**Notes for Lecture on Inequalities (2020)**

**Introduction**

This lecture is the first of three dedicated to the broad topic of global social problems. In these lectures, I will seek to analyze how intersecting hierarchies and processes of race, gender, and class serve to structure contemporary social and political dynamics and therefore shape the contours of major global social problems. The major global social problems I will focus on are: (1) inequalities; (2) borders; and (3) the COVID-19 pandemic. In the process, I hope to familiarize you with several important and often contested concepts in contemporary social science. These concepts include: occidentalism; primitive accumulation; sovereignty; border imperialism; bio-politics; and racial capitalism.

This first lecture focuses on the problem of inequalities. In it, I will address two main questions, in relation to a host of core readings on the topic. The two questions are:

1. In what ways does “Occidentalism” pervade mainstream analyses of social inequalities? and
2. How is “primitive accumulation,” or “accumulation by dispossession,” implicated in the production and reproduction of global inequalities?

The core readings which we will review in order to bring these questions into focus include chapters from Manuela Boatca’s *Global Inequalities beyond Occidentalism*; Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*; David Harvey’s *The New Imperialism*; Jodi Melamed’s article on “Racial Capitalism;” and Raj Patel and Jason Moore’s *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*.

**Decolonizing the Debate about Global Inequalities**

Let me start the discussion with a synoptic overview of some of the main arguments made by Manuela Boatca in her erudite and somehow provocative plea to decolonize the mainstream sociological discussion about global inequalities. Boatca begins with the observation that: “[t]o most academics in the global North, global inequalities are new” (p.1).

She traces “interest in the study of global inequalities” to “the unprecedented increase in income inequalities in the United States and Great Britain since the 1980s.” Nevertheless, she emphasises that “[a]t the same time, theoretically and methodologically different approaches to global inequalities developed in the formerly colonised and peripheral parts of the world did not become incorporated into the apparatus of general social theory” (p.5).

Boatca proposes a rather dramatic shift of the excessively present-ist optic of the contemporary sociological discussion, with its focus on recent trends in the so-called “neoliberal period.” Such a focus, she contends, is both biased and extremely short-sighted. Instead, as she sets out to painstakingly document in the text: “[G]lobal inequalities are not a new phenomenon. Instead, inequalities have been the result of transregional processes for more than five centuries” (p.2).

Five centuries is a significant time horizon – one deliberately chosen because it coincides with the onset of European trans-Atlantic imperial plunder. This is how her story of global inequalities is framed, as one intended to take a longer view. Though, equally significantly, her optic is not one that spans millennia. She does not attempt, along the lines of the social-ecologist Murray Bookchin in his classic book *The Ecology of Freedom*, to trace “the emergency of hierarchy” *tout court*. Nowhere in her narrative do we hear about the complex and very deep historical processes, “the dialectical unfolding,” by which hierarchical societies emerged, “from gerontocracy, through patricentricity, shamanistic guilds, warrior groups, chiefdoms, and finally state-formations, even before classes began to emerge” (Bookchin, p.26).

No, in relation to the mainstream sociological discussion about global inequalities, Boatca certainly takes a long view. But in terms of all possible explanatory frameworks, relevant for understanding systematic patterns of inequality, perhaps her view is not so long. Indeed, though her focus is not presentist, it remains decisively *modernist* nonetheless. Boatca hones in on what Immanuel Wallerstein has called the modern world system, that is, capitalism as a world economy, which, following Wallerstein, she insists can only be understood in relation to Europe’s colonial enterprise. In other words, her narrative focus is on what Wallerstein’s collaborator, the decolonial theorist Alonso Quijano, has dubbed “the colonial matrix of power.” Though, with Bookchin, or indeed, with Andre Gunder Frank, we might still be tempted to ask: *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*

Even so, Boatca’s five-hundred-year optic on global inequalities deliberately centers the dynamics of capitalism as a world economy, in relation to Europe’s colonial enterprise. Hers is an optic which is intended to provide a useful corrective to the obsessive and extremely narrow present-ism of the mainstream sociological discussion, which she depicts as focused nearly exclusively on trends in income inequality over the past three or four decades, linked to an allegedly novel *transnationalisation* of the global political economy, in the period of so-called “neoliberalism.” Against such hegemonic present-ist framing of the subject, Boatca powerfully and persuasively insists that “viewing the *transnationalisation* of inequality as a new phenomenon today requires (1) disregarding the large-scale, systematic cross border processes that long preceded the emergence of the nation-state in Western Europe, (2) erasing the transnational experiences of non-European, non-Western regions as well as of non-Western or non-White populations from social theory and (3) disregarding the multiple entanglements between Europe and its colonies, dependencies and occupied territories throughout the centuries” (p.2).

It’s perhaps worth noting here that Boatca’s approach converges with the call made by Raj Patel and Jason Moore in their *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* “to move away from seeing the modern world as a collection of states and toward see[ing it] as a world-system of capital, power, and nature,” and “to consider these processes over the span of centuries—not decades” (p.25).

By all means, Boatca sees the sociological debate about global inequalities to be burdened, limited, by what she calls its long-standing “Occidentalist” biases, its systematic *erasures* of “the particular historical circumstances of the European colonial expansion in the Americas, of the colonial and imperial conquest of the non-European world, as well as of the impact of slave labour on colonial plantations upon the development of Western societies from the elaboration of its categories of analysis” (p.3).

Boatca’s argument attempts a synthesis and creative incorporation of several related critical research programs or traditions. These include: (1) the “world-systems analysis’ agenda for unthinking nineteenth-century social scientific paradigms and on the corresponding critique of the nation-state as an unquestioned unit of analysis (Wallerstein 1991c)”; (2) “postcolonial studies’ critique of Eurocentrism in general and of Orientalism in particular (Said 1978); (3) “dependency theory’s focus on the entanglements between patterns of inequality as reflecting colonial power relations between metropoles and colonies (Cardoso and Faletto 1969; Frank 1972)”; and (3) “the decolonial perspective’s conceptualisation of modernity/coloniality as eminently relational and joint products of Europe’s colonial expansion in the Americas in the sixteenth century and of the resulting geopolitics of knowledge production (Coronil 1996, Mignolo 2000)” (pp.3-4).

Boatca emphasises especially the need to “reconceptualis[e] the standard dimensions of social inequality in light of the power relations engendered on the colonial side of modernity,” and correspondingly, on the need to focus “on processes of othering as systematic and ongoing practices of gendering, racialisation, and ethnicisation,” which, she furthermore insists, “allows us to grasp the dynamic, rather than the static aspect of social inequality and stratification” (p.16).

Boatca conceives of her work as an attempt to provide a crucial corrective, an effort to counter the “silences, the absences, the blind spots” in the mainstream sociological discussion and analysis of global inequalities. Such silences, absences, and blind spots, for her, are but a by-product of the discipline’s longstanding and still deeply entrenched Occidentalist “definition of modernity as a particularly Western European achievement,” a conceptualization which systematically covers over and conceals “inequalities ensuing from the production of the colonial difference since the European overseas expansion” (p.17).

Boatca takes the term “Occidentalism” from the tradition of decolonial theory. More specifically, she follows Fernando Coronil in defining Occidentalism as “the expression of a constitutive relationship between Western representations of cultural difference and worldwide Western dominance” (Coronil 1996: 57). The term is of course intimately related to the post-colonial theorist Edward Said’s famous articulation of the concept of “Orientalism.” Boatca specifies that “Occidentalism does not represent the counterpart of Orientalism, but its precondition.” It is, for her, “a discourse from and about the West that sets the stage for discourses about the West’s Other(s) – i.e., for Orientalism, but also for anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, and sexism” (p.82).

Likewise, the term Occidentalism is closely related but not synonymous with the concept of Eurocentrism. This because of the marginalisation, even Othering, of Eastern European experiences within Occidentalist discourse. Indeed, according to Boatca, Occidentalism emerged not as a pan-European, but as an essentially pan-Western discourse.” It is a discourse “that constructed and downgraded both European and non-European Others to the extent that their ‘Westernness’, i.e., their Occidentality, had become questionable in a given historical and geopolitical context” (p.82). To this end, she goes on to quote the decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo, who argues that: “If racism is the matrix that permeates every domain of the imaginary of the modern/colonial world system, ‘Occidentalism’ is the overarching metaphor around which colonial differences have been articulated and rearticulated through the changing hands in the history of capitalism … and the changing ideologies motivated by imperial conflicts (Mignolo 2000: 13)” (p.82).

Boatca is thus following the so-called decolonial turn with her employment of the concept of Occidentalism, and in differentiating between it “as a discourse from and about the West,” which “emerged as early as the European colonial expansion,” on the one hand, and Orientalism, on the other, “as a discourse about the West’s Other,” which “emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment.” This distinction made by Boatca, following the decolonial perspective, is intended to emphasise “the epistemic dimension of inequality processes had been coterminous with the emergence of capitalism itself, and is thus essential for an analysis of global inequalities” (p.20).

If Boatca, in line with the decolonial perspective, thus emphasises the epistemic dimension of inequality, this does not mean that her account ignores the dimension of material power relations, or, otherwise put, political economy. Rather, she emphasises that there is “a complex recursivity between material and epistemic forms” of structural violence and the patterns of inequalities they produce and reproduce, to invoke Jodi Melamed’s felicitous turn of phrase (Melamed, p.77).

In such a vein, Boatca’s critique of mainstream sociological accounts emphasises how different aspects of what she calls “the colonial difference,” such as “chattel slavery and its consequences, racially segregated work forces both in the core and in the periphery, exploitative bourgeoisies and ‘dual economies’ in Latin America, patriarchal gender relations in Africa and the Middle East, and the coexistence of forms of wage and non-wage labour in all colonised areas” have all been treated as but historical residues, or more specifically, as but “feudal remnants and proof of the periphery’s backwardness up to the twentieth century.” They therefore “did not qualify as products of inequality relations under capitalism” and consequently were excluded from “its theorisation” (p.17).

Boatca’s book “draws on the insights of gender studies, world-systems analysis, and post- and decolonial perspectives in order to suggest three substantive and interrelated modifications of the mainstream study of social inequality. First, a shift from the focus on the nation-state as sole unit of analysis to a global focus encompassing worldwide centre-periphery relations alongside nationwide and regional inequalities and the connections between them; second, a systematic and explicit engagement with the theories of social change implicit in concepts of social inequality and the conclusions entailed for the corresponding definition of modernity and the modern; and third, an emphasis on the dynamics behind the emergence of categories along which inequality structures were historically constructed, i.e., on processes of othering such as gendering, racialisation, and ethnicisation, rather than on static categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity” (p.18).

Such modifications of the study of social inequality, indeed, such efforts to “take coloniality into account,” are what is required if the study of global inequalities is to be rendered truly global, to accomplish the discipline’s longstanding claims to universality, claims inherent in the discipline’s “current theoretical canon,” but which have been again and again effectively distorted, obfuscated, undermined, by “the ‘blind spots’ resulting from the particularity of a single epistemological perspective,” one which over-represents “modernity,” so to speak, while under-representing “coloniality” (p.18).

If Boatca’s book thus follows Immanuel Wallerstein’s call to *unthink* or *undiscipline* hegemonic theoretical models, she does so with a constructive, globalizing (if not universalizing), even cosmopolitan intent. By making these models come to grips with “impact [of] the geopolitical displacement of the sixteenth century,” she hopes to help “fill in the blanks that have so far prevented [the discipline] from being “both global and truly ‘cosmopolitan’,” despite its many failed attempts and false pretences (p.22).

In sum, Boatca’s is a work committed to the task of un-erasing: of un-erasing “the history and experience of the non-White and non-European populations as well as non-Western regions from social scientific theory-building.” Such un-erasure, she insists, “would not only reveal a far more entangled history of multiple Europes than the one we are accustomed to reading, but would also result in global instead of universal sociology.” By overcoming the near-ubiquitous tendency to “overgeneralis[e] from the particular history of its own geopolitical location,” she concludes, “a global sociology which has moved beyond Occidentalism would be able to account for the continuum of structures of power linking geopolitical locations from colonial through postcolonial times” (p.231).

**Enter Marx and the Concept of “Primitive Accumulation”**

Now, among the canonical theorists who Boatca includes as at least a partial target for her decolonial critique is Karl Marx. Boatca criticises Marx for largely failing to “go beyond the focus on the nation-state for the analysis of either capitalism in general or inequality more specifically,” even though she does acknowledge that he does “pay some attention to the global dimension” (p.19). She criticizes many of Marx’s writings, including *The Communist Manifesto*, the *Grundrisse*, and Capital, for articulating a perspective that is at the same time methodologically nationalist, Eurocentric, and developmentalist. Nonetheless, she follows a recent trend, perhaps most elaborately laid out in the English language in Kevin Anderson’s magisterial *Marx at the Margins* (of which she seems unaware), in recuperating and revindicating different, less-known writings of Marx, which are somehow less vulnerable to such charges.

According to Boatca, “Marx’ and Engels’ largely ignored articles and letters on Asia, the Middle East, Russia, Ireland, and the Americas … provide a framework within which to comprehend the relationship between Europe and its Other(s) as a dialectical one, and help situate capitalist modernity globally as the product of unequal relations between coloniser and colonised.” Boatca hones in in particular upon “Marx’s treatment of New World slavery as a condition of possibility for European industrialism and for modernity more generally,” which she contends, “provides a key point of entry to Marx’ understanding of coloniality as a set of anomalies meant to disappear in time, yet structurally embedded in the logic of capitalist production” (pp.19-20).

So too does Boatca make use of the concept of “primitive accumulation,” a category about which Marx had a significant amount to say, the historical and theoretical analysis of which he would famously elaborate in Part VIII of the first volume of his magnum opus, *Capital*, first published in 1867. As we shall see, the concept of “primitive accumulation” has been employed, reconceptualised, and further articulated by a relatively wide variety of contemporary critical social scientists. It is a crucial concept, one which allows for a materialist account of the ways in which hierarchies of racialisation, gender, and property relations are intricately intertwined and have intersected, indeed, have been together historically fused and forged.

Boatca’s account includes a useful overview of how Marx would articulate the concept of “primitive accumulation” in the last part of the first volume of *Capital*, in relation to his discussion of the origins of capitalism as a unique system of social-property relations, a system which requires “the separation of the producer from the means of production” and entails “the appropriation of surplus labour.” Both of these core features of capitalism “were the result of the previous process of expropriation of the agricultural population from the land” (p.31). This previous process of expropriation Marx would identify as “the starting point of the capitalist mode of production,” and for which he would apply the label, “the so-called primitive accumulation.”

Marx did not invent the term. In fact, he took it from the repertoire of the classical political economists who were the main target of his critique. Indeed, as Silvia Federici reminds us, and as Michael Perelman has pointed out, the term primitive accumulation was actually “coined by Adam Smith and rejected by Marx, because of its ahistorical character in Smith’s usage.” Indeed, according to Perelman, “[t]o underscore his distance from Smith, Marx prefixed the pejorative 'so-called' to the title of the final part of the first volume of Capital, which he devoted to the study of primitive accumulation. Marx, in essence, dismissed Smith's mythical ‘previous’ accumulation in order to call attention to the actual historical experience’” (Federici, p.117).

As Jodi Melamed has argued: “The chapters on “So-Called Primitive Accumulation” in Capital yield a particularly rich analysis of the violence of transformative processes that extract people and things from previously sustaining social relations and insert them into the capital-relation … that makes accumulation possible” (p.80). Moreover, Melamed reminds us of “Marx’s rendition of the “nursery tale” bourgeois political economists use to explain the origin of capitalist wealth. The tale involves two kinds of people who lived long, long ago: “one the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elites,” who accumulate wealth so their progeny can become capitalists; “the other, lazy rascals” who “spend their sustenance, and more in riotous living,” so that the masses of people, who are their heirs, are left with “nothing to sell except their own skins” (p.80)

Marx was at pains to stress that this “nursery tale” of the bourgeois economists about “capitalism’s original diversity (versions of which are still told everyday) substitutes for the “notorious fact” that, in acquiring the wealth of European modernity, “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part,” not “effort” or “right” (p.80). And crucially, Melamed adds, a point to which we shall return, that “[t]he division of humanity into “worthy” and “unworthy” forms is the trace of the violence that forces apart established social bonds and enforces new conditions for expropriative accumulation” (p.80).

As such, the process of primitive accumulation, Marx would stress, was characterised by extreme violence. In his evocative words, “capital comes into the world dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood.” As Boatca explains: “Unlike Adam Smith and the classical political economists, who viewed the emergence of capitalism as a natural development arisen from an increasing division of labour between producers of specialised goods, merchants, and factory owners employing wage labourers, Marx stated that capitalism had been based on the violent dissolution of feudal economic structures and their transformation into capitalist forms of exploitation” (p.31). To this end, Boatca quotes a famous passage from Chapter XXVI of *Capital*, on “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation,” where Marx eloquently argues:

“[T]he historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves ***only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire*** (Marx 1978f: 433)” (p.31).

As Federici elaborates, Marx thus “introduced the concept of ‘primitive accumulation’ at the end of *Capital* Volume I to describe the social and economic restructuring that the European ruling class initiated in response to its accumulation crisis, and to establish (in polemic with Adam Smith) that: (i) capitalism could not have developed without a prior concentration of capital and labor; and that (ii) the divorcing of the workers from the means of production, not the abstinence of the rich, is the source of capitalist wealth. Primitive accumulation, then, is a useful concept, for it connects the ‘feudal reaction’ with the development of a capitalist economy, and it identifies the *historical* and *logical* conditions for the development of the capitalist system, ‘primitive’ (‘originary’) indicating a precondition for the existence of capitalist relations as much as a specific event in time” (Federici, p.63).

So-called ‘primitive accumulation’, then, as the term is employed by Marx, refers to “the historical process upon which the development of capitalist relations was premised.” And, as Federici rightly insists, it is useful because “it provides a common denominator through which we can conceptualize the changes that the advent of capitalism produced in economic and all social relations.” In sum, “‘primitive accumulation’ is treated by Marx as a foundational process, revealing the structural conditions for the existence of capitalist society. This enables us to read the past as something which survives into the present …” (Federici, p.12).

Now, as Federici also stresses, Marx “analyzed primitive accumulation almost exclusively from the viewpoint of the waged industrial proletariat: the protagonist, in his view, of the revolutionary process of his time and the foundation for the future communist society. Thus, in his account, primitive accumulation consists essentially in the expropriation of the land from the European peasantry and the formation of the free, independent worker” (Federici, p.63).

The primary site of this violent appropriation, of this expropriation which is written in the annals of humanity in letters of blood and fire, according to Marx, is thus the European countryside. Nevertheless, as both Federici and Boatca point out, Marx also acknowledges and seeks to explain this intra-European dynamic process “in relation to Europe’s colonial enterprise.” To make this point, both Federici and Boatca quote another famous passage from Marx, this one from Chapter XXXI of *Capital*, on “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,” in which Marx traces “the dawn of the era of capitalist production,” and, thus, the process of primitive accumulation of capital, back to “the discovery of gold and silver in America, the expatriation, 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 blackskins” (Marx 1978f: 435). This passage, Boatca rightly insists, “reinforc[es] the view that the development of modern capitalism was closely tied to European colonialism” (p.37).

For her part, Federici also quotes another passage from Chapter XXXI of *Capital*, in which Marx goes on to recognize that “[a] great deal of capital, which today appears in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday in England the capitalised blood of children” (Federici, p.63).

Nevertheless, Federici then proceeds to emphasize that, by contrast, we do not find in Marx’s work “any mention of the profound transformations that capitalism introduced in the reproduction of labor-power and the social position of women. Nor does Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation mention the ‘Great Witch-Hunt’ of the 16th and 17th centuries, although this state-sponsored terror campaign was central to the defeat of the European peasantry, facilitating its expulsion from the lands it once held in common” (Federici, p.63). This is a point to which we will return below.

**Primitive Accumulation, Racial Capitalism, and Patriarchy**

Now, Boatca’s book goes on to document how, from the 1970s forward, theorists have taken up the crucial category of “primitive accumulation” for the dual purposes of reconceptualising “gender relations and colonial exploitation under capitalism,” while “actively incorporating developments outside of Europe.” On the one hand, she explicates, “the world-systems perspective argued that non-wage, colonial modes of labour control were integral to and essential for the logic of capitalism” (p.20). To this end, she provides an overview of the important book by Sydney Mintz, from 1986, titled *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, in which he introduces the “notion of the ‘double linkage of production and consumption’ between slaves on Caribbean plantations and industrial workers in Western Europe” (p.230).

Like Mintz before her, Silvia Federici has also stressed the centrality of the plantation system to the development of the modern capitalist economy. In Federici’s words: “It is now established that the plantation system fueled the Industrial Revolution, as argued by Eric Williams, who noted that hardly a brick in Liverpool and Bristol was not cemented with African blood (1944:61--63). But capitalism may not even have taken off without Europe's ‘annexation of America’, and the ‘blood and sweat’ that for two centuries flowed to Europe from the plantations. This must be stressed, as it helps us realize how essential slavery has been for the history of capitalism, and why, periodically, but systematically, whenever the capitalist system is threatened by a major economic crisis, the capitalist class has to launch a process of ‘primitive accumulation’, that is, a process of large-scale colonization and enslavement, such as the one we are witnessing at present” (Federici, p.104).

Moreover, Federici continues: “The plantation system was crucial for capitalist development not only because of the immense amount of surplus labor that was accumulated from it, but because it set a model of labor management, export-oriented production, economic integration and international division of labor that have since become paradigmatic for capitalist class relations. With its immense concentration of workers and its captive Iabor force, uprooted from its homeland, unable to rely on local support, the plantation prefigured not only the factory but also the later use of immigration and globalization to cut the cost of labor. In particular, the plantation was a key step in the formation of an international division of labor (through the production of ‘consumer goods’) integrated the work of the slaves into the reproduction of the European workforce, while keeping enslaved waged workers geographically and socially divided” (Federici, p.104).

The focus on the centrality of the plantation system to the development of the modern capitalist economy, in turn, has direct ramifications for how we can conceptualization the relation between racism and capitalism. Anti-black racism and the ideology of white supremacy emerged with the rise of capitalism to justify the violent colonial-settler theft of the land and the slave-based economy of the plantation system. This is why, as Jodi Melamed has argued, racism, or racialism, should be understood “as a material force” in history, one which would “inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (p.77).

The term “racial capitalism,” often attributed to the path-breaking 1983 book by Cedric Robinson, called *Black Marxism*, proves most relevant in this regard. Jodi Melamed has more recently elaborated on the concept, in direct relation to the violent process of primitive accumulation, originally emerging out of the plantation system, but continuing into the present. “Capitalism ***is*** racial capitalism,” Melamed insists. This because “capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires” (p.77). We will return to this important point below.

If Cedric Robinson, and more recently, Jodi Melamed and Robin Kelley, among others, have made this provocative and powerful argument that capitalism ***is necessarily*** racial capitalism, other scholars, working in the tradition of Marxist feminism have added that capitalism ***is necessarily*** patriarchal capitalism as well. In such a vein, Silvia Federici has argued: “[C]apitalism, as a social-economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism. For capitalism must justify and mystify the contradictions built into its social relations – the promise of freedom vs. the reality of widespread coercion, and the promise of prosperity vs. the reality of widespread penury - by denigrating the "nature" of those it exploits: women, colonial subjects, the descendants of American slaves, the immigrants displaced by globalization. At the core of capitalism there is not only the symbiotic relation between waged contractual labor and enslavement but, together with it, the dialectics of accumulation and destruction of labor-power, for which women have paid the highest cost, with their bodies, their work, their lives” (Federici, p.17).

Which brings us back to Boatca’s book. Boatca attributes the shift of attention to plantation slaves in the Caribbean to the work of world-system theorists in general, and to that of Sidney Mintz in particular. But she also traces a parallel, analogous intellectual development coming from feminist scholars associated with the Bielefeld school of development sociology, who specifically “claimed that subsistence labour paralleled wage labour as a core pillar of capital accumulation” (p.20). Here Boatca highlights the crucial contribution of Maria Mies, who in her 1986 book, titled *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, introduces the “concept of the ‘double-faced process of colonisation and housewifisation’,” a process “which structurally and temporally juxtaposes the naturalisation of non-White women in the Caribbean and Africa to the defining of white European women into housewives” (p.230).

In sum, whereas the world-system theorists would have us shift our attention to plantation slaves in the Caribbean, the Bielefeld school feminists would have us focus on housewives. Crucially, both of these lines of argument amounted to “attempt[s] to decentre the role of the proletariat as the main exploited class, and, accordingly, that of wage labour as the defining moment of the capitalist system” (p.45). And in the process, they help to illuminate the ways in which relations of racial and gender domination have constituted fundamental, core components of the workings of modern capitalism.

In Boatca’s words: “[B]y highlighting the contribution that modern slave economies on the one hand and subsistence production on the other had had to the emergence and maintenance of capitalism as a global mode of production, [these two approaches] succeeded in modifying Marx’s conceptualisation of the process of primitive accumulation so as to account for the creation of patterns of global inequality” (p.57).

Federici’s work proves again highly relevant in this regard. At the outset of her magisterial *Caliban and the Witch*, first published in 2004, Federici pays homage to the contribution of the Bielefeld school’s Maria Mies in particular, who she lauds for “re-examin[ing] capitalist accumulation from a non-Eurocentric viewpoint, connecting the destiny of women in Europe to that of Europe's colonial subjects, and providing for a new understanding of women's place in capitalism and the globalization process” (p.13).

Federici makes much use of the concept of “primitive accumulation” in the elaboration of her argument about “the constructed character of [gender] roles in capitalist society” (p.14). Specifically, she argues that “the construction of a new patriarchal order, making of women the servants of the male work-force, was a major aspect of capitalist development” (p.115). To make this argument, she develops and adapts the concept of primitive accumulation to arrive at a formulation that allows for an effective transcendence of “the dichotomy between ‘gender’ and ‘class’” (p.14).

Federici stresses that her analysis of primitive accumulation “departs from Marx's” in important ways. For example, she insists that, “[w]hereas Marx examines primitive accumulation from the viewpoint of the waged male proletariat and the development of commodity production, [she] examine[s] it from the viewpoint of the changes it introduced in the social position of women and the production of labor-power.” Accordingly, Federici’s “description of primitive accumulation includes a set of historical phenomena that are absent in Marx, and yet,” she contends, “have been extremely important for capitalist accumulation.” Such historical phenomena “include (i) the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; (ii) the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged work and their subordination to men; (iii) the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers” (p.12).

Crucially, Federici places “at the center of her analysis of primitive accumulation the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries.” Indeed, she argues, quite provocatively, “that the persecution of the witches, in Europe as in the New World, were as important as colonization and the expropriation of European peasantry from its land were for the development of capitalism” (p.12).

Moreover, what Melamed refers to as the complex “recursivity between material and epistemic forms” of domination is also present in the contours of Federici’s account. For Federici emphasises the dialectical relation between ideological denigration and projects of expropriation, as well as the violence involved in both dimension. In Federici’s words: “It is no exaggeration to say that women were treated with the same hostility and sense of estrangement accorded [so-called] ‘Indian savages’ in the literature that developed on the subject after the Conquest. The parallel is not casual. In both cases literary and cultural denigration was at the service of a project of expropriation … [T]he demonization of the American indigenous people served to justify their enslavement and plunder of their resources. In Europe, the attack waged on women justified the appropriation of their labor by men and the criminalization of their control over reproduction. Always the price of resistance was extermination. None of the tactics deployed against European women and colonial subjects would have succeeded, had they not been sustained by a campaign of terror. ln the case of European women it was the witch-hunt that played the main role in the construction of their new social function, and the degradation of their social identity” (p.102).

As such, Federici thus makes a compelling case for expanding the scope of expropriations involved in the process of primitive accumulation to include the systematic subjugation of women. To this end, she contends that “[t]he expropriation of European workers from their means of subsistence, and the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans to the mines and plantations of the ‘New World’, were not the only means by which a world proletariat was formed and ‘accumulated’ (p.63). Federici further specifies that the process by which the world proletariat was formed “required the transformation of the body into a work machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the workforce. Most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women which, in Europe as in America, was achieved through the extermination of the [so-called] ‘witches’ (p.63). Federici thereby concludes that “primitive accumulation … is not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as ‘race’ and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat” (p.63).

Following the lead of Maria Mies, Federici goes on to stress that the historic changes which she traces “peaked in the 19th century with the creation of the housewife.” According to Federici, these changes “redefined women's position in society and in relation to men.” She argues: “The sexual division of labor that emerged … not only fixed women to reproductive work, but increased their dependence on men, enabling the state and employers to use the male as a means to command women’s labor. In this way, the separation of commodity production from the reproduction of labor power also made possible the development of a specifically capitalist use of the wage and of the markets as means for the accumulation of unpaid labor. Most importantly, the separation of production from reproduction created a class proletarian women who were as dispossessed as men but, unlike their male relatives proletarian women who were as dispossessed as men but, unlike their male relatives, in a society that was becoming increasingly monetarized, had almost no access to wages, thus being forced into a condition of chronic poverty, economic dependence, and invisibility as workers” (p.75).

In sum, and in accordance with this logic, the family comes into focus as “emerg[ing] in the period of primitive accumulation … as the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women's labor” (p.97).

The subjugation of women is thus treated by Federici as a constitutive feature of the capitalist system. Or, as Patel and Moore put the point, “[p]atriarchy isn’t a mere by-product of capitalism’s ecology— it’s fundamental to it” (p.31). Indeed, Federici contends that “the power-difference between women and men and the concealment of women's unpaid-labor under the cover of natural inferiority, have enabled capitalism to immensely expand the ‘unpaid part of the working day’, and use the (male) wage to accumulate women's labor; in many cases, they have also served to deflect class antagonism into an antagonism between men and women. Thus, primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves” (p.115).

**Primitive Accumulation and the Domination of Nature**

If the concept of primitive accumulation is therefore useful insofar as it helps to illuminate the intersection – indeed, fusing – of processes of production and reproduction of racial, gender, and class hierarchies in the modern capitalist world-system, the world-ecological approach, associated with the work of Jason Moore, would have us situate these processes, in turn, in relation to the dynamics of domination of humans over nature. Moore is perhaps most famous for his contribution to the debate about the “anthropocene," for which he has proposed the alternative terminology of the “capitalocene,” as a way of emphasizing the link between climate catastrophe and the dynamics of global capitalism.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the time horizon invoked by Moore to describe and explain the capitalocene is, again, roughly five hundred years. For like Boatca, Moore’s framework and understanding of modern capitalism is highly indebted to the world-system theory first proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein. But Moore’s approach goes beyond the work of Boatca or, for that matter, Wallerstein, insofar as he argues that to take capitalism seriously requires “understanding [that] it [is] not just … an economic system but … a way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of the web of life on earth” (Patel and Moore, p.3). Indeed, as Moore puts it in his book with Patel, “[c]apitalism is not just part of an ecology but is an ecology—a set of relationships integrating power, capital, and nature” (p.38).

The world-ecological approach thus seeks to interpret the dynamics of capitalism as a danger for what they refer to as “the web of life,” the basic trouble being “that capital supposes infinite expansion within a finite web of life” (p.27). At the core of Patel and Moore’s argument is the importance of the dichotomous split between Nature and Society, a split they associate with the rise of capitalism. In their words, “[i]f profit was to govern life, a significant intellectual state shift had to occur: a conceptual split between Nature and Society” (p.24).

Moreover, Patel and Moore go on to relate this conceptual split to the process of subjugation of women, Indigenous Peoples, slaves, and colonized peoples, which we have analysed in relation to the concept of primitive accumulation. For, according to Patel and Moore, “[t]he rise of capitalism gave us the idea not only that society was relatively independent of the web of life but also that most women, Indigenous Peoples, slaves, and colonized peoples everywhere were not fully human and thus not full members of society. These were people who were not—or were only barely—human. They were part of Nature, treated as social outcasts—they were cheapened” (p.24).

What’s more, Patel and Moore continue: “The cleaving of Nature from Society, of savage from civilized, set the stage for the creation of … other cheap things … Capitalism’s practices of cheap nature would define whose lives and whose work mattered—and whose did not. Its dominant ideas Nature and Society (in upper case because of their mythic and bloody power) would determine whose work was valued and whose work—care for young and old, for the sick and those with special needs, agricultural work, and the work of extrahuman natures (animals, soils, forests, fuels)— was rendered largely invisible” (pp.24-25).

The world-ecological approach espoused by Patel and Moore thus brings into focus how the dynamics of domination of *nature by humans* is systematically related to the domination of *humans* *by humans*. Patel and Moore seek to “show how relations of power, production, and reproduction work through the web of life,” always stressing that “the modern world’s violent and exploitative relationships are rooted in five centuries of capitalism” (p.38).

Like those who center the concept of primitive accumulation, the world-ecological approach advocated by Patel and Moore also emphasizes the ubiquity of violence and bloodshed. In their words: “World-ecology allows us to see how concepts we take for granted—like Nature and Society—are problems not just because they obscure actual life and history but because they emerged out of the violence of colonial and capitalist practice … These master concepts were not only formed in close relation to the dispossession of peasants in the colonies and in Europe but also themselves used as instruments of dispossession and genocide. The Nature/Society split was fundamental to a new, modern cosmology in which space was flat, time was linear, and nature was external. That we are usually unaware of this bloody history—one that includes the early modern expulsions of most women, Indigenous Peoples, and Africans from humanity—is testimony to modernity’s extraordinary capacity to make us forget” (p.39).

**Primitive Accumulation as Ongoing Process**

One of the main contributions of the reconceptualization of “primitive accumulation” that has taken place over the past several decades was to make the point that it should not be seen as a process relegated to the historical past, located only at the origins of modern capitalism; but that, instead, it is better understood as an *ongoing process*.

Indeed, for the so-called subsistence theorists associated with the Bielefeld school, Boatca emphasises, primitive accumulation is best conceived as “an ongoing process through which nonwage workers and subsistence producers are being tapped for surplus labour and surplus product in addition to the process of capital accumulation through the exploitation of the actual wage work” (p.52).

Likewise, Boatca cites the decolonial theorist Fernando Coronil, who has brought together both the point about the importance of decentring the industrial worker in accounts of capitalist dynamics and the point about the importance of conceiving of “primitive accumulation” as an ongoing process, to argue emphatically that: “Colonial ‘primitive accumulation’, far from being a precondition of capitalist development, has been an indispensable element of its ongoing dynamic. ‘Free wage labor’ in Europe constitutes not the exclusive condition of capitalism but its dominant productive modality, one historically conditioned by ‘unfree labor’ elsewhere, much as the ‘productive’ labor of wage workers depends on the ongoing ‘unproductive’ domestic labor of women at home. Instead of viewing nature and women’s labor as ‘gifts’ to capital [ … ], they should be seen as confiscations by capital, as part of its colonized other, as its dark side (Coronil 2000: 358)” (p.86).

Federici, too, is quite emphatic in insisting that primitive accumulation is best conceived as an *ongoing process*. Again and again, in the course of her historical account, Federici seeks to highlight “the essential similarity between these phenomena and the social consequences of the new phase of globalization that we are witnessing tells us otherwise” (p.84). Federici criticizes Marx for having “assumed that the violence that had presided over the earliest phases of capitalist expansion would recede with the maturing of capitalist relations, when the exploitation and disciplining of labor would be accomplished mostly through the workings of economic laws (Marx 1909, Vol.1)” (p.12). In this respect, she emphasizes, Marx “was deeply mistaken.” And she proceeds to argue, to the contrary, that “[a] return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalise globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times” (pp.12-13).

As such, she contends that “primitive accumulation has been a universal process in every phase of capitalist development.” And she concludes that, “[n]ot accidentally, its original historical exemplar has sedimented strategies that, in different ways, have been re-launched in the face of every major capitalist crisis, serving to cheapen the cost of labor and to hide the exploitation of women and colonial subjects” (pp.16-17).

Indeed, recognition of the ongoing nature of processes of primitive accumulation has led some theorists to advocate for renaming the concept. In such a vein, for example, the dependency theorist Andre Gunder Frank would argue that the term “primary accumulation” is a “more adequate label for the exploitative practices that had continued until long after the industrial revolution and up to the present day” (Boatca, pp.57-58). Along similar lines, David Harvey opts to use the term “accumulation by dispossession,” since, in his judgment, “it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original’”(p.144).

By all means, terminology aside, among contemporary theorists of primitive accumulation conceived as an ongoing process, Harvey’s work has been among the most influential, because of the analytical rigor with which he has sought to “examine … the ‘organic relation’ between ***expanded reproduction*** on the one hand and the often ***violent processes of dispossession*** on the other,” and his effort to trace how these two processes together have served to “shape the historical geography of capitalism” (p.142).

In his chapter on “Accumulation by Dispossession,” in his 2005 book on *The New Imperialism*, Harvey situates his argument by relating it to an argument originally advanced by the famous revolutionary thinker and martyr, Rosa Luxemburg, in what was probably her most important theoretical work, on *The Accumulation of Capital*, and which was originally published in 1913, in which she emphasised that capital accumulation has a dual character. In her words:

“One concerns the commodity market and the place where surplus value is produced—the factory, the mine, the agricultural estate. Regarded in this light accumulation is a purely economic process, with its most important phase a transaction between the capitalist and the wage labourer. . . . Here, in form at any rate, peace, property and equality prevail, and the keen dialectics of scientific analysis were required to reveal how the right of ownership changes in the course of accumulation into appropriation of other people's property, how commodity exchange turns into exploitation, and equality becomes class rule. The other aspect of the accumulation of capital concerns the relations between capitalism and the non-capitalist modes of production which start making their appearance on the international stage. Its predominant methods are colonial policy, an international loan system—a policy of spheres of interest—and war. Force, fraud, oppression, looting are openly displayed without any attempt at concealment, and it requires an effort to discover within this tangle of political violence and contests of power the stern laws of the economic process” (Harvey, p.137).

Harvey labels the two types of capital accumulation sketched by Luxemburg as accumulation by expanded reproduction, on the one hand, and accumulation by dispossession, on the other. And he goes on to argue that “[t]he umbilical cord that ties together” these two modes of accumulation “is that given by finance capital and the institutions of credit, backed, as ever, by state powers” (p.152). A state-finance nexus brings the two together, so to speak, a conceptualization which Jodi Melamed has amended to call a “state-finance-racial violence nexus,” thereby emphasising “the inseparable confluence of political/economic governance with racial violence” (Melamed, p.78).

Like Harvey, Melamed emphasizes that “so-called primitive accumulation—where capital is accrued through transparently violent means (war, land-grabbing, dispossession, neo/colonialism)—has become everywhere interlinked and continuous with accumulation through expanded reproduction, which we used to think of as requiring only “the silent compulsion of economic relations” (Melamed, p.76). Though Harvey, it should be noted, is careful to stress that processes of “primitive accumulation” need not be overtly violent – that they can entail “appropriation and co-optation of pre-existing cultural and social achievements as well as confrontation and supersession” (p.146).

According to Harvey, “accumulation by dispossession” is comprised by a wide variety of processes: “These include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade and usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation” (p.145).

In his discussion, Harvey highlights how “[s]ome of the mechanisms of primitive accumulation that Marx emphasized have been fine-tuned to play an even stronger role now than in the past.” In particular, he points to “the speculative raiding carried out by hedge funds and other major institutions of finance capital as the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession in recent times” (p.147).

Harvey also mentions the international regime of intellectual property rights as an example of a “[w]holly new mechanism of accumulation by dispossession” in the contemporary period (p.147). He also includes in his discussion such processes as “[t]he commodification of cultural forms, histories, and intellectual creativity; the wave of privatization (of water and public utilities of all kinds) that has swept the world, indicate a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons’;” and “[t]he rolling back of regulatory frameworks designed to protect labour and the environment from degradation has entailed the loss of rights” (p.148). Moreover, like Patel and Moore, he refers to “[t]he escalating depletion of the global environmental commons” as yet another example of the process of accumulation by dispossession (p.148).

In a nutshell, Harvey argues that “[w]hat accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost” (p.149). And he goes on to make the case that the neoliberal period, which he depicts as having been ushered in as a response to a crisis of overaccumulation of the 1970’s, has been characterised by a rather dramatic acceleration of processes of accumulation by dispossession. Harvey contends that “the intense difficulty of sustaining expanded reproduction … generat[ed] a much greater emphasis upon a politics of accumulation by dispossession” (p.172). In his words: “Accumulation by dispossession became increasingly more salient after 1973, in part as compensation for the chronic problems of overaccumulation arising within expanded reproduction. The primary vehicle for this development was financialization and the orchestration, largely at the behest of the United States, of an international financial system that could, from time to time, visit anything from mild to savage bouts of devaluation and accumulation by dispossession on certain sectors or even whole territories” (p.156).

More recently, Jodi Melamed has added, that “since the implementation of austerity regimes in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008,” there has been a further “acceleration of primitive accumulation for everyone,” while also pointing to “the dispossessions of Indigenous people” in particular, which, in the North and South American contexts, at least, she claims “have become visible as the means of transit (the origin, exemplification, and medium)” for such acceleration (p.83).

**Primitive Accumulation and the Prospect of Human Emancipation**

Unlike most of the other theorists who have employed the concept of primitive accumulation, for whom such processes are treated in the tone of thoroughgoing denunciation, Harvey registers a certain, albeit perhaps reluctant, ambivalence with respect to such processes. And in this regard, he remains arguably closer to Marx’s own treatment of such processes. This despite some of Marx’s later writings on non-Western and precapitalist societies, where he contemplated the possibility of multiple paths towards socialism, especially in his writings on agrarian Russia’s communal villages, which he came to consider “could be a starting point for a socialist transformation, one that might avoid the brutal process of the primitive accumulation of capital” (Anderson, p.196). Even so, throughout most of Marx’s life and in most of his writings, Marx tended to espouse a “dialectical developmentalism,” in which the transition towards socialism could only occur after a successful transition towards capitalism and industrialization.

This “dialectical developmentalist,” quasi-evolutionary perspective is what leads Harvey to argue that, at least in some circumstances, “accumulation by dispossession can … be interpreted as the necessary cost of making a successful breakthrough into capitalist development with the strong backing of state powers” (p.154). Elsewhere, he puts the point more bluntly, by stating, quite provocatively: “You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, the old adage goes, and the birth of capitalism entailed fierce and often violent episodes of creative destruction” (p.162). A view which he traces explicitly back to Marx, for whom, he insists, “it could be said that primitive accumulation was a necessary though ugly stage through which the social order had to go in order to arrive at a state where both capitalism and some alternative socialism might be possible” (p.163). To this end, Harvey reminds his readers that “Marx took the view that there was something progressive about capitalist development and that this was true even for British imperialism in India (a position that did not command much respect in the anti-imperialist movements of the post-Second World War period)” (p.163).

Having made this point, Harvey goes on to distinguish between two types of primitive accumulation, one “progressive,” the other “reactionary.” In his words: “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” (p.164).

As I have suggested, such ambivalence on the part of Marx, and by extension Harvey, is something that puts them explicitly at odds with other theorists who would object to all forms of “developmentalist” and “social-evolutionary” discourse, dialectical or otherwise. Silvia Federici proves again illustrative in this regard. Federici acknowledges at the outset of her book that her own analysis “departs from Marx's in its evaluation of the legacy and function of primitive accumulation.” She contends that “[t]hough Marx was acutely aware of the murderous character of capitalist development - its history, he declared, ‘is written in the annals of humanity in characters of fire and blood’ - there can be no doubt that he viewed it as a necessary step in the process of human liberation.” She further emphasises that Marx “believed that [primitive accumulation] disposed of small-scale property, and that it increased (to a degree unmatched by any other economic system) the productive capacity of labor, thus creating the material conditions for the liberation of humanity from scarcity and necessity” (pp.12-13).

Nevertheless, Federici counters that “Marx could never have presumed that capitalism paves the way to human liberation had he looked at its history from the viewpoint of women” (p.13). To the contrary, she insists, “[w]e cannot … identify capitalist accumulation with the liberation of the worker, female or male, as many Marxists (among others) have done, or see the advent of capitalism as a moment of historical progress. On the contrary, capitalism has created more brutal and insidious forms of enslavement, as it has planted into the body of the proletariat deep divisions that have served to intensify and conceal exploitation. It is in great part because of these imposed divisions - especially those between women and men - that capitalist accumulation continues to devastate life in every corner of the planet (pp.63-64).

**Conclusion**

Let us, therefore, conclude. In this lecture, I began by providing an overview of the call to decolonize the debate about global inequalities – which turns out to be a call for a corrective to the systematic blind-spots in the mainstream discussion, the tendency to cover-over and conceal “inequalities ensuing from the production of the colonial difference since the European overseas expansion” (Boatca, p.17). This, in turn, led us to a discussion of Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation.” We considered the relevance of this category for understanding the historically forged connections and relations among racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and the domination of nature. We then honed in on the significance of recent attempts to reconceptualise primitive accumulation as an ongoing process, and reviewed interpretations of the neoliberal period which characterise this period as having experienced an acceleration of such processes. Finally, we ended with a discussion of different interpretations of the relation between primitive accumulation and the prospect of human emancipation.

Up next: the problem of borders.