

Power, politics and environmental change
MA Environmental Humanities 2014-15
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Class 3: Green materialism

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Intro

- **Purpose:** present the green materialism explanation of why environmental change happens
- Reason **why** you should know this:
 - Because political ecology (field we draw from in this course to study and understand environmental change) tacitly or explicitly assumes several materialist principles

Class outline

- Discuss answers to student assignment
- Go deeper into the details of the green materialism explanation of why and how environmental change (degradation) happens, and with what implications
- Outline links: materialism and study of environmental change

But before: why “materialism”?

- Social and cultural systems (e.g. legislation, types of government, literature, etc.) are based in historical (and changing) **material conditions and relations** – real stuff (Robbins, 2004)



Courbet 'The Stonebreakers' (source: undsoc.org)

Robbins explains that “[f]or materialists, environmental degradation is... inevitable in capitalism” (p. 46).

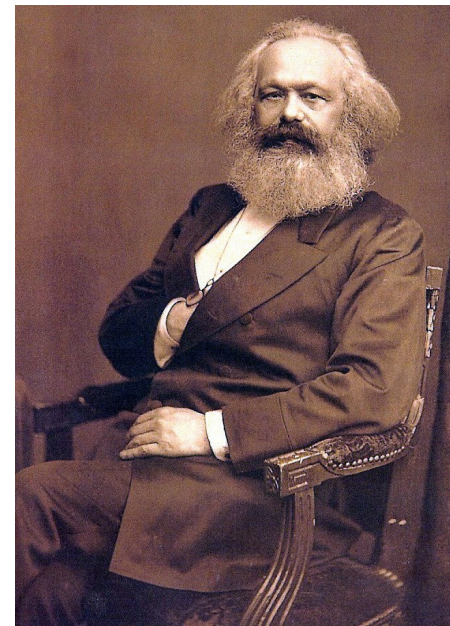
Explain in your own words why is this the case, and how does such degradation occurs

CLASS ASSIGNMENT 1

Answer

Robbins, 2004, p.51:

- “all progress in capitalistic agriculture is the progress in the art, not only of **robbing** the **labourer**, but of robbing the **soil**; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards **ruining the lasting sources of that fertility**” (Marx, 1967)



Value surplus: what is it?

- Marx (1867)
 - “Yield, profit or return on production capital invested, i.e. amount of the increase in the value of capital...”
 - ...after it goes through the production process



How is it generated?

Owner (shoe in mkt) = 40Kč

Worker prod (machine):
10Kč/ 15min = 40Kč/ hour

Worker wage: 10 Kč/ hour



Source: <http://utama.info/>

Operational costs = 20Kč/ h

Invest (put in prod) = 30Kč/ hour
– get back 40Kč/ hour

Profit (above value investment) = 10Kč/ hour

Why is it necessary?

Capital accumulation



THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN.

<http://weknowwhatsup.blogspot.com.es>



Source: <http://freedombunker.com>



Niger Delta (Nigeria) (Image: Sosialistisk Ungdom – SU/Flickr)



Tar Sands from space (source: <http://stephenleahy.net>)

Extracting surplus from nature

**Intensity of extraction >
restoration**

1. Original/ Primitive Accumulation
2. Accumulation by Dispossession

TWO WAYS OF ACCUMULATING K

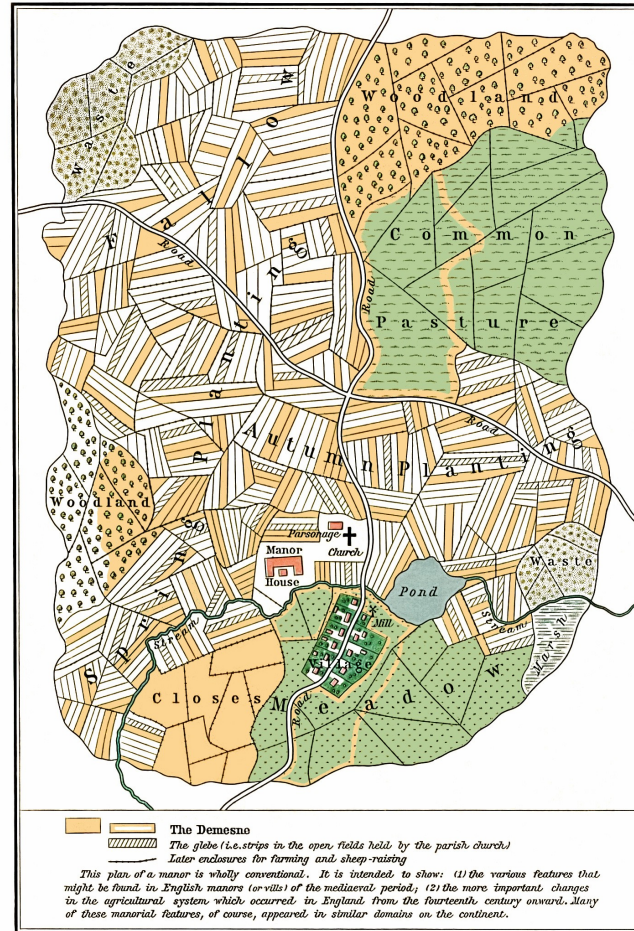


Source: <http://pixgood.com>

Primitive accumulation

The question: how did some people managed to accumulate capital in the first place?

Plan of a Mediaeval Manor.



Open field system

Prevalent agri system in European Middle Ages based on manor-village



Source: <https://ashleymuseum>

Manorialism or Serfdom

Prevalent agri system in European Middle Ages based on manor-village

“England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land,
have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons...”

Gerrard Winstanley, 1649



Source: <https://theliberi.wordpress.com>

Primitive accumulation: example
English 16th – 19th century enclosures

**Primitive (capital)
accumulation and
ecological
degradation:**
16-17th century
Spain (Moore, 2003)



*[The] "aridification" of the land hit particularly the **small producers** and led to further **land concentration**. While this process of exhausting the land led to inability to export, land concentration that resulted from it led to a further monetarization of productive relations, since "the **inability of peasants ... and villagers to provide for their own subsistence by working their own land enlarged the **internal [labour] market****.*

Wallerstein (1980)

Accumulation by dispossession

- Harvey (2004):
 - Neoliberal **policies** in western nations from 1970s onwards...
 - ...result in **centralization of wealth and power** in the hands of a few...
 - ...by **dispossessing the public** of their wealth or land (publicly-owned assets, e.g. water, forests, etc.)...
 - ...that pass to become **private property**
- Privatisation: main practice



Reuters: Roy Letkey (source: www.abc.net.au)



Source: www.globalgiving.org

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egtKx24dat8>
Accumulation by dispossession: privatising water

The water sector, together with many others, has become one of the battlefields over which “accumulation by dispossession” tactics are waged, often won by capital, and occasionally lost.”
(Swyngedouw, 2005)

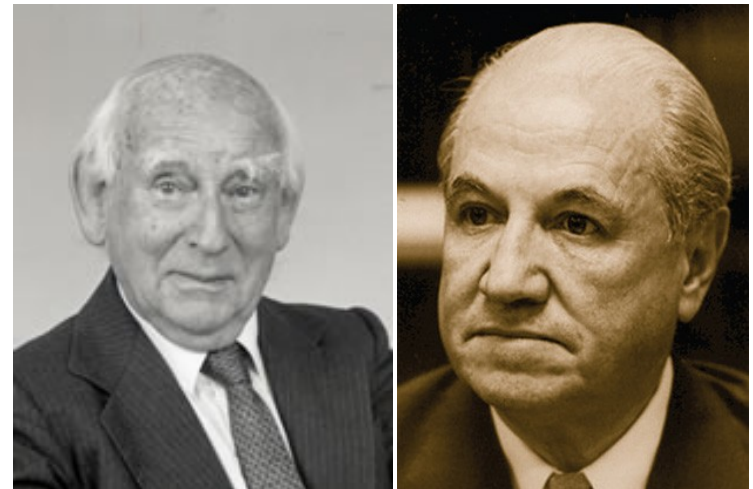
Implications: dependency and accumulation

Dependency theory

(Latin American economists,
1960s)

- Marginal conditions -> terms of trade
- Colonised countries:
 - primary products
 - perpetual underdevelopment
- Peet, 1999
 - External centres of command
 - Dependence after independence
 - Although sovereign, disadvantaged

Hans Singer – Raul Prebisch



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org>

Implications: dependency, accumulation, and environmental degradation

States cannot control action of capital in their territories + capital is accumulated elsewhere. Examples?

◆ Miskito in Nicaragua (Nietschmann, 1979)

◆ Nigeria oil

“The current MOU provides the companies a guaranteed minimum profit of \$2.30 per barrel after tax and royalty on their equity crude, and a reserves additional bonus, in any year...” (Oyefusi, 2007)

The US embassy cables

theguardian



WikiLeaks cables: Shell's grip on Nigerian state revealed

US embassy cables reveal top executive's claims that company 'knows everything' about key decisions in government ministries

David Smith in Lagos, Wednesday 8 December 2010



Despite billions of dollars in oil revenue, 70% of people in Nigeria live below the poverty line. Photograph: George Osodi/AP

The oil giant Shell claimed it had inserted staff into all the main ministries of the Nigerian government, giving it access to politicians' every move in the oil-rich Niger Delta, according to a leaked US diplomatic cable. The company's top executive in Nigeria told US diplomats that Shell had seconded employees to every relevant department and so knew "everything that was being done in those ministries"...Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and the eighth biggest exporter in the world, accounting for 8% of US oil imports. Although a recent UN report largely exonerated the company, critics accuse Shell, the biggest operator in the delta, and other companies, of causing widespread pollution and environmental damage in the region. Militant groups engaged in hostage-taking and sabotage have proliferated.

Implications: environmental movements

- Labour movement



- Environmental



Image credit: america.gov/Flickr

Lessons learned 1/2

- 3 materialist assumptions/ assertions tacit in PE (study environmental change and conflict):
 1. Social and cultural relationships: rooted in economic interactions
 - Among people
 - Between people and non-human objects and systems
 1. Exogenous imposition of unsustainable extractive regimes of accumulation results in environmental and social stress
 2. Production for the global market leads to contradictions and dependencies

Lessons learned 2/2

- All PE research engages with the **broadly defined political economy**
 - Systems that govern: use, overuse, degradation, and recovery of environment...
 - ...structured into a larger social engine, which revolves around the control of nature and labour (Althusser & Balibar, 1970)

Classroom activity (35 min)

- Own examples of capital accumulation linked to environmental degradation
 - Split into two groups
 - Explain: who did what to whom, where and why?
 - 15 min work into groups to generate this
 - 20 min (5+5): feedback
 - 5 min to present (each group)
 - 5 min to comment (each group)

** If not possible (time lims) do this as one group in classroom*