

Power, politics and environmental change
MA Environmental Humanities 2016-17
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Class 2: 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).

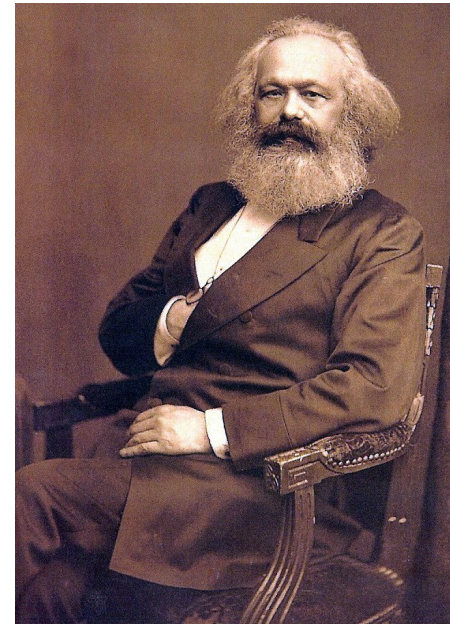
Explain in your own words why is this the case, and how does such degradation occurs

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

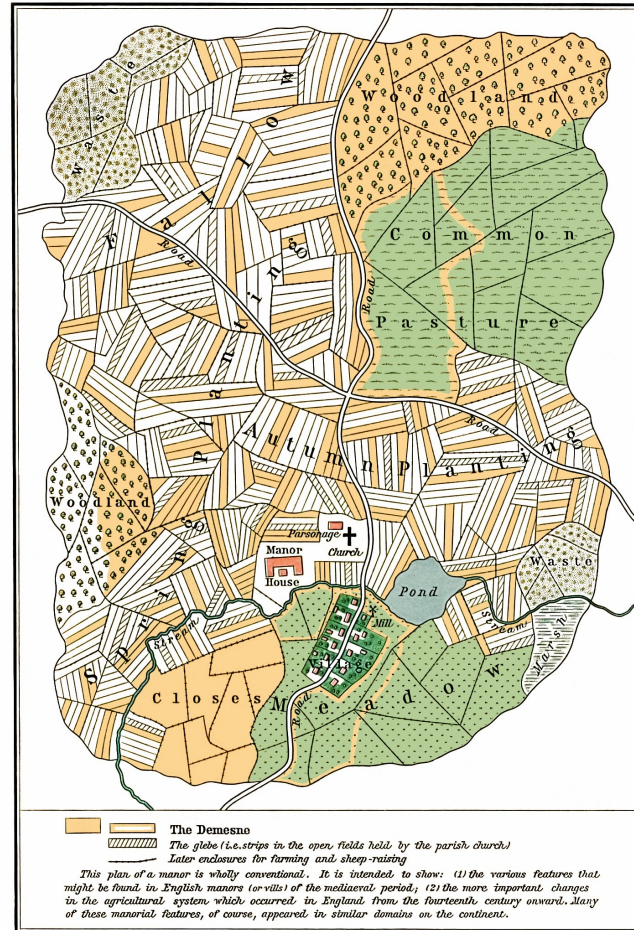


Source: <http://pixgood.com>

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=H4_jvlsGzXI
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: 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 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*

ADD THIS O/H TO AT LEAST QUICKLY EXPLAIN THE MAJOR PE STUDY USING THIS

APPROACH Political economy of soil degradation

- **What he tries to explain?**
 - Why, although there are half a century of policies and (int'l) programmes to deal with soil erosion (reduced productivity of soil), they have failed?
 - Usually: it's the farmers to blame
- **What he finds?**
 - The root causes of soil erosion are not to be found only at the site where land degradation occurs (Hertford, 1987):
 - Farmers are forced to degrade the land in order to delay their own destruction
 - By those who exploit them (the “haves”) within an int'l system of production
 - Capitalist production tends to encourage mining of soils (Robbins, 2012):
 - Farmers produce for int'l competitive markets, many times because of state-sponsored programmes (e.g. Malian cotton farmers, or intro cash crops, or agri modernisation programmes), at times promoted by int'l agencies (e.g. WB), or introduced by colonial powers (e.g.
 - In int'l competitive markets, when economic (profit) margins decline, costs and risks are passed downwards to individual producers, who try extract as much as possible in order to balance their losses
 - This is why they will more readily use pesticides, follow shorter fallowing (time left land to rest) periods, etc. to ensure they have a crop to sell
 - Similarly: this is why they will go deeper into the forest (encroach), to increase production and offset tighter prices for agricultural produce
 - Lost value of (degraded) forest (e.g. biodiversity lost) = extracted from its location to be accumulated in distant commodity markets (e.g. cotton market in London, NY, etc.)
 - Only if the threat to accumulation possibilities of “haves” (e.g. nat'l and multi-nat'l intermediaries) is substantial, soil conservation practices may be successful (implemented); this is because “haves” can adjust themselves to soil erosion (e.g. by making agreements with farmers in other countries, etc.) (Hertford, 1987)