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Formation of Modern Societies

Assess Marx's account of the origins of capitalism

-Six pages Essay- (not include cover page)

Assess Marx's account of the origins of capitalism

They hang the man and flog the woman

That steals the goose from off the common,

Yet let the greater villain loose

That steals the common from the goose (seventeenth century English rhyme, anonymous) (Wikipedia)

In part VIII of 'Capital', in the chapter entitled 'The Secret of Primitive Accumulation',

Marx identifies the essential characteristics of the capitalist system; in effect, he defines 'capitalism', but it is a word he seems hardly ever to have used in print.

Capitalism brings into contact 'on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess, by buying other people's labour power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour-power' (Marx, 1995, p. 364). The 'process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production'

(Marx, 1995, p. 364). In the next chapter, 'Expropriation of the agricultural population from the land', Marx lists the main elements in that process.

In the fifteenth century the 'immense majority of the population consisted ... of free peasant proprietors' (Marx, 1995, p. 366). There was 'an independent special class of wage-labourers, relatively and absolutely few in numbers' (Marx, 1995, p. 366).

Beginning in the last third of the fifteenth century, however, a 'mass of free

proletarians was hurled on the labour-market by the breaking-up of the bands of feudal retainers' (Marx, 1995, p. 366). Then 'the great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land' (Marx, 1995, p. 367), despite the passing of laws to the contrary at various points during the Tudor and early Stuart periods. These lords transformed 'arable land into sheep-walks' (Marx, 1995, p. 367) to take advantage of the high price paid for wool by Flemish manufacturers. The dissolution of the monasteries 'hurled their inmates into the proletariat. The estates of the church' (Marx, 1995, p. 367) went to new owners 'who drove out, en masse, the hereditary sub-tenants' (Marx, 1995, 367). The 'yeomanry, the class of independent peasants' (Marx, 1995, p. 367) went from being numerous at the end of the seventeenth century to being non-existent by 1750. 'Feudal tenure of land' (Marx, 1995, p. 368) was abolished after the 'restoration of the Stuarts' (Marx, 1995, p. 368). Landlords and capitalists celebrated the beginning of the reign of William and Mary 'by practising on a colossal scale thefts of state lands' (Marx, 1995, p. 368). In the sixteenth century the law opposed enclosure but by the eighteenth century it had changed sides; Parliament passed various 'Acts for enclosure of Commons' (Marx, 1995, p. 369). Between 1801 and 1831 3,511,770 acres were 'by parliamentary devices presented to the landlords by the landlords' (Marx, 1995, p. 369). Finally there were the Highland Clearances. So Marx's account of the process which takes away from the labourer the

possession of his means of production is, more or less, enclosure (and accompanying evictions) plus the breaking-up of bands of feudal retainers. This takes place from the last third of the fifteenth century to 1831, a period of about 350 years.

Elsewhere Marx describes capitalism as a mode of production; one in a historical sequence. First there was primitive communism, which is not a mode of production and in which there were no class divisions. The ancient mode of production was based on the exploitation of slave labour; since capitalism is usually understood to have begun in western Europe, the best example of the ancient mode is the Roman Empire. The feudal mode of production involved a military aristocracy ruling serfs. The capitalist mode of production involves private ownership of the means of production; propertyless wage labourers are exploited by the owners of the means of production through the labour market. A socialist or communist mode of production lies in the future. The means of production will be socially owned and managed and there will be none of the class exploitation that happened in all previous modes of production.

A mode of production involves two things; forces of production and relations of production. Marx divides the forces of production into, on the one hand, raw materials, tools and so on and, on the other, labour power, including skills and so on. Relations of production concern ownership and control of the forces of production. Change comes about when the forces of production have developed to a point where they are restricted by the relations of production. Perhaps, then it is 'the rapid rise of the Flemish wool manufactures, and the corresponding rise in the price of wool in

England' (Marx, 1995, p. 367) that is the change in the forces of production which Marx has in mind. Does this mean that he includes what Wood calls the 'value-added process' (Wood, 2002, p. 20) in his account of the origins of capitalism? Perhaps, then, Wood is wrong to say that 'he decisively broke with the old paradigm' (Wood, 2002, p. 35) in part VIII of Capital.

Over the course of several centuries England went from feudalism to capitalism and an account of the origins of capitalism must explain this. Feudalism was not about the exchange of goods and services. You provided services to the person above you and got more or less nothing in return. Although money was in use in the Middle Ages, in essence the feudal system didn't need it. This is in sharp contrast to capitalism, where the exchange of goods and services for money is at the heart of the system. If, in the fifteenth century, most people were free peasant proprietors, this was an enormous change from, say, the thirteenth century, when most people were feudal serfs. Yet Marx begins his account at a time when this change has already taken place.

Marx does not make clear how the ex-peasant and his family survived after expropriation. If there were capitalists around eager to employ (and thus exploit) him, their beginning should form part of the account of the origins of capitalism. If not, since the Poor Law, as Marx points out, did not exist until about 1600, wouldn't the serf and his family die? If so they would be the tragic victims of terrible injustice but not the ancestors of a class of people who owned no means of production. No

doubt Marx could clarify this, but he doesn't.

The sheep are, in themselves, problematic. Marx put forward a labour theory of value. This was crucial, for instance, in the theory of the falling rate of profit.

'Capitalism, as a technologically progressive social form, tends persistently to substitute machines for human workers. Hence labour power, the source of surplus value, tends to contract and with it the rate of profit' (Lekachman, 1986, p. 76) .

From the point of view of such a theory replacing people with sheep for profit doesn't make sense.

Is there a role for cultural values in an account of the origins of capitalism? Weber (writing later than Marx) thought so. He identified Calvinism as inspiring a way of life that is, in effect, capitalist. In any case it may be asked why, after feudalism, did exploitation take place through the labour market; why not straightforward slavery? Did Christian values stop the powerful from enslaving their own people? Marx does not discuss values, even to dismiss them.

In the part VIII of Capital, 'The so-called primitive accumulation', Marx attacks the political economy of his time. Capitalism is about exploitation through the labour market. This requires a proletariat; a very large class of people who own no means of production. This proletariat, Marx says, was created by enclosure. Enclosure caused human suffering on a massive scale; it was unjust and morally wrong. Yet political economy brushes all this aside and instead talks about the primitive

accumulation. This is a question simply of saving up. Marx reveals the ugly secret of the primitive accumulation; the injustice and suffering involved (Wood says 'people too often miss the significance of the phrase 'so-called' [Wood, 2002, p. 36] but perhaps it is the significance of the word 'secret' which is sometimes missed).

He does it very well. But he is not primarily concerned with providing a detailed and analysing account of the origin of capitalism. He doesn't explain how the serfs were replaced by peasant proprietors; how expropriated peasants survived to become the ancestors of the proletariat, rather than starving to death; how replacing people with sheep fits his labour theory of value. He does not consider any role for cultural values in the origins of capitalism. So it's a brilliant attack on the political economy of the time but a bit disappointing account of origin of capitalism.

List of references

Marx, K., 1995, 'Capital', New York, World's Classics)

Lekachman, R., 1986, 'Capitalism for beginners', London, Unwin

Wikipedia, article on Enclosure

Wood, E.M., 2002, 'The origin of capitalism a longer view', London, Verso