THE AGRARIAN ORIGINS OF CAPITALISM

by ELLEN MEIKSINS WOOD

One of the most well established conventions of Western culture is the association of capitalism with cities. Capitalism is supposed to have been born and bred in the city. But more than that, the implication is that *any* city—with its characteristic practices of trade and commerce—is by its very nature potentially capitalist from the start, and only extraneous obstacles have stood in the way of *any* urban civilization giving rise to capitalism. Only the wrong religion, the wrong kind of state, or any kind of ideological, political, or cultural fetters tying the hands of urban classes have prevented capitalism from springing up anywhere and everywhere, since time immemorial—or at least since technology has permitted the production of adequate surpluses.

What accounts for the development of capitalism in the West, according to this view, is the unique autonomy of its cities and of their quintessential class, the burghers or bourgeois. In other words, capitalism emerged in the West less because of what was *present* than because of what was *absent*: constraints on urban economic practices. In those conditions, it took only a more or less natural expansion of trade to trigger the development of capitalism to its full maturity. All that was needed was a quantitative growth which occurred almost inevitably with the passage of time (in some versions, of course, helped along but *not* originally caused by the Protestant Ethic).

There are many things to be said against these assumptions about the natural connection between cities and capitalism. Among them is the fact that they tend to *naturalize* capitalism, to disguise its distinctiveness as a historically specific social form, with a beginning and (no doubt) an end. The tendency to

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identify capitalism with cities and urban commerce has generally been accompanied by an inclination to make capitalism appear as a more or less automatic consequence of practices as old as human history, or even the automatic consequence of human nature, the "natural" inclination, in Adam Smith's words, to "truck, barter, and exchange."

Perhaps the most salutary corrective to these assumptions—and their ideological implications—is the recognition that capitalism, with all its very specific drives of accumulation and profit-maximization, was born not in the city but in the countryside, in a very specific place, and very late in human history. It required not a simple extension or expansion of barter and exchange but a complete transformation in the most basic human relations and practices, a rupture in age-old patterns of human interaction with nature in the production of life's most basic necessities. If the tendency to identify capitalism with cities is associated with a tendency to obscure the *specificity* of capitalism, one of the best ways of understanding that specificity is to consider the agrarian origins of capitalism.

What Was "Agrarian Capitalism"?

For millennia, human beings have provided for their material needs by working the land. And probably for nearly as long as they have engaged in agriculture they have been divided into classes, between those who worked the land and those who appropriated the labor of others. That division between appropriators and producers has taken many forms in different times and places, but one general characteristic they have had in common is that the direct producers have typically been peasants. These peasant producers have remained in possession of the means of production, specifically land. As in all pre-capitalist societies, these producers have had direct access to the means of their own reproduction. This has meant that when their surplus labor has been appropriated by exploiters, it has been done by what Marx called "extra-economic" means—that is, by means of direct coercion, exercised by landlords and/or states employing superior force, privileged access to military, judicial, and political power.

Here, then, is the most basic difference between all pre-capitalist societies and capitalism. It has nothing to do with whether production is urban or rural and everything to do with the particular property relations between producers and appropriators, whether in industry or agriculture. Only in capitalism

is the dominant mode of surplus appropriation based on the dispossession of the direct producers whose surplus labor is appropriated by purely "economic" means. Because direct producers in a fully developed capitalism are propertyless, and because their only access to the means of production, to the requirements of their own reproduction, even to the means of their own labor, is the sale of their labor-power in exchange for a wage, capitalists can appropriate the workers' surplus labor without direct coercion.

This unique relation between producers and appropriators is, of course, mediated by the "market." Markets of various kinds have existed throughout recorded history and no doubt before, as people have exchanged and sold their surpluses in many different ways and for many different purposes. But the market in capitalism has a distinctive and unprecedented function. Virtually everything in capitalist society is a commodity produced for the market. And even more fundamentally, both capital and labor are utterly dependent on the market for the most basic conditions of their own reproduction. Just as workers depend on the market to sell their labor-power as a commodity, capitalists depend on it to buy labor-power, as well as the means of production, and to realize their profits by selling the goods or services produced by the workers. This market-dependence gives the market an unprecedented role in capitalist societies, as not only a simple mechanism of exchange or distribution but as the principal determinant and regulator of social reproduction. The emergence of the market as a determinant of social reproduction presupposed its penetration into the production of life's most basic necessity, food.

This unique system of market-dependence entails some very distinctive "laws of motion," specific systemic requirements and compulsions shared by no other mode of production: the imperatives of competition, accumulation, and profit-maximization. And these imperatives, in turn, mean that capitalism can, and must, constantly expand in ways and degrees unlike any other social form—constantly accumulating, constantly searching out new markets, constantly imposing its imperatives on new territories and new spheres of life, on human beings and the natural environment.

Once we recognize just how distinctive these social relations and processes are, how different they are from other social forms which have dominated most of human history, it becomes clear that more is required to explain the emergence of this

distinctive social form than the question-begging assumption that it has always existed in embryo, just needing to be liberated from unnatural constraints. The question of its origins, then, can be formulated this way: given that producers were exploited by appropriators in noncapitalist ways for millennia before the advent of capitalism, and given that markets have also existed "tired out of mind" and almost everywhere, how did it happen that producers and appropriators, and the relations between them, came to be so market dependent?

Now obviously the long and complex historical processes that ultimately led to this condition of market dependence could be traced back indefinitely. But we can make the question more manageable by identifying the first time and place that a new social dynamic is clearly discernible, a dynamic that derives from the market dependence of the main economic actors. And we can then explore the specific conditions surrounding that unique situation.

As late as the seventeenth century, and even much later, most of the world, including Europe, was free of the market-driven imperatives outlined here. A vast system of trade certainly existed, by now extending across the globe. But nowhere, neither in the great trading centers of Europe nor in the vast commercial networks of the Islamic world or Asia, was economic activity, and production in particular, driven by the imperatives of competition and accumulation. The dominant principle of trade everywhere was "profit on alienation," or "buying cheap and selling dear"—typically, buying cheap in one market and selling dear in another.

International trade was essentially "carrying" trade, with merchants buying goods in one location to be sold for a profit in another. But even within a single, powerful, and relatively unified European kingdom like France, basically the same principles of noncapitalist commerce prevailed. There was no single and unified market, a market in which people made profit not by buying cheap and selling dear, not by carrying goods from one market to another, but by producing more cost-effectively in direct competition with others in the same market.

Trade still tended to be in luxury goods, or at least goods destined for more prosperous households or answering to the needs and consumption patterns of dominant classes. There was no mass market for cheap everyday consumer products. Peasant producers would typically produce not only their own food requirements but other everyday goods like clothing. They

might take their surpluses to local markets, where the proceeds could be exchanged for other commodities not produced at home. And farm produce might even be sold in markets further afield. But here again, the principles of trade were basically the same as in manufactured goods.

These noncapitalist principles of trade existed side-by-side with noncapitalist modes of exploitation. For instance, in western Europe, even where feudal serfdom had effectively disappeared, other forms of "extra-economic" exploitation still prevailed. In France, for example, where peasants still constituted the vast majority of the population and still remained in possession of most land, office in the central state served as an economic resource for many members of the dominant classes, a means of extracting surplus labor in the form of taxes from peasant producers. And even rent-appropriating landlords typically depended on various extra-economic powers and privileges to enhance their wealth.

So peasants had access to the means of production, the land, without having to offer their labor-power as a market commodity. Landlords and office-holders, with the help of various "extra-economic" powers and privileges, extracted surplus labor from peasants directly in the form of rent or tax. In other words, while all kinds of people might buy and sell all kinds of things in the market, neither the peasant-proprietors who produced, nor the landlords and office-holders who appropriated what others produced, depended directly on the market for the conditions of their self-reproduction, and the relations between them were not mediated by the market.

But there was one major exception to this general rule. England, already in the sixteenth century, was developing in wholly new directions. Although there were other relatively strong monarchical states, more or less unified under the monarchy (such as Spain and France), none was as effectively unified as England (and the emphasis here is on England, not other parts of the "British Isles"). In the sixteenth century, England—already more unified than most in the eleventh century, when the Norman ruling class established itself on the island as a fairly cohesive military and political entity—went a long way toward eliminating the fragmentation of the state, the "parcellized sovereignty" inherited from feudalism. The autonomous powers held by lords, municipal bodies, and other corporate entities in other European states were, in England, increasingly being concentrated in the central state. This was in contrast to other

European states where even powerful monarchies continued for a long time to live uneasily alongside other post-feudal military powers, fragmented legal systems, and corporate privileges whose possessors insisted on their autonomy against the centralizing power of the state.

The distinctive political centralization of the English state had material foundations and corollaries. First, already in the 16th century, England had an impressive network of roads and water transport that unified the nation to a degree unusual for the period. London, becoming disproportionately large in relation to other English towns and to the total population of England (and eventually the largest city in Europe), was also becoming the hub of a developing national market.

The material foundation on which this emerging national economy rested was English agriculture, which was unique in several ways. The English ruling class was distinctive in two major and related respects: on the one hand, as part of an increasingly centralized state, in alliance with a centralizing monarchy, they did not possess to the same degree as their Continental counterparts the more or less autonomous "extra-economic" powers on which other ruling classes could rely to extract surplus labor from direct producers. On the other hand, land in England had for a long time been unusually concentrated, with big landlords holding an unusually large proportion of land. This concentrated landownership meant that English landlords were able to use their property in new and distinctive ways. What they lacked in "extra-economic" powers of surplus extraction they more than made up for by their increasing "economic" powers.

This distinctive combination had significant consequences. On the one hand, the concentration of English landholding meant that an unusually large proportion of land was worked not by peasant-proprietors but by tenants (the word "farmer," incidentally, literally means "tenant"—a usage suggested by phrases familiar today, such as "farming out"). This was true even before the waves of dispossession, especially in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, conventionally associated with "enclosure" (about which more in a moment), in contrast, for example, to France, where a larger proportion of land remained, and long continued to remain, in the hands of peasants.

On the other hand, the relatively weak "extra-economic" powers of landlords meant that they depended less on their ability to squeeze more rents out of their tenants by direct,

coercive means than on their tenants' productivity. Land lords had a strong incentive, then, to encourage—and, where ever possible, to compel—their tenants to find ways of increasing their output. In this respect, they were fundamentally different from rentier aristocrats who throughout history have depended for their wealth on squeezing surpluses out of peasants by means of simple coercion, enhancing their powers of surplus extraction not by increasing the productivity of the direct producers but rather by improving their own coercive powers—military, judicial, and political.

As for the tenants themselves, they were increasingly subject not only to direct pressures from landlords but to market imperatives which compelled them to enhance their productivity. English tenancies took various forms, and there were many regional variations, but a growing number were subject to economic rents, that is, rents not fixed by some legal or customary standard but responsive to market conditions. By the early modern period, even many customary leases had effectively become economic leases of this kind.

The effect of the system of property relations was that many agricultural producers (including prosperous "yeomen") were market-dependent, not just in the sense that they were obliged to sell produce on the market but in the more fundamental sense that their access to land itself, to the means of production, was mediated by the market. There was, in effect, a market in leases, in which prospective tenants had to compete. Where security of tenure depended on the ability to pay the going rent, uncompetitive production could mean outright loss of land. To meet economic rents in a situation where other potential tenants were competing for the same leases, tenants were compelled to produce cost-effectively, on penalty of dispossession.

But even those tenants who enjoyed some kind of customary tenure which gave them more security, but who might still be obliged to sell their produce in the same markets, could go under in conditions where competitive standards of productivity were being set by farmers responding more directly and urgently to the pressures of the market. The same would increasingly be true even of landowners working their own land. In this competitive environment, productive farmers prospered and their holdings were likely to grow, while less competitive producers went to the wall and joined the propertyless classes.

In all cases, the effect of market imperatives was to intensify exploitation in order to increase productivity—whether exploi-

ation of the labor of others or self-exploitation by the farmer and his family. This pattern would be reproduced in the colonies, and indeed in post-Independence America, where the independent small farmers who were supposed to be the backbone of a free republic faced, from the beginning, the stark choice of agrarian capitalism: at best, intense self-exploitation, and at worst, dispossession and displacement by larger, more productive enterprises.

The Rise of Capitalist Property

So by the sixteenth century English agriculture was marked by a unique combination of conditions, at least in certain regions, which would gradually set the economic direction of the whole economy. The result was an agrarian sector more productive than any other in history. Landlords and tenants alike became preoccupied with what they called "improvement," the enhancement of the land's productivity for profit.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this concept of "improvement," because it tells us a great deal about English agriculture and the development of capitalism. The word "improve" itself, in its original meaning, did not mean just "making better" in a general sense but literally (based on the old French for "into," *en*, and "profit," *pros*, or its oblique case, *preu*) doing something for monetary profit, and especially cultivating land for profit. By the seventeenth century, the word "improver" was firmly fixed in the language to refer to someone who rendered land productive and profitable, especially by enclosing or reclaiming waste. Agricultural "improvement" was by then a well established practice, and in the eighteenth century, in the golden age of agrarian capitalism, "improvement," in word and deed, came truly into its own.

The word was, at the same time, gradually acquiring a more general meaning, in the sense that we know it today (we might like to think about the implications of a culture in which the word for "making better" is rooted in the word for monetary profit); and even in its association with agriculture, it eventually lost some of its old specificity—so that, for example, some radical thinkers in the nineteenth century might embrace "improvement" in the sense of scientific farming, without its connotation of commercial profit. But in the early modern period, productivity and profit were inextricably connected in the concept of "improvement," and it nicely sums up the ideology of a rising agrarian capitalism.

In the seventeenth century, then, a whole new body of literature emerged, a literature spelling out in unprecedented detail the techniques and benefits of improvement. Improvement was also a major preoccupation of the Royal Society, which brought together some of England's most prominent scientists (Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle were both members of the Society) with some of the more forward-looking members of England's ruling classes—like the philosopher John Locke and his mentor, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, both of whom were keenly interested in agricultural improvement.

Improvement did not, in the first instance, depend on significant technological innovations—although new equipment was used, like the wheel-plow. In general, it was more a matter of developments in farming techniques: for example, “convertible” or “up and down” husbandry—alternating cultivation with fallow periods, crop rotation, drainage of marsh and plowlands, and so on.

But improvement meant something more than new methods and techniques of farming. It meant, even more fundamentally, new forms and conceptions of property. “Improved” farming, for the enterprising landlord and his prosperous capitalist tenant, ideally required enlarged and concentrated landholdings. It also—and perhaps even more—demanded the elimination of old customs and practices that interfered with the most productive use of land.

Peasant communities have, since time immemorial, employed various means of regulating land use in the interests of the village community. They have restricted certain practices and granted certain rights, not in order to enhance the wealth of landlords or states but to preserve the peasant community itself, perhaps to conserve the land or to distribute its fruits more equitably, and often to provide for the community's less fortunate members. Even “private” ownership of property has typically been conditioned by such customary practices, giving non-owners certain use-rights to property “owned” by someone else. In England, there were many such practices and customs. There existed common lands, on which members of the community might have grazing rights or the right to collect firewood, and there were also various kinds of use-rights on private land—such as the right to collect the leavings of the harvest during specified periods of the year.

From the standpoint of improving landlords and capitalist farmers, land had to be liberated from any such obstruction to

their productive and profitable use of property. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, there was growing pressure to extinguish customary rights that interfered with capitalist accumulation. This could mean various things: it might mean disputing the communal ownership of common lands and claiming private ownership; it might mean eliminating various use-rights on private land; or it might mean challenging the customary tenures which gave many smallholders rights of possession without unambiguous legal title. In all these cases, traditional conceptions of property had to be replaced by new, capitalist conceptions of property—property as not only “private” but also *exclusive*, literally excluding other individuals and the community, by eliminating village regulation and restrictions on land use, by extinguishing customary use-rights, and so on.

These pressures to transform the nature of property manifested themselves in various ways, in theory and in practice. They surfaced in court cases, in conflicts over specific property rights, over some piece of common land or some private land to which different people had overlapping use-rights. In such cases, customary practices and claims often directly confronted the principles of “improvement”—and judges often recognized reasons of improvement as legitimate claims against customary rights that had been in place as long as anyone could remember.

New conceptions of property were also being theorized more systematically, most famously in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Chapter 5 of that work is the classic statement of a theory of property based on the principles of improvement. Here, property as a “natural” right is based on what Locke regards as the divine injunction to make the earth productive and profitable, to *improve* it. The conventional interpretation of Locke's theory of property suggests that *labor* establishes the right to property, but a careful reading of Locke's chapter on property makes it clear that what really is at issue is not labor as such but the productive and profitable utilization of property, its improvement. An enterprising, improving landlord establishes his right to property not by his own direct labor but by the productive exploitation of his land and other people's labor on it. Unimproved land, land not rendered productive and profitable (such as the lands of indigenous peoples in the Americas), is “waste,” and it is the right, even the duty, of improvers to appropriate it.

The same ethic of improvement could be used to justify certain kinds of dispossession not only in the colonies but at home in England. This brings us to the most famous redefinition of property rights: *enclosure*. Enclosure is often thought of as simply the privatization and fencing in of formerly common land, or of the "open fields" that characterized certain parts of the English countryside. But enclosure meant, more particularly, the extinction (with or without a physical fencing of land) of common and customary use-rights on which many people depended for their livelihood.

The first major wave of enclosure occurred in the sixteenth century, when larger landowners sought to drive commoners off lands that could be profitably put to use as pasture for increasingly lucrative sheep farming. Contemporary commentators held enclosure, more than any other single factor, responsible for the growing plague of vagabonds, those dispossessed "masterless men" who wandered the countryside and threatened social order. The most famous of these commentators, Thomas More, though himself an encloser, described the practice as "sheep devouring men." These social critics, like many historians after them, may have overestimated the effects of enclosure alone, at the expense of other factors leading to the transformation of English property relations. But it remains the most vivid expression of the relentless process that was changing not only the English countryside but the world: the birth of capitalism.

Enclosure continued to be a major source of conflict in early modern England, whether for sheep or increasingly profitable arable farming. Enclosure riots punctuated the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and enclosure surfaced as a major grievance in the English Civil War. In its earlier phases, the practice was to some degree resisted by the monarchical state, if only because of the threat to public order. But once the landed classes had succeeded in shaping the state to their own changing requirements—a success more or less finally consolidated in 1688, in the so-called "Glorious Revolution"—there was no further state interference, and a new kind of enclosure movement emerged in the eighteenth century, the so-called Parliamentary enclosures. In this kind of enclosure, the extinction of troublesome property rights that interfered with some landlord's powers of accumulation took place by acts of Parliament. Nothing more neatly testifies to the triumph of agrarian capitalism.

So in England, a society in which wealth still derived predominantly from agricultural production, the self-reproduction of both major economic actors in the agrarian sector—direct producers and the appropriators of their surpluses—were, at least from the sixteenth century, increasingly dependent on what amounted to capitalist practices: the maximization of exchange value by means of cost-cutting and improving productivity, by specialization, accumulation, and innovation.

This mode of providing for the basic material needs of English society brought with it a whole new dynamic of self-sustaining growth, a process of accumulation and expansion very different from the age-old cyclical patterns that dominated material life in other societies. It was also accompanied by the typical capitalist processes of expropriation and the creation of a propertyless mass. It is in this sense that we can speak of “agrarian capitalism” in early modern England.

Was Agrarian Capitalism Really Capitalist?

We should pause here to emphasize two major points. First, it was not merchants or manufacturers who were driving this process. The transformation of social property relations was firmly rooted in the countryside, and the transformation of English trade and industry was result more than cause of England's transition to capitalism. Merchants could function perfectly well within noncapitalist systems. They prospered, for example, in the context of European feudalism, where they profited not only from the autonomy of cities but also from the fragmentation of markets and the opportunity to conduct transactions between one market and another.

Secondly, and even more fundamentally, readers will have noticed that the term “agrarian capitalism” has so far been used without reference to wage-labor, which we have all learned to think of as the essence of capitalism. This requires some explanation.

It should be said, first, that many tenants did employ wage labor, so much so that the “triad” identified by Marx and others—the triad of landlords living on capitalist ground rent, capitalist tenants living on profit, and laborers living on wages—has been regarded by many as the defining characteristic of agrarian relations in England. And so it was—at least in those parts of the country, particularly the east and southeast, most

noted for their agricultural productivity. In fact, the new economic pressures, the competitive pressures that drove out unproductive farmers, were a major factor in polarizing the agrarian population into larger landholders and propertyless wage laborers, and in promoting the agrarian triad. And, of course, the pressures to increase productivity made themselves felt in the intensified exploitation of wage labor.

It would not, then, be unreasonable to define English agrarian capitalism in terms of the triad. But it is important to keep in mind that competitive pressures, and the new "laws of motion" that went with them, depended in the first instance not on the existence of a mass proletariat but on the existence of market-dependent tenant-producers. Wage laborers, and especially those who lived entirely on wage labor, depending on it for their livelihood and not just for seasonal supplements (the kind of seasonal and supplementary wage labor that has existed since ancient times in peasant societies) remained very much a minority in seventeenth century England.

Besides, these competitive pressures operated not just on tenants who did employ wage laborers but also on farmers who—typically with their families—were themselves direct producers working without hired labor. People could be market dependent—dependent on the market for the basic conditions of their self-reproduction—without being completely dispossessed. To be market dependent required only the loss of direct non-market access to the means of production. In fact, once market imperatives were well established, even outright ownership was no protection against them. And market dependence was a cause, not a result, of mass proletarianization.

This is important for various reasons—and I'll have more to say later about its broader implications. For the moment, the important point is that the specific dynamics of capitalism were already in place, in English agriculture, before the proletarianization of the work force. In fact, those dynamics were a major factor in bringing about the proletarianization of labor in England. The critical factor was the market dependence of producers, as well as appropriators, and the new social imperatives created by that market dependence.

Some people may be reluctant to describe this social formation as "capitalist," precisely on the grounds that capitalism is, by definition, based on the exploitation of wage labor. That reluctance is fair enough—as long as we recognize that, whatever we call it, the English economy in the early

modern period, driven by the logic of its basic productive sector, agriculture, was already operating according to principles and "laws of motion" different from those prevailing in any other society since the dawn of history. Those laws of motion were the *preconditions*—which existed nowhere else—for the development of a mature capitalism that would indeed be based on the mass exploitation of wage labor.

What, then, was the outcome of all this? First, English agriculture was uniquely productive. By the end of the seventeenth century, for instance, grain and cereal production had risen so dramatically that England became a leading exporter of those commodities. These advances in production were achieved with a relatively small agricultural labor force. This is what it means to speak of the unique *productivity* of English agriculture.

Some historians have tried to challenge the very idea of agrarian capitalism by suggesting that the "productivity" of French agriculture in the eighteenth century was more or less equal to that of England. But what they really mean is that *total agricultural production* in the two countries was more or less equal. What they fail to point out is that in one country, that level of production was achieved by a population the vast majority of which still consisted of peasant producers, while in the other country, the same total production was achieved by a much smaller work force, in a declining rural population. In other words, the issue here is not total output but *productivity* in the sense of output per unit of work.

The demographic facts alone speak volumes. Between 1500 and 1700, England experienced a substantial growth in population—as did other European countries. But English population growth was distinctive in one major respect: the percentage of the urban population more than doubled in that period (some historians put the figure at just under a quarter of the population already by the late 17th century). The contrast with France is telling: here, the rural population remained fairly stable, still about 85 to 90 percent at the time of the French Revolution in 1789 and beyond. By 1850, when the urban population of England and Wales was about 40.8 percent, France's was still only 14.4 percent (and Germany's 10.8).

Agriculture in England, already in the early modern period, was productive enough to sustain an unusually large number of people no longer engaged in agricultural production. This fact, of course, testifies to more than just particularly

efficient farming techniques. It also bespeaks a revolution in social property relations. While France remained a country of peasant proprietors, land in England was concentrated in far fewer hands, and the propertyless mass was growing rapidly. While agricultural production in France still followed traditional peasant practices (nothing like the English body of improvement literature existed in France, and the village community still imposed its regulations and restrictions on production, affecting even larger landholders), English farming was responding to the imperatives of competition and improvement.

It is worth adding one other point about England's distinctive demographic pattern. The unusual growth of the urban population was not evenly distributed among English towns. Elsewhere in Europe, the typical pattern was an urban population scattered among several important towns—so that, for example, Lyons was not dwarfed by Paris. In England, London became disproportionately huge, growing from about 60,000 inhabitants in the 1520s to 575,000 in 1700 and becoming the largest city in Europe, while other English towns were much smaller.

This pattern signifies more than is apparent at first glance. It testifies, among other things, to the transformation of social property relations in the heartland of agrarian capitalism, the south and southeast, and the dispossession of small producers: a displaced and migrant population whose destination would typically be London. The growth of London also represents the growing unification not only of the English state but of a national market. That huge city was the hub of English commerce—not only as a major transit point for national and international trade but as a huge consumer of English products, not least its agricultural produce. The growth of London, in other words, in all kinds of ways stands for England's emerging capitalism, its integrated market—increasingly, a single unified, and competitive market; its productive agriculture; and its dispossessed population.

The long-term consequences of these distinctive patterns should be fairly obvious. Although this is not the place to explore the connections between agrarian capitalism and England's subsequent development into the first "industrialized" economy, some points are self-evident. Without a productive agricultural sector which could sustain a large non-agricultural workforce, the world's first industrial capitalism would have been unlikely to emerge. Without England's agrarian capitalism,

there would have been no dispossessed mass obliged to sell its labour-power for a wage. Without that dispossessed non-agrarian work force, there would have been no mass consumer market for the cheap everyday goods—such as food and textiles—that drove the process of industrialization in England. And without its growing wealth, together with wholly new motivations for colonial expansion—motivations different from the old forms of territorial acquisition—British imperialism would have been a very different thing than the engine of industrial capitalism it was to become. And (this is no doubt a more contentious point) without English capitalism there would probably have been no capitalist system of any kind: it was competitive pressures emanating from England, especially an industrialized England, that compelled other countries to promote their own economic development in capitalist directions.

The Lessons of Agrarian Capitalism

What, then, does all this tell us about the nature of capitalism? First, it reminds us that capitalism is not a “natural” and inevitable consequence of human nature, or even of age-old social practices like “truck, barter, and exchange.” It is a late and localized product of very specific historical conditions. The expansionary drive of capitalism, to the point of virtual universality today, is not the consequence of its conformity to human nature or to some transhistorical natural laws but the product of its own historically specific internal laws of motion. And these laws of motion required vast social transformations and upheavals to set them in train. It required a transformation in the human metabolism with nature, in the provision of life’s basic necessities.

The second point is that capitalism has from the beginning been a deeply contradictory force. We need only consider the most obvious effects of English agrarian capitalism: on the one hand, the conditions for material prosperity existed in early modern England as nowhere else; yet on the other hand, those conditions were achieved at the cost of widespread dispossession and intense exploitation. It hardly needs to be added that these new conditions also established the foundation for new and more effective forms of colonial expansion and imperialism, as well as new needs for such expansion, in search of new markets and resources.

And then there are the corollaries of “improvement”: on the one hand, productivity and the ability to feed a vast popu-

lation; on the other hand, the subordination of all other considerations to the imperatives of profit. This means, among other things, that people who could be fed are often left to starve. In fact, it means that there is in general a great disparity between the productive capacities of capitalism and the quality of life it delivers. The ethic of "improvement" in its original sense, in which production is inseparable from profit, is also the ethic of exploitation, poverty, and homelessness.

The ethic of "improvement," of productivity for profit, is also, of course, the ethic of irresponsible land use, mad cow disease, and environmental destruction. Capitalism was born at the very core of human life, in the interaction with nature on which life itself depends. The transformation of that interaction by agrarian capitalism revealed the inherently destructive impulses of a system in which the very fundamentals of existence are subjected to the requirements of profit. In other words, it revealed the essential secret of capitalism.

The expansion of capitalist imperatives throughout the world has constantly reproduced some of the effects that it had at the beginning within its country of origin. The process of dispossession, extinction of customary property rights, the imposition of market imperatives, and environmental destruction has continued. That process has extended its reach from the relations between exploiting and exploited classes to the relations between imperialist and subordinate countries. More recently, the spread of market imperatives has taken the form, for example, of compelling (with the help of international capitalist agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) farmers in the third world to replace strategies of agricultural self-sufficiency with specialization in cash crops for the global market. The dire effects of these changes will be explored elsewhere in this issue.

But if the destructive effects of capitalism have constantly reproduced themselves, its positive effects have not been nearly as consistent. Once capitalism was established in one country and once it began to impose its imperatives on the rest of Europe and ultimately the whole world, its development in other places could never follow the same course it had in its place of origin. The existence of one capitalist society thereafter transformed all others, and the subsequent expansion of capitalist imperatives constantly changed the conditions of economic development.

We have now reached the point where the destructive effects of capitalism are outstripping its material gains. No third world country today, for example, can hope to achieve even the contradictory development that England underwent. With the pressures of competition, accumulation, and exploitation imposed by other more developed capitalist systems, the attempt to achieve material prosperity according to capitalist principles is increasingly likely to bring with it only the negative side of the capitalist contradiction, its dispossession and destruction without its material benefits, at least for the vast majority.

There is also a more general lesson to be drawn from the experience of English agrarian capitalism. Once market imperatives set the terms of social reproduction, all economic actors—both appropriators and producers, even if they retain possession, or indeed outright ownership, of the means of production—are subject to the demands of competition, increasing productivity, capital accumulation, and the intense exploitation of labor.

For that matter, even the absence of a division between appropriators and producers is no guarantee of immunity (and this, by the way, is why “market socialism” is a contradiction in terms): once the market is established as an economic “discipline” or “regulator,” once economic actors become market dependent for the conditions of their own reproduction, even workers who own the means of production, individually or collectively, will be obliged to respond to the market’s imperatives—to compete and accumulate, to let “uncompetitive” enterprises and their workers go to the wall, and to exploit themselves.

The history of agrarian capitalism, and everything that followed from it, should make it clear that wherever market imperatives regulate the economy and govern social reproduction there will be no escape from exploitation.