

David Harvey: Dispossession or Expropriation? Does capital have an “outside”?

David Harvey: espoliação ou expropriação? Há “lado de fora” do capital?

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¹ The capital-imperialism concept is proposed by the author as an expanded form of capitalism, already permeated by imperialism, but born under the atomic phantom of the Cold War. In capital-imperialism, the internal domination of capital needs, and is complemented by, an external expansion through the expropriation from entire populations of conditions of production (land), rights, as well as environmental and biological conditions of existence. Capital-imperialism also rapidly imposes its own fundamental social relations for the expansion of capital; it contradictorily favors the emergence of bourgeoisies and of new States, while reducing the diversity of their internal organization and enclosing them in multiple hierarchical and unequal webs. In order to achieve its expansion, it also throws much of humanity into the socialization of the productive process and/or circulation of commodities, adding new modalities to the previous inequalities. Nonetheless, it maintains the representative-electoral format, turning democracy into a census-autocratic model, similar to shareholders' meetings, composing a bifurcated pattern of political action, highly internationalized for capital and heavily fragmented for work.

Resumo

O texto, extraído de livro que defende a categoria de capital-imperialismo para explicar o período contemporâneo (o qual integra teoria do valor e do Estado), propõe um debate, com David Harvey, sobre o conceito de acumulação por espoliação. O artigo defende que as formas de expropriação não se limitam a um momento "primitivo" mas integram a própria forma de expansão ampliada do capital e do capitalismo. Apresenta uma investigação comparativa entre as formulações presentes na obra de Karl Marx, de Karl Kautsky e de Rosa Luxemburgo, para refletir criticamente sobre os conceitos de "externo/interno", de expropriação e de acumulação capitalista no contexto contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: David Harvey, expropriação, neoliberalismo, espoliação, reprodução ampliada.

Abstract

The present excerpt is taken from a book that stands for the concept of capital-imperialism in order to explain the contemporary period (which integrates theory of value and the state). It proposes a debate, with David Harvey, on the concept of accumulation by dispossession, arguing that expropriation forms are not limited to a "primitive" moment but they are part of an enlarged form of expansion of capital and capitalism itself. It presents a comparative investigation between the formulations present in the works of Karl Marx, Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, to critically reflect on the concepts of "external/internal", as well as expropriation and capitalist accumulation in the contemporary context.

Keywords: David Harvey, expropriation, neoliberalism, dispossession, enlarged reproduction.

The Marxist geographer, David Harvey, has formulated a seemingly identical thesis to the one we are supporting here. However, there are important differences that should be highlighted. In particular, the opposition between expropriation and dispossession, as well as his work on externalities or those ‘outside’ production.

Harvey forged the term “accumulation by dispossession”², which he opposed to accumulation by expanded reproduction³. Accumulation by dispossession, for Harvey, indicates a contemporary modified rebirth of an archaic form (primitive accumulation) that reestablishes its expansion as well as impacting fully capitalist countries. This process involves the elimination (dispossession) of rights and establishes the capitalist control of collective forms of property (such as nature, waters, knowledge), thereby increasing accumulation. He emphasizes how this current expansion is a form of robbery, the “original sin” of primitive accumulation, so that the current over-accumulated accumulation does not cease (Harvey, p. 119). There is a continued expropriation of rural workers, yet this now also includes the dispossession of assets and rights in fully urban and capitalist situations.

Let us look closely at some problematic assumptions of his argument. Harvey assumes that Marx understands the expropriation as an original (“primitive”) moment, which would then carry on in an expanded and normalized process of accumulation, although subject to crises. For this reason, he describes the current situation as accumulation by dispossession, as it is qualitatively different from the traditional, productive, and enlarged, form of capital: “The implication is that primitive accumulation that opens up a path to expanded reproduction is one thing, and accumulation by dispossession that disrupts and destroys a path already opened up is quite another” (Harvey, p. 135). Hence the idea that normalized capitalism would soften the speculative and fraudulent features of two “primitive” moments (Harvey, p.123).

Indeed, Marx does argue that once the peasants have been violently expropriated the “normalized” economic coercion over the “free” workers would replace this explicit violence. However, in several passages of *Capital*, as previously shown⁴, [1] Marx reiterates

² The word “dispossession” is not present on the English version of *Capital*, vol.1, available at www.marxists.org. Nonetheless, in the same edition, we have found 41 mentions to the word “expropriation”. Accessed in June 30th, 2009.

³ In the Brazilian edition, the word was literally translated from English, while we should note that the most used expression would be: “enlarged reproduction”

⁴ Marx reinstates the subject [of expropriations] in Book III of *Capital* when he discusses the role of credit and interest-bearing capital in capitalist production at its maximum point of concentration: “Success and failure both lead here to a centralization of capital, and thus to expropriation on the most enormous scale. Expropriation extends here from the direct producers to the smaller and the medium-sized capitalists

that the expansion of capitalist social relations presupposes a continuum of successive expropriations, that go far beyond those already “freed” workers (also mentioning the expropriation of minor capitalists).

Moreover, the historical expansion of capitalism never corresponded to an entirely “normalized” form, since it never waived speculation, fraud, sheer robbery, and primary expropriations, which were enlarged by it. Productivity improvement, or the increase of judicial exploitation (legal and covenanted) of the labor force in central countries, was accompanied by permanent expropriation, as well as the recreation of compulsory forms of work in the peripheries, which could no longer be considered external to capital. The shift towards Industrial Capital in the nineteenth century enforced the brutal colonization of Asia; the intense and technologically driven production under Fordism, provoked violent struggles, alongside increased colonization, and two world wars. Finally, the so-called Welfare State “glorious years”, in some countries, coexisted with fierce dictatorships imposed throughout the most distant parts of the planet: the Middle East, Latin America (with remarkable truculence in Central America), in Europe itself —Greece, Portugal, and Spain — and Asia, with special regards to the appalling situation in Indonesia.

In many countries, the subalternization of workers was carried out under extreme conditions, with strong military support of the core countries, especially the United States. Thus, the normalized versus predatory capitalism duality does not seem to sustain itself. Instead, peculiar patterns and connections according to each historical moment, in which dominant capitalist forces (either in core countries or others) take advantage of disparate social, historical, and cultural contexts, creating subaltern populations under imbricated unequal relationships. It uses, as well as recreates, traditional springboard ways of expansion. The violence of capital is permanent and constitutive: the mass production of expropriation in many ways depending on the scale and concentration of capital, has never been reduced or “normalized” when we take a global perspective. Moreover, such a phenomenon is not necessarily an outcome of the coexistence between capitalist (“normalized”) and non-capitalist (primitive) countries, on the contrary, it is the product of

themselves. *It is the point of departure for the capitalist mode of production; its accomplishment is the goal of this production.* In the last instance, it aims at the expropriation of the means of production from all individuals. With the development of social production, the means of production cease to be means of private production and products of private production, and can thereafter be only means of production in the hands of associated producers, i.e., the latter's social property, much as they are their social products. *However, this expropriation appears within the capitalist system in a contradictory form, as appropriation of social property by a few; and credit lends the latter more and more the aspect of pure adventurers.*” (Marx, 1985, p. 334, emphasis added)

historical forms of unequal capitalist expansion, which takes place within countries and in the relationships established between them. Nonetheless, all of them increasingly respond to the same social dynamic. In other words, capitalist relations correspond to the ever more truculent expansion of expropriations, normalizing the increasing existence of the masses who are compelled to sell their labor power and whose availability, from this standpoint, does not demand direct coercion by the exploiting capital.

Harvey also distinguishes “productive accumulation” from “predatory accumulation”, although he marks its overlap: “Capital accumulation indeed has a dual character. But the two aspects of expanded reproduction and accumulation by dispossession are organically linked, dialectically intertwined.” (Harvey, p. 144, emphasis added). The latter currently dominates the former – being at the heart of neoliberal and neoconservative practices. This duality leads Harvey to emphasize the rupture between class struggles — whose relevance today drops— and the multiple and scattered existing identifications within populations, stemmed by “the inchoate, fragmentary, and contingent forms taken by accumulation by dispossession.” (Harvey, p. 142). Yet, he proposes the reconciliation of both conceptions. His underlying conception of social class slides from a central form of social life organization — which can only consciously express itself through the constitution of common experiences — to an identity or cultural modality. His accumulation antithesis leads him not to realize the correlation between the multiple expropriations and the huge increase in workforce availability to capital (“free as birds” as Marx stated). The working class expands because of the pressures of capitalism, revealing its current fragmented and competitive configuration, beneath a tragic social situation.

Such a contemporary phenomenon, which massively turns populations into mere available workforce, individuals at the world market’s disposal, allows us to adopt a distinct perspective from Harvey’s: there is an intensification of the currently dispersed social struggle. The contraposition grows between the brutal but straightforward concentration of capital and the dispersion it imposes on its opponents. Harvey’s consternation on capitalism, both normalized and by dispossession, is understandable. The substantial difference today is that fraud and robbery in imperialist countries is now part of their daily routine, especially abroad. Many considered core countries to have specific virtues, while the peripheral suffered from some sort of deficit: handicapped capitalism, low popular organizational capacity, or flimsy democracy. The analysis that recognizes those virtues as

qualities derived from the existence of the periphery is certainly rare. However, this is not the case with Harvey, a fierce critic of imperialism.

Nonetheless, this new internal and predatory feature of capitalism seems to also be a burden. Nowadays, distances are quickly reduced and the same practices become commonplace in every country. Electoral fraud, gross “public opinion” manipulations, submission to government by unions, diversified mafias, and corruption scandals, are practices no longer limited to the periphery. The recurring unemployment threat is deepened in core countries through the expropriation of rights that limited workforce availability; perverse changes in the modalities of labor force hiring are indiscriminately intensified. The (“free”) permanent availability of an enormous portion of the labor force is deepened, and the phenomenon grows among the strata of workers believed to be protected from such an eventuality. Harsh work process hierarchies are reorganized in order to overcome the fierce competition imposed by capital, in a diffuse and sparse style. Internal competition becomes a “natural need” among workers with profoundly diverse working contracts as well as amidst those deprived of fundamental rights at work.

The second argument worth highlighting in Harvey’s hypothesis refers to the internal and external dimensions of capital movements. As a historical process, the creation of a world market — pointed by Marx — occurred by unequally altering many people’s way of life, which did not mean that the socialization of production homogeneously reached most of the world population. There were — and still are — if on a smaller scale, some social circumstances in which distinct existing modalities were preserved. Alongside capitalist dominance within some countries, there was an extensive non-capitalist majority that coexisted.

Land expropriation, as the primary and fundamental expropriation for the exploitation of surplus value, continues to occur even in capitalist countries while it expands to subordinated countries with variable intensities, resulting in differentiated modalities and rhythms of expropriation. This is possible thanks to the intertwining of surplus labor extraction — in varied forms — and the inherent capitalist mode of production: surplus value. A huge part of the population is still bound to agricultural activities. This allows us to assume that, in many cases, their existence constitutes an external boundary to capital, even if, in so many other situations, they are already incorporated into market relations and to international chains of socialization. For instance, the Indian cotton producers, who directly own their means of production, experience successive crises linked

to the use of transgenic seeds (Carta Capital, 2008). Those crises end up in expropriations, which bring us to conclude that the external boundary to capital has been significantly diminished throughout the twentieth century.

Rosa Luxemburg, in a controversial thesis, considered the existence of new frontiers of capitalist advance composed of non-fully capitalist relations as an essential element for capital and capitalist expansion, due to the impossibility of realization in the strict context of capitalist societies (Luxemburg, 1985, pp. 227-252). Based on this assumption, David Harvey (2004) suggests that capital itself produces new externalities (or dispossession sources, in his terms). Harvey maintains, like Luxemburg, the need for an “exteriority” for capital. He considers, as does Luxemburg, that capitalism needs an externality, an “outside”. However, he modifies this formula. If to Luxemburg, “capitalism always requires a fund of assets outside of itself if it is to confront and circumvent pressures of overaccumulation”, he states that today “if those assets, such as empty land or new raw material sources, do not lie to hand, then capitalism must somehow produce them.” (Harvey, 2004, p.119, emphasis added), this is the second and crucial characteristic pointed out by Harvey to define the current form of accumulation by dispossession.

The capitalist countries offensive at the turn of the twentieth century, as pointed out by Rosa Luxemburg, (which involved expropriations of rural populations) occurred externally, encompassing non-capitalist regions, while the main contemporary trend would precisely be this internal dimension, through which all human activities tend to be subjected to capital appreciation. Harvey considers that capital itself began to produce externalities, assuring terrain for its expansion. This is one of the distinguishing elements between accumulation by dispossession and “primitive” accumulation (regarded as being ‘outside’ capitalist relations). His thesis is important and contributes to evidence the permanence of the expropriation process, but it also includes controversies, particularly on the existence of an “outside” (an externality) and on a different “quality” between the forms of accumulation.

In order to understand such controversy, we must go back in time and identify some theoretical debates on the existence of social segments that are external to capital. Kautsky’s theory brings back the assumption of the existence of economic sectors more or less refractory to capital, due to their nature. It would not be an existence limited to a historical phenomenon of transformation, or transfiguration, of “pre-capitalist” forms of existence production. The term made more sense than it does today, since it was the pre-

existing historical forms that were being intensively modified by the various modalities of subordination to capitalism. It is a complex theme and we will only develop one of its aspects here.

Karl Kautsky was one of the most important Marxist thinkers on the correlation between agricultural and industrial production. The Agrarian Question (1986) was one of his most relevant contributions. Amid inflamed debates within nineteenth century Social Democracy, Kautsky elaborated an overwhelmingly impressive study that aimed to determine the very characteristics of the concrete historical transformation of the agricultural world, especially in Germany. It included the assumption that “agriculture does not develop according to the pattern traced by industry: it follows its own laws.” (Kautsky, 1986, p.15), leading him to establish a qualitative difference between urban-based and agrarian production, “in such a way that labor as a whole beholds an integrality in which prevails the sensation that the peasant world is rather peculiar and irreducible to the modern economy schemes described by the classic socialism”. (Procacci, 1988, p. 112)

This description emphasizes the legalizing character of capitalist production, neglecting the “nuances and contaminations” of the historical materialist processes, thus enabling us to understand the Kautskyan thinking. In 1914, in *Imperialism and the War*, Kautsky (2008) returns to these ideas by underlining the distinction between agricultural and industrial activity. Differing from his previous work, he regards the theme in a much more unilateral way. Agriculture (even capitalist agriculture) would suffer from the limitation of land, of products (smaller variety), and by the permanent trend of a decreasing labor force due to greater technical obstacles in increasing productivity. Nevertheless, despite being less attractive to capital than industry, agriculture would still be essential for the latter, because it provides the needed inputs. Kautsky's analysis does not go into the predominant social relations in each branch of activity, nor in the connections between them. Instead, he emphasizes the uniqueness of each activity, urging for the qualitative difference between rural and industrial work.

In this sense, at least a portion of agriculture would be a burden to capitalism (which is fundamentally synonymous to urban industry). The agrarian economy would be a sector almost permanently external to capitalism. The city-countryside opposition, typical of capitalism's beginnings, has not been diluted in its general development. It was reinforced due to – among other reasons – its agrarian nature, regardless of the established social relations of work.

Kautsky brings forth a problematic generalization although his findings are the result of accurate empirical observation. For, in fact, the pace of the transformation of social relations in the countryside is not the same as in urban regions. Working relations with distinct arrangements exist — and continue to exist — in agriculture, whether as persistence of previous forms, or as hybrids modalities, as a result of an array of modulations of the direct dominance of capital in production. Kautsky points out that industrial expansion (such as urban and industrial activities expansion) resulted in pressures for the expansion of agricultural production (mining and agriculture) with the purpose of ensuring industrial dynamics. In this sense, he puts forward a relevant suggestion by underlining the importance of the incorporation of land (colonization) for industrial expansion regardless of the existing dominant social relations, as long as it assures the supply of goods to the industries of capitalist countries. It thus admitted a need to expand capital out of its own limits, to a geographically external scope. The persistent coexistence between several social forms of agricultural production reaffirms this relation.

Nevertheless, it is problematic to assume that imperialism fundamentally derived from a contradiction between developed industry and stiff agricultural production (unable to capitalize itself at a higher speed). Such an assumption disregards the profound transformations (including ones in productivity) that agricultural production has experienced, aside from the remaining different social forms of work and production. Yet, the aforesaid plurality was never just an agrarian prerogative, since countless activities have also developed in urban regions, most of them related to trading systems (such as handicraft and small business), formally and directly incorporated into capital. Similar processes affected rural and urban populations. Many workers in different activities have tried (and still try, like the peasantry) to preserve their historical forms of existence. Under intense commodification and successive expropriations, many of these traditional activities were preserved, modified, and mutilated, in contradictory but simultaneous ways. Although Kautsky admits in *The Agrarian Question* that this phenomenon is a matter of historical process that imbeds various productive forms, his following text allows the assumption of a permanent externality at the agriculture frontier.

Rosa Luxemburg had similar concerns, but from a distinct perspective. While for Kautsky the relationship between industry (urban) and countryside (mainly agriculture, since mining had another configuration) resulted in an agrarian question exteriorized due to its nature, Luxemburg replaces this issue by the relation between capitalist and non-

capitalist societies and, therefore, the development of capitalist social relations towards an external social space that plays the role of a necessary condition for its development. For her, the surplus value making “is, beforehand, related to non-capitalist producers and consumers” (Luxemburg, 1985, p. 251), which naturally impelled capitalist expansion beyond the limits of a social existence that was already fully dominated by capitalist relations.

Despite the enormous difference between the two perspectives, the point at issue is capitalism’s need of an outside, whether by the nature of agrarian activity, as in Karl Kautsky, or by non-capitalist social relations, as in Rosa Luxemburg. In the early twentieth century, this was a shocking standpoint given the dominance of non-capitalist forms of life and social relations throughout the world; large rural populations, barely expropriated, in non-industrialized countries.

Despite this, such arguments hinder the understanding of how the internal dynamics of capitalist expansion promotes and exacerbates its own grounding social conditions, either through the subalternized incorporation of other sectors of production – from other regions or countries – modifying and subordinating the relations from where they are found through direct expansion as occurs in the industrialization of new areas. In either approach, the overlap is always unequal. Nonetheless, it tends to eliminate any externality by subordinating and mutilating the previous social relationships as well as such capitalist expansion imposing its domination. Expropriation is the social condition of capital’s full expansion and they have been carried out in diverse manners, rhythms, and degrees, coupling diversified forms of production under the control of capital, albeit at the cost of enormous social, political, cultural, and economic brutality.

The idea proposed by Lenin supposes a qualitative transformation of the totality of the process as a consequence of growth itself as well as of the concentration of capital. He admits the trend towards the elimination of such “exteriority” vigorously in force at the beginning of the twentieth century (as feudal remnants in almost all of Europe and, above all, in Russia). Furthermore, that this process was unequally incorporated into a totalizing planetary dynamic, under countless modalities, but often employing military control. What used to be on the outside is henceforth incorporated, despite this profoundly unequal manner.

The huge capitalist expansion in the twentieth century did not manage to reduce the complexity of the subject: in fact, it is impossible to disregard the persistence of groups

whose internal relations do not mirror a set of capitalist relations taken as a “role model”, in particular the resistance of peasant segments to expropriation, as well as to the political, social, and cultural jeopardy that go along with it. One might admit that they still constitute a boundary to capital to the extent that many peasants still retain ownership of their land (in whole or in part) and of their means of production, remaining in a non-fully capitalist mode of production. However, it is ever more problematic to consider them as alien to capitalist dynamics and, therefore, as externalities, since they have commonly become a target for new expropriations, as in water grabbing cases. The boundaries between what is external and internal to capital are increasingly tenuous, while expropriation, as the fundamental strategy for the establishment of capitalism, has been terribly intensified.

We must also remember that even when it comes to genuine capitalist grounds, such as in monopolistic models, there was no such thing as the entire elimination of smaller and competitive sectors, as, for instance, the subcontracting between companies. Some phenomena demonstrate the imposition of diverse, but joined, forms of extraction of surplus value. Accumulation takes place in many ways, such as the division of huge conglomerates in myriad competing companies, which, by its turn, can continue to belong to the same owners; the permanence of peasants or of semi-peasants in many countries; the re-creation of countless smaller and highly competitive companies, even though under the control of capitalist investors; the arduous and legitimate conquest of indigenous groups over their ancestral lands and their conversion into guardians of extensive natural areas (biodiversity), tend to result in contradictory combinations.

Thanks to an everlasting inclination to subsume everything, capitalism modifies numerous historical forms, and even when it allows for the preservation or encourages the reproduction of externalities, it converts them into rearranged modalities of capital subordination, hindering any possibility of full reproduction in pre-capitalist, non-capitalist, or anti-capitalist formats. Unequal features are ever more imposed by capitalism, yet paradoxically, they motivate the reconstruction of the most contrasting elements of previous traditions. In particular, the egalitarian elements in their antagonism to the mutilated dissolution of community bonds by the constant expropriating expansion of capitalism. They constitute, in my perspective, not externalities or fragments of it, but completely internal struggles. Embodying the renewed ability to counter diverse traditions to the annihilating forms of capital imposition. They openly react to the drastically unequal characteristics of capitalist subordination, which did not decrease but quite the opposite

were deepened. Popular peasant-based movements with an anti-capitalist performance are a genuine struggle from the inside, and not only with romantic bias, that wishes a return to an earlier mythical time, when they would belong to an exterior side. Such social movements are able to make essential contributions; by re-creating and rebuilding partially preserved social dynamics they modify and expand their scope, reconfiguring in daily life opposition to the capitalistic logic. As Edward P. Thompson recalled in the memorable article *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* (1995, p. 395-452), they give rise to a fundamental memory of the history that constitutes us, which is present not only in our memories but also in social forms and practices, enhancing its dissemination, as well as strengthening the struggle against the assumption that “there are no alternatives”.

The argument brought by Harvey suggests a new production of externalities qualitatively distinct from expropriation. Such a proposition does not seem convincing at a time when the current trend is to subordinate all forms of existence to capital. The concept of expropriation, as the founding basis of the social relation that supports capitalist dynamics, allows us to better understand the internal dynamics of capitalistic logic, it is the central character at the beginning, middle, and end of the concentration of capital.

The semblance of promoting an aggregation, a production of “externalities”, or of proceeding unilaterally, such as “appropriating” or “commodifying”, should not obscure the fact that these are evidence of the intensification of the most fundamental characteristics of capital reproduction (which is not simply an apparently “normalized” economic form) and involves a set of social relations. For example, investment in areas or sectors so far poorly controlled by capital — such as the seas and oceans — can only be understood by remembering that it corresponds to a brutal expropriation from humanity of a socially available natural property.

Such perspectives enable us to understand the new characteristics of expropriation in the multinational capital-imperialism era because it relocates the contradiction between the hyper-concentrated monetary-capital expansion and the directly related imposition of multiple expropriations over social life as a whole, converting all human activities into unequal forms of assets to be valued. The extraction of surplus value, aimed at valuing such increasing masses of concentrated resources under an “abstract” property, makes use of all sorts of workers and conditions – from top scientists to all forms of compulsory and/or child labor in degrading conditions, from mega conglomerates to multiple mafias – occurring at different points in the planet or in the same city, all of them merged on the inside by the

same production of surplus value to capital, while segmented on the outside. Such phenomena are not a matter of deviation, or an unusual situation, but the outcome of the perverse and socially dramatic dynamic of capital.

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