

History of Capitalism: The Destruction and Grabbing of Collective Commons

Part 1 of Collective commons, debts and pharmaceutical companies' patents

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Since the dawn of capitalism the logic of collective commons has been systematically challenged by the capitalist class through commodification and private appropriation of wealth. One of their earliest objectives, when factories started to appear in Europe just over several centuries ago, was to take away the common people's resources and livelihoods by grabbing the lands they lived on and so force them to migrate to the cities and accept the miserable and miserably paid jobs in the factories. On farther continents under European domination their goal had been to grab the land and resources of local populations and force them into hard labour under the whip of imperialist exploiters.

From the 16th to the 19th century the various countries that one after the other fell under the yoke of capitalism all went through vast periods of destruction of collective commons, a process that has been well documented by such authors as Karl Marx (1818-1883) [book 1 of Capital](#), [1] Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) [in The Accumulation of Capital](#), [2] Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) [The Great Transformation](#), [3] Silvia Federici (1942) *Caliban and the Witch*. [4] [A great film by Raoul Peck about the young Karl Marx](#) [5] visualizes examples of the destruction of collective commons with dramatic scenes of the brutal repression of poor people collecting wood for fuel in German Rhineland forests and Karl Marx's stand in support of their centuries old legal and traditional right to do so that was running contrary to capitalistic logic. Daniel Bensaïd wrote [Les Dépossédés : Karl Marx, les voleurs de bois et le droit des pauvres](#) (*in French*) a concise description of the process of destroying collective commons. [6]

In *Capital*, Karl Marx describes certain forms of grabbing by the capitalist system in Europe:

“The spoliation of church properties, the fraudulent alienation of the State domains, the robbery of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property, and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of reckless terrorism,

were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalistic agriculture, made the soil part and parcel of capital, and created for the town industries the necessary supply of a “free” and outlawed proletariat”. (*Capital*, [Book I, eighth section. Chap. 27](#))

While capitalist production was being imposed on Europe it was also spreading all over the globe:

“The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation”. (*Capital*, [book I, part 8. Chap. 31](#))

Marx very succinctly describes the four centuries leading up to the generalization of the industrial revolution at the time *Capital* was written:

“The different momenta of primitive accumulation distribute themselves now, more or less in chronological order, particularly over Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and England. In England at the end of the 17th century, they arrive at a systematic combination, embracing the colonies, the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system. These methods depend in part on brute force, e.g., the colonial system. But, they all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition ([Chap. 31](#)).

Since then, capitalism has continued its offensive against collective commons for two reasons: 1. The commons have not yet entirely disappeared and therefore they limit the total domination of capital, which consequently seeks to appropriate them or reduce them to the bare minimum. 2. Important struggles have recreated commons during the 19th and 20th centuries. These commons are constantly being challenged.

During the 19th and 20th centuries there have been simultaneous destructions and creations of collective commons

During the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, popular movements recreated social commons by developing systems of collective support: cooperatives, strike funds, solidarity funds. The victories of the Russian revolution also led to a short period of creation of common properties, until Stalinism degenerated into dictatorship and shamefully privileged a bureaucratic caste as described by Leon Trotsky in 1936 (Leon Trotsky [The Revolution Betrayed](#). [7]).

In many capitalist countries (in varied degrees of development) the governments realized that to maintain social peace and even to avoid a resurgence of revolutionary movements some scraps had to be thrown to the populations. This resulted in the development of *welfare states*.

After WW2, from the second half of the 1940s to the end of the 1970s the wave of

decolonizations mainly in Africa, Asia and the Middle-East, and the victorious revolutions in China (1949) and Cuba (1959) led to the redeployment of some collective commons notably through the nationalizations of strategic infrastructures (Suez canal in 1956 by the Nasser regime) and [commodities such as copper by Allende in the early 1970s and petroleum resources \(Algeria, Libya, Iraq, Iran...\)](#).

This period of reaffirming collective commons is expressed in several United Nations documents from the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to the 1986 *Declaration on the Right of Development* which in article 1 paragraph 2 affirms: “The human right to development also implies the full realization of the right of peoples to self-determination, which includes,(...) the exercise of their inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources.” [8] This inalienable right of peoples to full sovereignty over their resources is constantly challenged by the [IMF, the World Bank and the majority of governments in the interests of big private corporations](#).

Concerning collective commons

In this article we will not establish a *stricto sensu* definition of what are ‘collective commons’. The term will be used in a wide generic sense. This will include the collective ownership of lands which under different forms has marked the history of Humanity right up to the most recent concepts of ‘collective commons’; public services which are 20th century social conquests won through social struggles and financed through taxation. ‘Collective commons’ also includes workers’ own solidarity structures that grew with early capitalism such as solidarity and strike funds, cooperatives, mutual loans, not forgetting more recent developments such as labour laws and welfare state structures won by the working classes during the 20th century and analyzed in an original manner by Bernard Friot. [9] In a collective commons environment mercantile relations are either excluded or reduced to minimal proportions.

An extract of Jean-Marie Harribey’s book, [La richesse, la valeur et l’inestimable](#) suggests that the ever worsening ecological crises would stimulate renewed [interest in the ‘notion of the commons \[arising\] from the awareness of the existence of a common heritage of humanity and therefore of the need to preserve certain material resources \(water, air, soil, forests, raw materials\) and also immaterial resources \(climate, knowledge, culture, health, financial stability, peace, etc.\)’](#). [10]

The activity of social reproduction has also come to the forefront of concerns about the commons through the work of feminist movements. As Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser write in their manifesto *Feminism for the 99%*, [11] “Finally, capitalist society harbors a social-reproductive contradiction: a tendency to commandeer for capital’s benefit as much ‘free’ reproductive labor as possible, without any concern for its replenishment. As a result, it periodically gives rise to ‘crises of care,’ which exhaust women, ravage families, and stretch social energies to the breaking point (page 65). The authors’ define social reproduction as follows “It encompasses activities that sustain human beings as embodied social beings who must not only eat and sleep but also raise their children, care for their families, and maintain their communities, all while pursuing their hopes for the future. These people-making activities occur in one form or another in every society. In capitalist societies, however, they must also serve another master, namely, capital, which requires that social-reproductive work produce and replenish ‘labor power’” (page 68).

What the authors add later on brings us closer to the situation highlighted by the current multidimensional crisis of capitalism and the coronavirus pandemic: '[Capitalism assumes]that there will always be sufficient energies to produce the laborers and sustain the social connections on which economic production, and society more generally, depend. In fact, social-reproductive capacities are not infinite, and they can be stretched to the breaking point. When a society simultaneously withdraws public support for social reproduction and conscripts its chief providers into long and grueling hours of low-paid work, it depletes the very social capacities on which it relies. (page 73)

What is denounced in this passage allows us to better understand the fragility of capitalist society in the face of epidemics, the inability of governments to do what is necessary in time to best defend the population, the pressure put on workers in the essential and vital sectors to come to the aid of the population while, at the same time, as a result of the decisions of these same governments, they are underpaid, devalued and in insufficient numbers. The same can be said about the causes of the failure of governments to address the consequences of climate change and the under-equipment and lack of civil protection personnel in the face of increasingly frequent 'natural disasters'.

Public debt has been and still is systematically used as a means of grabbing commons

Since the 1970s public debt has systematically been used as a means of grabbing commons, as much in the North as in the South. The CADTM, along with other social movements, has not ceased to denounce this since the 1980s. We have devoted a dozen books [12] and several hundred articles to this issue. It is very satisfying to see that more and more writers are now highlighting the issue of debt as a weapon against public property. [13]

We cite once again *Feminism for the 99%*:

'Far from empowering states to stabilize social reproduction through public provision, it authorizes finance capital to discipline states and publics in the immediate interests of private investors. Its weapon of choice is debt. Finance capital lives off of [sovereign debt, which it uses to outlaw even the mildest forms of social-democratic provision, coercing states to liberalize their economies, open their markets, and impose 'austerity' on defenseless populations. \(page 77\)](#)

All through the neoliberal offensive that has been the dominating ideological tendency since the 1980s, governments and different international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF have insisted on the "duty" to repay external debt in order to generalize a tidal wave of privatizations of many countries' strategic economic sectors, public services and natural resources, whether in developed countries or not. As a consequence, the previously existing tendency towards reinforcing collectivism has been reversed.

The list of assaults on public properties based on public debt is long. Some have accelerated the ecological crisis and the development of zoonoses: rapid deforestation, intensive animal farming and monocrops to gain foreign currencies in order to pay foreign debt, all of this in the framework of [structural adjustment policies induced by the, already ill mentioned World Bank and IMF.](#)

Some of the political policies imposed through debt repayment obligations have seriously

hindered the capacity of states and populations to deal with public health crises including the coronavirus pandemic: stagnation or reduction of public health budgets, imposing compliance to medical patents, renouncing the use of generic drugs, giving up producing medical equipment domestically, preferring private sector medical treatment and medicine distribution, suppressing free access to medical care in many countries, reducing the quality of working conditions in the medical sector and introducing the private sector into numerous essential public health services.

Already, over a century and a half ago Marx put it in a nutshell: “*Public debt: the alienation of the state – whether despotic, constitutional or republican – marked with its stamp the capitalistic era*”. [14] Once we have become aware of the way repayment of public debt is instrumentalised to impose mortal neoliberal capitalist policies, we know we must fight for the cancellation of illegitimate debt.

Coming next part 2: Knowledge appropriation and Big Pharma profits during the pandemic

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This article was originally published on [CADTM](#).

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He is a frequent contributor to *Global Research*.

Notes

[1] Karl Marx. 1867. *Capital*, vol I, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/>

[2] Rosa Luxemburg. 1913. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/index.htm>

[3] Polanyi, K. 1944. *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston

[4] Silvia FEDERICI (2004), *Caliban and the Witch*, Autonomedia, New York, 2004.

[5] *Le Jeune Karl Marx* French-German-Belgian biographical film by Raoul Peck, released in 2017.

[6] Daniel Bensaïd, (https://wiki2.org/en/Daniel_Bensa%C3%AFd) *Les dépossédés. Karl Marx, les voleurs de bois et le droit des pauvres*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2007, 128 pages. (in French)

[7] Léon Trotsky. 1936. *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is It Going?*, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1937.

[8] UNO, 41/128. Declaration on the Right to Development, Adopted by the General Assembly 4 December 1986, <http://un-documents.net/a41r128.htm>

[9] Bernard FRIOT, *Puissances du salariat*, Paris, La Dispute, coll. « Travail et salariat », 2012, 437 p., 1ère éd. 1998, ISBN : 978-2-84303-226-4. See also, by the same author *L'enjeu du salaire*, La Dispute, 2012, 202 p. (in French)

[10] Jean-Marie HARRIBEY, *La richesse, la valeur et l'inestimable*, Les Liens qui Libèrent, Paris, 2013, 544 pages, 28 €, p. 393 (in French)
http://www.editionslesliensquiberent.fr/auteur-Jean_Marie_Harribey-254-1-1-0-1.html In this book, see the thesis of Jean-Marie Harribey, who convincingly demonstrates in chapter 9 that work performed in the non-market but monetary sphere is value-producing. See on the same subject and by the same author: 'Le travail productif dans les services non marchands (in French)', *La Pensée*, N° 330, 2002
<http://jeanmarieharribey.fr/travaux/valeur/travail-productif.pdf>

[11] Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, *Féminism for the 99% a manifesto*, available here: <https://outraspalavras.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Feminism-for-the-99.pdf>

[12] See Eric Toussaint, [Your Money or Your Life. The Tyranny of the Global Finance](#), Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2005; [Debt, the IMF, and the World Bank, Sixty Questions, Sixty Answers](#), Monthly Review Press, New York, 2010; [The World Bank – A Critical Primer](#), Between the lines, Toronto/Pluto Press, London/David Philips Publisher, Cape Town/CADTM, Liège, 2008.

Among the precursory works on debt as an instrument for the imposition of neoliberal policies, books by two women should be highlighted: Susan George on the one hand and Cheryl Payer on the other. George, Susan, 1988. *A Fate Worse than Debt* Pinguin, and 1992, *The Debt Boomerang: How Third World Debt Harms Us All* Pluto Press. Cheryl Payer, 1974, *The Debt Trap: The International Monetary Fund and the Third World*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, and 1991, *Lent and Lost. Foreign Credit and Third World Development*, Zed Books, London, 154 pp.

[13] See for instance Verónica Gago and Luci Cavallero, [“Debt is a war against women’s autonomy”](#) , published on 20 May 2021; Camille Bruneau, [‘La farce de la « prise en compte du genre » : une grille de lecture féministe des politiques de la Banque mondiale’](#) (in French), published 11 June 2021.

[14] Karl Marx. 1867. *Capital*, vol I, Part VIII: Primitive Accumulation, Chapter XXXI :[Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist](#)

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