All That Is Sacred Is Profaned
A Pagan Guide To Marxism
(excerpt)
CHAPTER THREE: The Birth & History of Capitalism

In this chapter we’ll look at how capitalism came about and how certain historical forms and forces shaped its birth.

This is the most important part of this book and introduces many potentially difficult concepts, so please be patient with yourself as you read it!

History as progress or history as process?

Before we look deeply into the roots of capitalism and the way it was born into the world, we need to have a brief discussion about history itself.

As people who live in Capitalist societies, who have only ever known Capitalism, we tend to accept the idea that history is a progression from lower or less complex states of existence towards higher or more complex states. Also, we make value-judgments about those states of existence: more complex and modern is “better,” while simpler and older is “worse.”

Try a thought experiment with me. Imagine what daily life looked like 500 years ago in what we now call France. Try to put yourself in the place of the average peasant (not a lord or lady). Imagine what you might be doing every day. Picture what you might be wearing and eating, where you might live, what your family looks like. Imagine what it’s like to work,
what sort of activities you do every day, and what it feels like afterward.

Now also try to sense that world—what it feels like, what it smells and tastes like, what sounds you hear when you wake and go to sleep.

How did you feel about this image? What kind of judgments may have come into your head? Did you cringe a little when I asked about “smell,” perhaps imagining the reek of animal dung, body odor, rotting teeth, or other unpleasant things? Did you perhaps imagine yourself tired, sick from illnesses that couldn’t be treated back then, exhausted from the relentless work of farming, sewing, and doing all the other things required to survive? Did you maybe imagine yourself bored, with nothing to read or watch, no internet or smartphone or even music to listen to whenever you wanted?

If you had negative feelings about what life might have been like, you are hardly alone. In fact, this is the dominant capitalist conception of what life was like before our modern era, and is what is quite often depicted in films and television. Life back then, according to this image, was “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

What if I told you that this way of looking at the past is as new as capitalism itself?

Societies before ours, and even some societies that exist now, don’t think of the past as a place where we were all miserable. In fact, there are some cultures that do not or didn’t have a conception of “past” at all—what came before and what will come were more like places on a map or parts of a house. They were locations, not moments that have
disappeared completely because they no longer occur.

Much of the reason why we look at the past as we do now comes from a particular world-view that arose in Europe through a mix of Christianity, “The Enlightenment,” and Capitalism itself. For instance, the words I quoted above (“poor, nasty, brutish, and short”) come from a 17th century Enlightenment philosopher named Thomas Hobbes: he is one of the people who helped create this conception of the past in the first place.

The “Progress Narrative”

I'll call this general conception of history (where the past is worse than the present) the “Progress Narrative.” In this view of history, the present is always “better” than the past because it is more complex and more civil. Those who lived in that past might not have meant to be brutish and backward, but they had little choice because they were not yet enlightened. The ancient world was full of “superstition” and “primitive” ways of thinking, institutions like human sacrifice and slavery, and people lived in a kind of intellectual darkness. On the other hand, the present is better because we've “progressed” beyond all those ideas and institutions. We've collectively “seen the light” (the Enlightenment) and therefore live in superior, advanced cultures.

If this idea sounds a little Christian or imperialist, you're not wrong—Thomas Hobbes and other Enlightenment thinkers like him were indeed Christian, and they provided the primary moral and intellectual foundation for European colonization of the rest of the world.
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Others, such as Adam Smith (whose concept of the “invisi-
ble hand of the market” is oft-quoted by defenders of capi-
talism) also saw the past as something to be disgusted by
and capitalism something to be embraced, especially be-
cause capitalism was constantly “improving” the way hu-
mans produced, consumed, and exchanged.

The “Process Narrative”

A different way of looking at history ex-
ists, one that Marx and Engels proposed.
In this view, history should be seen as a
process or series of processes. This is
called historical materialism, or Marxist
dialectical materialism. But rather than
chasing one of the most confusing and
debated aspects of Marxist thought
down a rabbit hole, in this course we’ll
talk about this view as the Process Nar-
rative.

In the Process Narrative of history, the
conditions of life are constantly in flux,
changing according to larger processes
(forces) which conflict with each other.
Value judgments about the past and the
present are useless in this narrative, and
a great example of how this plays out is
to imagine an oak tree.

In the ProGress Narrative of history, the
acorn from which the oak sprouted, or
the sapling it became, are both lesser
than the full-grown oak in the present.

In the ProCess Narrative, however, both
the acorn and the oak are both pro-
cesses of the same thing—in fact, the
tree itself is a process, a thing always
becoming, rather than a thing ever fin-
ished.

PROGRESS
NARRATIVE
The idea that
human society is
constantly getting
better, becoming
more advanced
and more free. In
this view, the past
was “backwards”
and “dark” while
the future will
inevitably be even
better than the
present.

PROCESS
NARRATIVE
A way of looking at
the world and ev-
erything in it as
things always in
states of continual
change and cy-
cles. In this view,
old and young,
modern and prim-
itive, and future
and past are
merely states of
being, not value
judgments.
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If this way of looking at the world sounds a bit Pagan, it's because it is also an animist view, while the Progress Narrative is a Christian (primarily Protestant) view. Protestants tend to see the world as a progression from the fall of man in the Garden of Eden to the second coming of Jesus Christ (at which point history will be fulfilled). Animist cultures, on the other hand, tend to think more in mythic cycles or in non-linear time: stories, rather than histories.

Nature Is All

Marxist Historical Materialism (the Process Narrative) makes one other assertion that we'll need to understand before looking at the birth of capitalism.

That assertion is this: human thought reflects the material world because humans are part of that world. That is, there is no realm of "ideals" that exists before the world; everything that we think is a reflection of our experiences as humans living in societies that humans have created. The human body is not just something we live in but something that we are, and it's that experience of being human in the world which leads us to "discover" (really—to imagine) ideal situations.

Compare this to one of the foundational ideas of the Progress Narrative: that there is an "ideal state" of existence towards which society is always reaching (and, in the more Christian variants, an "ideal state" from which we have fallen and need to return). In that view, what is ideal already exists in our heads and it's that ideal against which we should judge human experience.

There's a simpler way of understanding this, one many Pagans are very familiar with. In many magical conceptions of the world, there are four elements which comprise all of existence: air, fire, water, and earth. These elements are always intermixing to create the world: for instance, the human body is comprised of earth (its structure and material existence), water (our bodies are mostly water and are
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flexible), air (the oxygen we breathe and the carbon dioxide we create), and fire (the heat we create and take in, the transmutation of food into energy). All of these elements are physical (material) forces that are always in relationship with each other.

In Western society, however, we tend to think of a split between mind (or spirit) and matter, and the mind/spirit is greater than matter. “Positive thinking” is one of the ways this manifests—if you just imagine yourself happy or rich, you’ll become happy or rich. Putting an optimistic spin on life, or visualizing world peace—these are other consequences of this worldview.

A Marxist framework points to the actually-existing circumstances that are causing poverty and war, and show how material conditions lead to such suffering. In this way, the Marxist framework can be said to be more Pagan—it tells us to look at the world around us, study it, understand how processes work together for or against certain ways of being, and says that it isn’t our theories and positive thinking that changes the world, it’s our actions.

This framework is also deeply animist. It allows us to see the past and the people who lived in it not as failed “primitive” states but as part of the same processes which exist now. Our ancestors are not faded memories but parts of our lives in the same way that a fallen tree continues to nourish the forest it was a part of. The dead live on, not just in our thoughts but literally in the very fabric of our material existence. We walk on streets and live in buildings built by people who no longer live—their work continues to shape our daily existence, whether we acknowledge them or not.

Life Before And Outside Capitalism

In the thought experiment at the beginning of this chapter, I asked you to imagine what life might have been like for a commoner 500 years ago. The answer to this question is also the answer to what life was like for commoners 1000
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years ago or 2000 years ago. It’s also what life is like now for people living in the few non-capitalist cultures still in existence, or what it’s like for people such as the Amish, and what life would be like today if you suddenly moved with about 40 other people to a small village without electricity and modern technological devices.

Part of your daily life would be spent working, just as it is now. There’s a pretty good chance you’d spend much of that work-time farming, raising your own food and livestock to provide food for yourself and your family. But you wouldn’t be farming alone—you’d be farming with others in your village, dividing the tasks up amongst each other according to who was good at what.

You wouldn’t be farming all year, by the way...you can’t in most of the world. Farming is a task-related kind of work, and these tasks are determined by the time of year and the cycle of growth. So, for instance, at the beginning of spring you’d be very busy breaking up the ground and planting seeds, but after that your tasks become watering and weeding until the plants are ready to harvest. At that point you're really, really busy again, putting everything into storehouses, grinding grain, sorting seeds to save for the next year, and doing other activities related to that harvest (including brewing beer and cider). And then, come winter, there’s no farming for you to do at all.

There would be many daily tasks as well. Every morning someone in your family would have to let all the animals out that you keep in coops, barns, or on the first floor of your house to protect them from wolves and foxes. You’d cook, draw water, clean, repair things, build things, create things. You might go hunting with others in the village, and have many other tasks that related to your daily survival.

Sounds like a lot of work? It is. But was it more work than what you’re doing now? The answer in many cases is no.

Sure, you probably work forty hours a week at a job, and a peasant might spend many more hours than that farming
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some weeks. So it probably seems like they were doing more work than you do now.

But think again about how much work you actually do in a day, but this time, instead of just including the hours spent at a job, think about all the other work you do. If you drive to work, include that. If you have kids you have to get ready for school each morning, include that time. Also include the amount of time you spend cooking and cleaning and shopping, doing all those other activities that are required for living. That's all work, too.

Now, imagine all the time you currently get off from work. Unless you're a school teacher, you probably don't have a three-month period every year where you don't have to go to your job, huh?

For a peasant though, winter was a time of rest, where none of the manual labor in the fields was even possible. For us, however, work is usually the same throughout the year, always the same required 8 (or more) hours each day, and often times even busier during winter, especially if you work in retail or shipping in the months leading up to Christmas.

There is one major difference between the work done by a peasant and the work done by us now. That's this: often, almost all of the work a peasant did was for themselves. They didn't "go to work" for someone, they just worked. In most of the history of humanity, the vast majority of what a human produced (the products of their work) were theirs to use, and what they produced that they didn't need (their surplus labor) they exchanged with others for things they didn't produce themselves.

That doesn't mean everything they produced was theirs. Often, some of it was taken from them through force. Feudal land owners, warlords, kings, and even religious leaders took some of that surplus in the form of taxation, tithes, rent, and outright theft.

That part hasn't changed between the past and the present—governments still tax our work. But believe it or not,
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the amount that a peasant got to keep was often a much higher percentage than what we get to keep from our work. (We'll look at that more in depth in a bit).

How To Get Rich Without Earning It

We've talked about what commoners were usually doing before capitalism—what about the rich? How did they get their wealth?
Throughout most of human history, the primary way for the rich to gain wealth quickly was to take it. War, conquest, slavery, pillaging—these were the ways you got wealth (and still are often enough). Riding into a village with soldiers, demanding tribute (taxes) in the form of grain, livestock, or other goods was a time-honored way of gaining wealth for those who didn't work for it themselves.

If you had enough soldiers, you might enslave the villagers, but keeping slaves isn't as easy at it seems. You have to watch them, beat them, and generally terrify them into submission, and this requires more than just a few soldiers. You would need a systematic way to keep them from running away or refusing to work or rising up against you, as well as having overseers (whom you have to pay) and more soldiers to defend you in the middle of the night from a slave revolt.

Sounds a bit...inefficient? It is, actually: slavery is a difficult system to maintain. Imagine yourself attempting to enslave someone (an uncomfortable and awful thought, I know!): how would you not only keep them from running away or killing you, but also force them to do work for you? Only empires (the Roman, the Greek, the British, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the American, etc.) are ever really capable of that scale of systematic oppression for very long.

So though slavery has existed everywhere many times, it has never become the primary way for the rich to gain wealth. And there are only so many times you can pillage the countryside before there is nothing left to pillage, so violent theft of wealth is also not a "sustainable" system for very long
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unless you had a massive army (which you also have to pay and feed).

Instead of slavery and armed theft, the primary method of gaining wealth that the rich have used before capitalism was taxation, yearly tributes of an amount enough to keep the lords rich but not so high that the peasants revolted. Because that’s always the other risk the rich face in their hunger for wealth—at any point, the people they take it from might decide to rise up against them. A handful of armed soldiers is no match for a hundred villagers armed with pitchforks, spears, and burning torches.

“Class struggle” existed before Capitalism. Those who want to take wealth from others have always had to worry about those they take from rising up against them. And those who produce wealth have always had to worry about those with weapons and power taking what they produce away from them. This is the point Marx and Engels make in the opening line of the first section of The Communist Manifesto:

“The history of all heretofore existing societies has been the history of class struggle…”

As I mentioned above, certain ways of taking wealth from others (like slavery) require larger systems to maintain them. By systems I don’t mean what we talk about when we say “systems of white supremacy” or “Patriarchy” (we’ll talk about those next chapter!) Rather, I mean physical systems: people and physical resources to enact those means.

Slavery, for instance requires slavers (armed people who would conquer, kidnap and transport slaves), overseers (people who would make sure the slaves were doing the work they were enslaved to do), soldiers or police (to catch slaves when they run away or defend the slave owners when they try to revolt), and also physical resources to maintain the slaves themselves (a slave you don’t feed won’t do work). All of this required a lot of wealth in the first place, and a lot of wealth to maintain, and the “risk” for the slave-owners of
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losing that wealth from revolts meant that few could really “afford” to keep slaves.

So from the point of view of the ruling classes (the wealthy, the nobility, etc.), finding a way to get labor (and therefore more wealth) from people that didn’t rely on such a risky and resource-heavy system was vital. Pillaging works, but only so often (and again—you need soldiers for this). So in Europe, they found another system: Feudalism.

**Feudalism**

**Feudalism** was born out of the collapse of the Roman Empire in Europe, but it took several centuries to fully take root. When Rome fell, Europe didn’t just disappear into a “dark ages” until the Renaissance. In fact, “the dark ages” is another creation of the so-called Enlightenment. The world was hardly dark just because an empire collapsed. If anything, life got a little better for the poor and definitely a lot better for people previously enslaved by the Romans.

One class of people did suffer from the fall of empire, however—the wealthy.

The Roman Empire had created vast networks of trade (including laying down thousands of miles of roads), as well as building up many towns into military fortresses connected by those trade routes. Through its imperial bureaucracy and system of patronage, it also created a class of people with massive amounts of wealth, much of it in the form of land granted them by the Empire. When the Empire collapsed, they no longer had the backing of imperial armies and had to hire their own.

**FEUDALISM**

The dominant political and economic system in Europe between the ninth and fifteenth centuries. In Feudalism, rich landowners (lords) supported stronger landowners (including kings) in return for military protection. Feudal lords controlled the peasants on their land and extracted a third of everything they produced in taxes. Those peasants were not allowed to leave the land or to marry without permission from the lord.
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So life for common people after the fall continued as it had before, except that the armed men who would occasionally ride into the village demanding grain and sheep weren't Roman soldiers any longer. They were local strongmen, sometimes chieftains of tribal nations, Viking raiders, or the hired thugs of former Roman nobility or their descendents. Meanwhile, local customs and beliefs were able to flourish again in many places without Roman soldiers forcing people to convert to Christianity or face death.

Feudalism arose from this environment as the small wealthy class tried to consolidate power again, aided by the Christian Church and its network of priests and bishops. Religion was useful in this process: it helped give those the Church supported an air of legitimacy to their claims, and in return the priests gained powerful help in converting (or re-converting) peasants.

What is Feudalism, though? It’s a hierarchical political relationship in which rulers swore loyalty to stronger rulers, who in turn promised to protect them from other strong rulers.

Feudalism became useful for the wealthy for a reason I’ve already hinted at throughout this discussion of history. Remember: soldiers cost money, and without soldiers you cannot exploit peasants easily. You need an army to force people to pay taxes or tribute, and if those soldiers are constantly busy making sure the peasants don’t revolt, they won’t be able to defend your land from invasion. The same is true in reverse: if you send your army out to fight another army, the people you’ve been exploiting are likely to rise up while they’re gone.

The political arrangement of Feudalism solved this problem for the rich. By agreeing to give a portion of their own wealth to a king, they received the protection of a larger army and could then focus on gaining wealth from the commoners. The king also gained claim to their land in these arrangements, a fact that comes into play later in the history
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of Europe, leading to the creation of large kingdoms and Empires like the British and Spanish.

Life Under Feudalism

Under Feudalism, life got harder for commoners again. As lord and king laid claim to land with armies, those who lived on that land found themselves suddenly claimed as well. Feudal lords began claiming portions of everything the peasants (or serfs) produced, as well as forcing them to work directly for the lord during certain periods of the year.

Our image of what life was like for a serf often looks like a short life of tragedy and back-breaking work. And in some cases, this is indeed what life as a producer within Feudalism looked like. It’s quite possible this is also how they themselves saw their lives, especially those who themselves (or whose grandparents) remembered what life was like before serfdom. But there are some surprising aspects to life as a serf that may shift your opinion slightly.

For instance, a serf was sometimes required to give their feudal lord up to 1/3rd of everything they produced. Sounds like a lot, until you compare it to how much taxes are for many workers in modern nations now (including sales tax). And this comparison isn’t even the half of it, because governments are not the only ones who take a portion of human labor under capitalism.

In fact, most small businesses cap their payroll for employees at 1/3 of their total budget. That means they are taking 2/3rds of what employees “make” for the owner and giving

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN FEUDALISM

The Church had a very important role in maintaining feudalism. Priests in every village often acted as spies for the feudal lords and preached obedience. This is because the Church relied on funding from the lords for their churches and the Pope and Bishops relied on kings for their protection. The Church also needed help from the lords to collect tithes, to convert Pagans and to kill heretics.
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them no more than 1/3 back. And that's for small businesses—larger businesses and corporations spend much smaller percentages of their revenue paying their workers.

So, serfs actually got to keep much more of what they produced than we do. In addition, the amount of time actually spent working was less than most people now (taking into account winters). And the amount of time serfs were forced to work without compensation for the lords was often only a few days per year.

Before we idealize feudal life too much, it's vital to understand one thing that serfs could not do. They couldn't leave the land. They belonged to the lord; they were the lord's serfs, and leaving often meant death if you were caught. Also, the lord had a lot of control over certain parts of the serf's life: for example, in many cases couples had to ask permission of the lord to marry, and the lord could (and did) in return demand the "right" to have sex with the woman first.

Another Shake-Up in Europe

Feudalism started in the 9th century, grew stronger for the next few hundred years, and then collapsed in the 15th century.

Most capitalist histories tell the story of its end as a natural transition to a more efficient system. Even many Marxist historians gloss over this transition, writing this change as if capitalism had merely been waiting for a chance to evolve from the Feudal system. But one very important Marxist Feminist scholar, Silvia Federici, makes clear that an event we all know of had much more importance to this change than we generally realise.

That event? The Black Death.

In the middle of the 1300's, between 30% to 60% of Europe's population died. Though the plague killed indiscriminately, by sheer percentage of the population, it was the peasants who suffered the most. And while it's impossible to
understand what that much death must have been like, there was an unlooked-for boon for the poor from this carnage: because there were fewer of them, they were in higher demand by the wealthy.

When workers are easy to come by, the rich get away with exploiting them more. When there are fewer workers available, the rich have to do more to attract or keep them.

Consider: if a lord needs 10 serfs to produce all the wealth he demands but has a hundred serfs at his disposal, if a few of them die it is no great loss to him. But if he needs ten and only has ten, he can’t work them as hard any longer. In return, the serfs understand this too, and are more likely to make successful demands that the lord must agree to.

So as perverse as it may sound, the Black Death actually ushered in a short period of power and freedom for peasants. They could leave the feudal manors and not worry that the lord’s soldiers would chase them down because most of those soldiers had died anyway. And if they stayed, they could be in better positions to negotiate their own terms with the lord.

Of course, this meant that the rich faced another problem. The old agreements no longer worked, peasant revolts became common occurrences (most of the largest ones occurred in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries), and free towns (full of people with no feudal lord) as well as communes full of heretics arose throughout Europe.

The rich couldn’t force people to work their land any longer; they had to find other ways to get them to do so.
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Primitive Accumulation: Slavery ≠ Colonization

Before we talk about the birth of capitalism from the ruins of Feudalism, there's another process that we haven't spoken of yet and it's of vital importance. That process is colonization.

Earlier in this chapter I explained how directly taking wealth from people is not a very sustainable system. Besides the initial cost of an army to conquer people with, communities can only be pillaged once or twice before there's nothing to take. You can ride into a village, kill all the men and steal all the gold in the houses only once before there's no more men to kill and no more gold to steal.

What was possible to pillage in Europe had mostly already been pillaged, especially as feudal holdings fell into ruin from lack of workers. Fortunately for the wealthy of Europe and unfortunately for the rest of the world, sea routes to the Americas were established.

Soon, ships full of soldiers arrived on the shores of both continents and “discovered” new villages to pillage, hauling gold, silver, furs, new foods, and slaves back to the coffers of king and merchant in Europe. The same happened in Africa and Asia: European lords competed with each other to pillage as much as possible in order to make up for the wealth they lost from the collapse of Feudalism.

Slavery—which had almost completely ended in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire—began again, but this time with slaves from Africa and the Americas.

There are several things to keep in mind when we look at how and why slavery began again during this period.

• First of all, like pillaging, slavery is not a very sustainable system to maintain unless you have a lot of resources to
begin with. In this case, unfortunately, that wasn’t a problem: all the stolen wealth from the Americas was more than enough to hire soldiers, slavers, and overseers for this.

• Secondly: slavery is a form of labor. We tend to forget this when we think about slavery because the brutality of the system looms larger than the motives behind it. To gain wealth, you need humans to apply their labor to things. Slavery is a way of getting that labor, and though the circumstances of a slave are absolutely worse than the circumstances of a serf or worker, the reason for that exploitation is the same in all cases: the rich want more wealth.

• Third: The tactics used in the exploitation of slaves from Africa and the Americas were not invented when this period of colonial slavery began. Recall the conditions of a serf under feudalism, particularly in the control that a feudal lord exerted over the sexual life and mobility of the serfs. Methods of control learned through the exploitation of peasants in Europe were applied in the institution of slavery.

• Fourth: Slavery has occurred in many times and many places throughout the world, including both in Europe and also in many of the groups who were enslaved. It also still occurs throughout the world. This is a very tricky concept to discuss, since some groups insist that only chattel slavery (the sort of slavery that was forced upon African peoples) is “actual” slavery. In chattel slavery, the slave is fully-owned by the owner and is their “property.” Often times, this ownership of the slave also extends to their children as well.

It’s important to understand this distinction, but also to consider that other forms of slavery also exist too: for in-
stance, women trafficked for unpaid sex-work, immigrant workers who are forced to work for free under threat of imprisonment, indentured servanthood as still practiced in the caste system of India or as occurred to Irish emigrants, and prison labor, especially amongst Black and other minority prisoners in the US. These are all forms of slavery that vary in degrees of exploitation, and chattel slavery is undoubtedly the most severe of these forms.

The use of slaves allowed the wealthy in Europe to circumvent the labor crisis they were facing in their own lands. Peasants in Europe had gained too much power to be easily exploited, so slavery was a means for the rich to continue extracting the labor of workers without ceding even more power to them.

Not only that, but it then gave them access to the wealth they needed to fight back against the peasant revolts in Europe, as well as allowing even lesser lords a chance to usurp the hierarchy instituted by Feudalism and become rulers in their own right.

It’s absolutely essential to see this connection. The wealth stolen during colonization and the exploitation of labor through slavery didn’t merely get stored in treasure chests within the throne rooms of kings and queens: it was used to gain more wealth, invested in new ways of extracting wealth from people and resources.

In Marxist terms, the period of extraction of wealth through plunder and slavery is called Primitive Accumulation (primitive means “first” or “initial” in this instance, not “backwards” or “savage” as we’ve come to understand it in the present). And all that wealth gained through primitive accumulation is what became the Capital which now rules the world.
The Birth of Capitalism: Enclosure and Industrialisation

Remember how I mentioned that slavery requires people working in specific professions (slave-catcher, overseer, etc.) in order be sustainable? Imperialism does too, and more so. Merchants, book-keepers, appraisers, colonial administrators, bankers, and countless other “managerial” occupations are needed to keep an Empire running.

The period of imperialist expansion saw an explosion of such professions, creating a new class of people above the workers but below the aristocrats. They lived mostly in towns and cities, partook in a greater share of the wealth coming from colonization than the workers, and also gravitated more towards the new “urban” Christianity (Protestantism) than the poor or the nobles did.

This class of people, the “bourgeoisie” (town-dwellers) began to exert a stronger influence on society than either of the two other groups. They tended to see themselves as the real power behind all the new wealth circulating throughout Europe (and to some degree they were right—they were the managers—though not the creators—of all this wealth).

They also saw themselves as more educated and creative than the ruling class (who were both very traditional and also very cautious with their wealth), and often times more “moral.” This last part comes from the sort of Protestant Christianity they favored most: Calvinism, which taught that wealth, self-discipline, and strict public morality were signs of God’s favor, that they were part of the “elect” whom God had chosen for salvation.

Calvinism is crucial to understanding how Capitalism developed, as it had even more of an influence than Lutheranism or

CALVINISM

A Protestant version of Christianity founded by John Calvin. It teaches that God has predestined his chosen people and that wealth is a sign of God’s favor. It also taught that hard work and a strict morality made you holy. The Puritans who colonized New England were Calvinists.
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Catholicism. Calvinism represented several significant breaks in world-view from the Catholic world-view, not least of which was its end to the prohibition against usury (lending money with interest).

Catholicism, while not at all a religion particularly kind to the poor, nevertheless maintained certain limits on the way the poor could be treated. Within Catholicism it would be sinful to charge so much for food that the poor would starve, for instance. Calvinism rejected such an idea and instead even suggested it was the duty of merchants to inflate prices so as to keep the poor from being lazy or overfed.

Also, Calvinism viewed the natural world as something God made for his chosen people to use; thus, a forest only had value as something to be used, not as something in-itself.

So, we have a new group of people, armed with a new religious view, quickly gaining more wealth and political power in Europe. And we have an aristocracy (still recovery from the collapse of the Feudal system) utterly reliant on this class of people.

And what about the poor? Life for them got even harder. As this new class of people (the bourgeoisie) arose, they began to demand more land from governments, especially from the parliament in England. They (and especially one of their philosophers, Adam Smith), argued that unproductive land was useless and possibly sinful, and English parliament gave them what they wanted in the form of several waves of Enclosure Acts.

These laws subdivided large plots of land (literally enclosing them in fences or hedges) which were then sold by the government. The “unproductive land” they targeted for these enclosures and sales didn’t come from the aristocrats, however, it came from the poor.

Under Feudalism, serfs were given access to shared plots of land they could use for their own needs. Small woodlands were full of animals that could be hunted for food and
leather as well as wood for building and heating; meadows and grasslands could be used for grazing sheep and cattle as well as growing food, and streams and ponds were sources of water and fish for the peasants.

Right to use this land had been enshrined in common law for centuries, concessions won by people as early as the beginning of feudalism. A cognate of this sort of land might be the small garden plots plantation owners allowed slaves to cultivate for their own food; though it was officially not the property of the slaves, it was land the owner set aside for their use and knew that, if he were to take it away from them, they would likely starve or revolt.

It was this very land, “the commons,” that the English parliament and large landholders enclosed and then sold off. Each meadow fenced off, each woodland cut down, and each stream and pond blocked off meant many hungry peasants suddenly with no means to survive. There were revolts against these actions, oftentimes led by women, and always put down violently by militia, landowners, and soldiers.

Enclosure spread quickly from England to Scotland and Ireland, then to France and what is now Germany, and soon Europe saw the greatest displacement it had ever seen. Peasants and small farmers suddenly had no land to live on: their only option was to move to the towns and cities to find work or become part of the settlements in the colonized lands. Most went to the towns, but when they got there, they found them already overflowing with other displaced peasants also looking for work.

**THE COMMONS**
Land and other resources that were shared amongst a community for their collective use. For instance, rivers for fishing, water, and bathing; forests for hunting, wood, and foraging; and meadows for grazing, growing food, and community events.

**ENCLOSURE**
The act of turning public land and other resources into private property.
CHAPTER THREE

Remember what happens when there are more workers available than what the wealthy need? The power and influence of each individual worker decreases and they become easier to exploit. So we can see that the displacement of people caused by enclosure fully reversed the damage done to the power of the wealthy after the Black Plague. In the 14th and 15th centuries there were too few workers and they were harder for the rich to exploit; by the 17th and 18th centuries, the rich were again in a position to exploit workers as efficiently as possible.

But this time, it was a wholly-new class of rich people who did the exploiting. As a class of people who managed colonial expansion and the wealth that came from it, as well as being devoted to religious principles which saw the world as a place to be used to show ones own salvation, the Bourgeoisie were able to seize upon this glut of workers and turn them into an industrial labor force.

They built first workhouses and then factories to employ the poor (including children) in making textiles, a task formerly performed by skilled artisan guilds. Other industries quickly fell under their dominance, utterly destroying centuries-old professions in the space of decades.

Those Satanic Mills

In the late 18th century, a man named Richard Arkwright invented the first water-powered loom able to spin cotton into yarn on an industrial scale. This was the birth of the modern factory, and soon hundreds more sprung up in and around cities, powered by the poor who’d only recently moved there to find work.

Arkwright is typical of the bourgeois capitalist: he built cottages and a public house around his first factory in order to house the workers he needed, just as Feudal lords had likewise done around their manors and castles. He gave his workers one week off per year, but with one stipulation: just
like a feudal lord, he forbade his workers to leave the town
where the factory was located.

It took very little time for this new way
of using the labor of workers to spread
throughout Europe. Factories sprung
up quickly in the American colonies,
primarily those (like Richard Arkwright’s
first factory) devoted to turning the
cotton picked by African slaves into
cloth and clothing to then be sold in
the cities crowded with displaced
people working in similar factories
elsewhere.

This is a vital point—the labor exploited through slavery
and the labor exploited in factories is connected, and not
just because they were both forms of exploited labor. They
were applying labor to the very same resources, just at dif-
ferent parts of the chain.

Just as now in Africa a child mines coltan that is then used
in manufacturing of smartphones by poorly-paid factory
workers in China, the exploitation of slave labor and factory
labor was put in place by the same forces and by same
people, stringing together the suffering of one group with
the suffering of another in order gain more wealth.

This is the chain of suffering that Marx saw, writing less than
a century after the first factory arose in England. The vampiric
nature of capital, “dead labor” (and include in that dead
slaves!) that “sucks the life of living labor.”

The bourgeoisie—this new managerial class—had learned
how to harness the power of workers in a way the Feudal
lords had never been able to achieve. Not just the power of
their own workers, but those elsewhere, people colonized
and enslaved across an ocean. A new system had arisen,
one which now seems to have no end.