

The Expropriation Continues

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Contrary to mainstream classical political economy, which treated the “original accumulation of capital” as the result of thrift, saving and reinvestment on the part of the capitalist, Marx argued in the first volume of *Capital* that capitalism — as opposed to simple market exchange — was founded on the separation of the peasantry from their customary property rights in the land and their transformation into a propertyless working class. The history of their dispossession, he wrote, “was written in letters of blood and fire.” Marx’s account included the enclosure of the European open fields in late medieval times, the Parliamentary Enclosure of common pasture and waste, as well as the enslavement of much of the population of the colonial world and the nullification of customary land rights (for example Hastings’s “Permanent Settlement” in Bengal). But as Danielle Nierenberg reminds us (“The Land Battle: 15 Organizations Defending Land Rights,” *Food Tank*, July 29), this robbery isn’t just a matter of history. It continues right up to the present day.

Of course it’s obvious that the theft of Third World land and natural resources continued long after Marx’s day. When Marx wrote his brief survey of primitive accumulation, the colonial division of the interior of Africa had not yet even begun. As just one example of that robbery, the native population was driven off the most fertile fifth of the land in the highlands of British East Africa and the land was given to settlers for cash crop production, and the colonial authorities imposed a poll tax on the evicted peasantry to compel them to earn wages working their own stolen land. Under neocolonialism, much of the mineral wealth of Africa and the rest of the developing world remains in the hands of the heirs and assigns of the Western capitalists who looted it in the first place. In the 20th century, a major part of U.S. foreign policy was invading or overthrowing any government that tried to restore these stolen land and minerals to their rightful owners. In Latin America, the United States trained and funded death squads or installed military dictatorships in most countries in order to protect the hacienda system there.

But it’s going on right now, too. According to the *Food Tank* article mentioned above, some 130 million hectares of land (or 500,000 square miles) in the developing world has been bought by foreign investors over the past fifteen years, most of it to produce cash crops for export and a great deal of it involving the dispossession of people previously cultivating it to feed themselves. For example, the Prosavala land grab in Mozambique will evict 500,000 people.

And some of it is promoted by self-described “progressives” like the folks at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. For example, the gigantic Kilombero rice plantation in Tanzania, a

corporate undertaking which takes up 20% of the Kilombero Valley, celebrated as a “model investment project” by the Gates Foundation and USAID, forced evicted peasants to choose between either \$6 per acre (compared to \$17/acre promised) or a maximum of three acres of far less fertile land elsewhere.

Of course this should come as no surprise. What’s variously called “cognitive,” “progressive” or “green capitalism,” celebrated in Paul Romer’s “New Growth Theory” and heavily promoted by the Gateses, Warren Buffett, and faux-left carpetbaggers like Bono, amounts to a scheme to give capitalism a new lease on life by enclosing new technologies of abundance for rent through “intellectual property” rather than socializing their benefits through competitive markets and commons-based peer production. So it’s only logical for those greenwashed parasites to move on to literally, physically enclosing land just like the gentry of England 250 years ago.

What it comes down to is that enormous fortunes are made, not by producing things, but by controlling the circumstances under which other people are allowed to make things. Henry George, Jr. described it as “controlling access to natural opportunities.” But it basically boils down to enclosure of one kind or another and the extraction of rent. And they can’t do it without government to enforce their patents and land titles. It’s time to smash the state, and with it the parasitic capitalists it serves.

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