women as “luxury creatures” and as demonstrators of wealth. As part of this process, the display of wealth by elites shifted from public festivals/markets to the collection of personal commodities in their private secluded homes and palaces.

<sup>23</sup> The “outsourcing” of home labor is not just a rural phenomenon (Aronson 1980); for example, at the turn of the century crowded urban quarters prevented new immigrants from doing their laundry directly in their apartments, thereby creating a new dependency on commercial laundry mats. As this example shows, technological changes may re-open the home to production, as cheaper and more efficient washing machines allow self-laundering once again (Perelman 1983).

Of course none of this is predestined or planned out. As Farriss (1984) argues in her lucid history of colonial Yucatan, the Spanish did not bring with them a modernizing project, but a “very simple colonial regime” that was an extension of medieval Spain. “The colonizers were no more capitalist than the colonized in the way they conceived relations between the two groups” (52). Farriss then poses this provoking analogy:

The comparison I am making is in the effect on indigenous society: the difference between a parasite that invades and destroys the host organism — in this case a social organism — and one that merely fastens itself on the organism and weakens it... (1984:52)

Following Farriss’s insights, I suggest that new varieties of capitalism will never totally replace previous economy systems; rather, capitalism(s) tend to co-opt what previous elements may facilitate accumulation. In some cases, pre-existing structures may be violently repressed by new forms of capitalism, but they are often simply co-opted (Harvey 2003:146-7).

Like a parasite, capitalism (and especially its current corporate incarnation) flourishes by feeding off an external host—whether it be common resources, the environment, subsistence economies (i.e. “use value” economies), household reproductive labor in the domestic sphere, or broader social/cultural networks. Continuing the metaphor a bit, the parasite force of capitalism penetrates as deeply as possible without killing its host, ideally weakening the organism just enough to avoid the social body from reacting and fighting back. In this, the state serves as a doctor of sorts—doling out medicine by limited prescription to keep the parasite from killing its unwilling social hosts, but never letting the hosts cure themselves with their own home remedies. After all, the most successful parasites manage to develop symbiotic relationships with their hosts, so as to remain undetected by the immune system. Parasites, too, are quintessentially opportunistic, as they often follow the invasion of some other disease. As we see in the new invasive procedures of empire on the world stage today, following military infection, corporate capital quietly slips into the bloodstream.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Business opportunists have long ridden along the tails of military invasion and imperialism—whether they be the carpetbaggers moving to the South behind the Union army or the companies following the scent of Paul Bremmer's

Marx himself clearly argues that states play a critical role in all these transitions to “hasten, as in a hothouse” (1976:915) processes of accumulation by dominant groups. Early capital accumulation originated not from the honest trading of merchants, but largely through *state-sanctioned* piracy, forced labor (especially slavery), monopolies, and seizures of property (Mies 1986; cf. Wolf 1982). Clearly such violence was not just a historical antecedent to capitalism, because “neoliberal” capitalism continues to use states as lubricating agents for transnational business. The political and ideological frameworks of states may vary, but they all seem to award a “head start” to elites in the accumulation game. Albeit fragmented themselves today by privatization (turned into “governments by contract,” in the famous words of Margaret Thatcher), states nonetheless remain important actors by providing a barrier for citizen claims for accountability and bailing out big business when necessary (Nasser 2003). In other words, states have developed symbiotic relationships with capitalism(s). As the main facilitator of how much corporate plunder and citizen rebellion shall be allowed, the state certainly remains an “essential terrain of opposition” (Wood 2002:181).

Something new may be happening on frontiers of the global periphery. The World Bank has initiated a massive experimentation in ameliorative “land reform”—or rather implementing market-driven land policies. By controlling the puppet strings of property relations, states were once the primary mediators in the destruction of certain ways of life and their recomposition into a new ways of work (Farid 2005). What then will happen if they follow the World Bank’s new advice to simply renounce their historically most important power to the market? Or to repeat a question posed by Marx, what would happen “if men were willing to turn the whole of the land from public into private property at one blow” (1976:938)? What will happen to communities and commons if market standardization of land regimes suddenly makes them “legible” to profiteering predators (a.k.a. “investors”) (cf. Scott 1998)? There would likely be

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grotesquely pro-U.S. corporate edicts—or have transformed military-subsidized technologies into new forms of accumulation (the development of pesticides from nerve gas agents during the Green Revolution).

massive social protest. Yet, there is something slippery with the World Bank's methodology. In Guatemala and elsewhere, they are clearly experimenting with land market mechanisms *on the periphery* with plans for later replicating these projects in core national territory once they have become normalized. So, before I turn to describe the particular life ways and stories of the Q'eqchi' Maya, I want to say a few words about the dynamics of frontiers.

### **The Drama of Frontiers**

Ever since my first field experience in 1990 working in Olancho, Honduras, I have been drawn to "wild" frontier regions as special places for understanding political economy. Through the "drama of the frontier" (Foweraker 1981:ix), we can witness directly the melding of traditional and colonist cultures and the ever-growing fluidity of identity groups. Although these hinterlands have been historically isolated from national economic and social changes, once colonization begins, (mal)"development" is shockingly rapid. The frontier palimpsest reveals layer upon layer etched with the sequential consequences of national integration. Although the extent of the devastation and the uniformity of the patterns of social and ecological devastation are so achingly similar across Latin America, the stubborn optimist in me finds them to be places of hope, where more just, equitable and sustainable development might be possible if only the rapid forces of change could be harnessed towards regional self-reliance and redistributive justice rather than absorption into export-driven national economies.

Anthropology has always lurked on "frontiers"—be they physical, disciplinary, and theoretical. Their instability, both physical and conceptual, lends an element of danger and beckon considerations of the future. As Tsing suggests, frontiers are zones of "awkward engagement" and of "cultural friction" (2005:xi). Frontiers also have chiasmatic qualities that stimulate evocative questions.<sup>25</sup> Are they free places—or emptied places? Are frontiers edges—or

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<sup>25</sup> Thanks to Don Brenneis for these insights on the chiasmatic quality of roads in his role as a discussant for the conference, "Roads and Walls: Concrete Histories" held March 3, 2006, at University of California-Santa Cruz, organized by the anthropology graduate students.

areas that connect? Do they separate—or integrate? Or, pertaining to my thesis on primitive accumulation, I might ask, are frontiers residual to capitalism—or generative of it? That these are such difficult questions to answer underscore the importance of frontiers as dynamic places of movement and exchange. For similar reasons, their mapping is deeply political—because descriptions and projections of the contours of a frontier are ultimately discussions about the future. As Susanna Hecht argues, Amazonia is not just a forest of trees, but of symbols; as regions perceived as lacking history, tropical frontiers are like a blank “canvas” for painting “narratives about primitivism, purity, and the primeval” (1993:4). How the Q’eqchi’ view the lowland geographical areas adjacent to their highland homeland is clearly very different than the state’s conceptualization of its hinterlands.

Infused as they are with power struggles, frontiers are excellent sites from which to examine the restructuring of global capitalism. To put it in Harvey-esque terms, space-time compression and capitalist transformation are exaggeratedly visceral in frontiers. They are sites of “spectacular” accumulation (cf. Retort 2005). Precisely because the most predatory and gratuitously destructive forms of capitalism seem to be at work on frontiers, they are good places to observe the striking contrasts between environmental destruction and the pitifully small improvement in human welfare that follows (cf. Hecht 1984). Moreover, analysis of the intense and often violent conflicts that occur in frontiers can serve to “unmask the true face” of national social and economic structures (Foweraker 1981). Located beyond the bounds of normality and civilization, the most deviant and omnivorous forms of capitalism can be found in frontiers—and push the norms of what constitutes acceptable economic behavior. For this reason, they are the perfect theatre for the viewing the perpetual re-enactment of the most brutal forms of “primitive accumulation.” As Harvey observes: “While I do not think that accumulation by dispossession is exclusive to the periphery, it is certainly the case that some of its most vicious and inhumane manifestations are in the most vulnerable and degraded regions within uneven geographical development” (2003:173).

Like westward expansion in the United States, the Latin American peasant pioneer cycle is, in a sense, a classic story of both spatial and temporal primitive accumulation.<sup>26</sup> Reminiscent in many ways of the brutal history of the English enclosures, the Latin American frontier story also appears to involve a process that forces settlers either to sell their labor for wages (quite often to the same cattle ranchers that displace them) or to clear more land that likely will be appropriated by cattle ranchers at a cheap price sometime in the future. Demographic analysts also note that steady migration streams and high fertility rates within the frontier almost guarantee that this process will be carried through future generations. Foweraker (1981), thus, observes that as a class, “the peasantry is effectively divorced from the means of production **through time**” (175) [emphasis mine]. The tragically ironic result is a reproduction of the minifundio/latifundio relations that led states to initiate frontier colonization schemes in the first place, as we shall see with the Q’eqchi’ Maya.

## **Chapter Overview**

Promising abundance and prosperity, Latin American frontiers have long fueled the imaginations of many actors—as cash for the lumber baron, refuges for rebel guerillas, havens for drug traffickers, garrison outposts for military men, enormous ranches for cattlemen, oil and mineral reserves for multinational corporations, living laboratories for tropical ecologists, spiritual fields for missionaries...and for landless families, an open territory promising a new start and a patch of earth to work with dignity. Why then, in Guatemala’s northern frontier, would so many settlers be selling the lowland homesteads they worked so hard to acquire? To explain this paradox, the first half of my book delves into the history, migratory patterns and agro-ecology of northern Guatemala’s predominant indigenous settlers, the Q’eqchi’ Maya as background for understanding contemporary threats to their landholdings. The second half of

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<sup>26</sup> Mainstream history often connects the rise of U.S. power to glorified accounts of the western pioneer trek across the North American continent. Though pioneer expansion decimated Native American populations and seized

the book then describes Q'eqchi' struggles to defend their "commons" against the cattle industry, but more broadly against a twenty-first century enclosure movement, driven by transnational trade, infrastructure development, and neoliberal property reform.

Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter provides additional background of three critical periods of land privatization: (1) the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica which partitioned lands between the Crown, military leaders, and the Catholic Church, (2) the 1870s coffee boom when the Guatemalan government gave away communal indigenous lands to foreign investors and instituted a series of laws turning the Maya people into serf labor, and (3) the design of colonization programs as part of the military's counter-revolution following the 1954 CIA coup of Guatemala's first democratically elected president. Beyond just the mere control of land, I argue that elites were equally interested in coercively maintaining cheap indigenous labor at each of these three historical moments.

In the third chapter, I explore the causes and consequences of Q'eqchi' migration and territorial expansion—and discuss why a learned observer would characterize them to the "gringos of the Maya world." Since at least the colonial period, the Q'eqchi' people have used migration into the northern lowland forests as a response to land conflicts, but also as resistance against elite attempts to control their labor. Once a mountainous people, almost half the Q'eqchi' population now lives in the lowlands, and over time, they have adapted remarkably well to these new ecosystems for reasons explained in the chapter. Trying to convey the human depth behind the migration numbers, throughout the chapter, I narrate several Q'eqchi' pioneer stories—recounting their tragedies, their epic journeys and their aspirations for a better life on the frontier.

The fourth chapter discusses the challenge of agricultural intensification facing lowland Q'eqchi' farmers. Concerned about massive deforestation in the wake of frontier colonization, biodiversity conservationists in Petén worry whether Q'eqchi' "slash and burn" farmers will

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indigenous territories, implicit in these mainstream histories is the assumption that economic growth justified the

intensify their agriculture fast enough to remain ahead of the demographic momentum otherwise pushing them to squat inside national parks. Their obsessive focus on the ecological limits or “carrying capacity” of the region, to me, clearly invokes specters of Thomas Malthus. Written in 1798 during the height of English enclosures, Malthus’s influential treatise on population, I posit, was not just a discourse about the limits of “nature” to exponential population growth, but more importantly, a justification of private property and inequality. To illustrate the flaws in Garret Hardin’s neo-Malthusian discourse on the “tragedy of the commons,” I devote most of this chapter to a description of the social and environmental logic of the traditional Q’eqchi’ customary system of milpa agriculture. While population growth may certainly accelerate deforestation, the greater problem, I argue is the “property trap” in which the Q’eqchi’ are caught. Through cross-country comparison, I show how the pressures of private property (in other words “the tragedy of enclosure”) in Guatemala have compelled the Q’eqchi’ to erode their environment, while the Belizean Q’eqchi have adapted more sustainably to their lowland rainforest habitat through customary land management.

Promoted as a “market-based” agrarian reform, the World Bank and other multilateral donors have loaned millions of dollars for land legalization programs across Guatemala and Belize, starting in Petén, as described in Chapter 5. Draped in environmental rhetoric, these projects claim they will slow the advance of the agricultural frontier into protected areas. In my research, I found quite the opposite: many peasant beneficiaries are selling their land to ranchers as soon as it gets legalized and then moving further north, often into national parks. This chapter documents the scope of the dispossession and attempts to explain why Q’eqchi’ settlers sell their land after having struggled so long as peasant pioneers. I argue that the fundamental problem with the land legalization process has been excessively technical implementation, made worse by misunderstandings about communal Q’eqchi’ land management practices.

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violence and genocide. As Frederick Jackson Turner expressed, westward expansion was our manifest destiny.

Although cattle ranching is the driving force behind deforestation, it has oddly been overlooked in the conservation literature on this region. Filling this gap, in Chapter 6, I provide a historical overview of the expansion of the beef industry into the northern Maya lowlands. The rest of the chapter focuses on the mechanisms of land acquisition by cattle ranchers and the complex Q'eqchi' absorption of the ranching culture surrounding them. Although tropical range ranching is not particularly profitable, I argue that the beef industry fulfills other social and speculative purposes by providing a physically powerful way for elites to control both land and labor until they can be profitably transformed into export-led agribusiness and other extractive activities. In the meanwhile, cattle serve as both a biologically and economically flexible tool of enclosure. As low maintenance property, cattle not only create surplus value, but also occupy extensive amounts of land. Because they practically reproduce themselves, the ephemeral employment provided by cattle constricts the pulse of local labor demand.

A hundred years after the original “liberal” reforms in Guatemala to promote foreign investment uprooted the highland Q'eqchi', “neoliberal” programs of trade and investment are once again dispossessing the Q'eqchi', as described in Chapter 7. One such program is the Puebla to Panama Plan (PPP), a \$50 billion infrastructure portfolio designed by the Inter-American Development Bank to facilitate foreign investment and transportation in southern Mexico and Central America. Although cloaked in the language of eco-development, many of the PPP mega-projects (roads, hydroelectric dams, port development, electricity grids) crisscross Guatemala's northern lowlands, thereby intensifying speculative pressures on Q'eqchi' territory. Land concentration, I argue, will be further compounded by grain price disruptions expected under the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

The concluding chapter (8) returns us again to the problem of enclosures and how the recurring dispossessions of the Q'eqchi' can deepen our understanding of other contemporary struggles to defend the commons. I review Q'eqchi' experiences in relation to the four hegemonic processes that I have presented in this introductory chapter as being common to

many cycles of primitive accumulation: (1) separation from the natural economy, (2) the rule of law, (3) the collateral damage of debt, and (4) a tumorous concept of economic growth. Shining the mirror back upon our own society, I then show how ideas about consumer “choice,” convenience, and comfort facilitate new Orwellian frontiers of corporate enclosures upon everyday life. If, as I have argued here, primitive accumulation is permanent, then so too will be societal responses to processes of enclosure. As I am hesitant to claim that the conclusion is about the ever-clichéd idea of resistance, I would prefer to say that it seeks to engage seriously with Karl Polanyi’s ideas about the critical importance of re-embedding runaway markets back into the social and cultural fabric. The understanding that primitive accumulation is a perpetually contested process provides us with a multitude of alternatives in *the here and now* for defending not only the materials commons (in the Q’eqchi’ case, land) but for strengthening democracy against the ever-growing threat of corporate fascism.

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# Map of Q'eqchi' village sites



**Map—Guatemalan departments and municipalities of Petén, Alta Verapaz, and Izabal**

