

Planes of stillness, crofts of blight

It is barely controversial to champion the importance of growth within today's narratives of economic reality. For example, Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund, can go on TV and warn about lagging international growth rates of 1% and 2%, and the only debates her remarks generate center on whether 3% or 4% is the appropriate benchmark and whether it is too early or too late to expect such growth to manifest. Few critics question the underlying assumptions of a growth-driven mythos. Growth is simply assumed to be desired and assumed to be desirable. However, a careful examination of those periods of history in which prodigious economic growth has occurred reveals that market growth – and its apotheosis, profit – are actually predicated on destruction and exploitation. In fact, 'growth' is simply the obverse and equal manifestation of these annihilating phenomena (cf. slavery, mining, timber). Put more radically, without a certain continuity of new destruction, a market stasis emerges, which, in its stillness, devitalizes the most basic premises of capitalism.



While it has always been an implicit ethos in neoliberal capitalism, there is now an explicit and total commitment to the telos of *permanent growth*; stocks always go up, housing and commodities prices always rise over the long run, currencies and wages always soar ever higher into the capitalist elysium, and this way, everyone wins. Naturally, within the game of capitalism, there are no winners without losers. For growth to persist indefinitely, a new crop of slaves must be found and worked to death every quarter, as it were. And without the spectacle of permanent growth – whether 2%, 4% or double-digit, as in China – the reality-envelope of neoliberal capitalism begins to decay, and other actors with other truths invade and occupy the exposed recesses. So, within a state mythos of obligatory permanent growth, we must expect a reality of permanent and increasingly creative and increasingly desperate destruction. To activate a phrase from Marxist thought, we must expect a state of *permanent primitive accumulation*. Elsewhere, the concept of primitive accumulation has been used to describe a specific, historical period in the past, demarcating the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Marx, himself, used the phrase in this way. However, primitive accumulation can also be thought of as a permanent and perpetual *activity-of-life* for the capitalist form. New bodies, new mountains, new relationships must be found and liquefied to express that dynamic discrepancy in power we measure as growth.



Capital abhors a vacuum, and fills any it finds with fungible overlays, intrusions, and envelopes. All beings and all space must be instrumentalized within the market and animated with the breath of abstract exchange. Infungible entities are enemies of the market. It is not particularly surprising that early speculative gray markets are already parceling out the real estate of Venus and Mars, and that not one of the space-exploration-capable states – United States, Russia, China, the EU members – has signed onto the 1979 international Moon Treaty safeguarding extraterrestrial bodies as non-militarized commons for all humans. The Moon, Mars, and possibly certain Jovian moons, are far too rich a substrate for capitalism's eternal metabolism of primitive accumulation to externalize them as some sort of illiquid communal right.



Nevertheless, from time to time, once-fungible entities manage to terminate market interfaces and return to a precapital pale. However, any such space or being that, through active or passive processes, manages to restore alterity to the market – a vacuum of fungibility – is always at risk of re-liquefaction; indeed, secondary and tertiary waves of primitive accumulation often violate the same entity across time. Within the urban landscape, vacant lots and abandoned structures often mark a locus of iterative primitive

accumulation. Annihilated once, and abandoned to the marginal, alienated subjects of that annihilation – houseless people, non-state forces, barterers, nomads, holy fools – fresh waves of gentrification render these spaces once again supple and vulnerable to extractive appropriation. Under the benevolent neoliberal narratives of infill and walkability, developers, policy-makers, urban planners, and do-gooders have accomplished substantial re-accumulation of these black spaces and structures.

Although this process occurs under the friendly iconography of eco-conscious neighborliness, it is fundamentally one of violence. Indeed, it is only through an alchemy of radical destruction that “re-development” is realized; first, like a priest in a canoe, a guileless port-o-potty appears, and then what remains of the old rooms and mirrors and plants is turned into splinters and expatriated, the land is scraped, the soil is pierced with cables and pipes, and soon – over the white crucifixes of realty signs – shiny citadels for the eco-elite arise, and the process of secondary primitive accumulation is complete. A dangerous stillness in the urban body, once detected, is quickly filled with the bright, violent clatter of exchange.

Vacant lots and abandoned buildings have long been thought of as loci of risk to good citizens; thus, the conversion of these ambiguous, threatening spaces into shiny buildings has typically been greeted with praise. However, this narrative neglects those for whom the vacant lots and abandoned buildings have always functioned as a sort of commons-of-last-resort. Indeed, most empty lots and empty buildings in the urban zone are far from empty. They serve as refuges for those who have been violated by the advancements of the market; spaces for games, clan rituals, extra-market economies, and – ultimately – for rest and recovery for a class of outsider actors and rejected subjects who have few other havens in the rectilinear world. The moss, the crust of foundation, the dangling shingle, the cobweb-softened recesses, these are a commons for those excluded by neoliberal capitalism. The loss of vacant lots and buildings enacts one of many displacements in the life-long chain of displacements familiar to these beings, another enclosure in a life of enclosures. These actors, long excluded from sanctioned economic relationships, sustain themselves on the outside of white markets and gray markets. For them, the condemned factories and churches and the interstitial asphalt plains constitute a barrier against final annihilation in the central engines of growth. The black shadow of a vacant lot – the lack of visibility, the lack of bio-technical incorporation – serves as a buffer against the fast-tracks to servitude and outright enslavement – by incarceration – guaranteed by the conventional economy.



What instruments of resistance are available, then, to those who would act against iterative accumulation within the urban landscape? Are there models in history within whose residua we might imagine a different way? Along which lines can we begin to develop planes of stillness cutting through the heart of the market? Planes of shadow in which rejected actors and communities can subsist? In Scotland, there exists a body of relationships that is likely the oldest codified form of resistance to capitalist land functions. Following the iterative traumas of the Highland Clearances of the late 18th and early 19th centuries – in which tens of thousands of pre-capitalist Scottish peasants were driven from their lands after increasingly profit-minded aristocrats enclosed the commons and converted hereditary subsistence plots into giant industrial agriculture operations – the Crofters' Holdings Act of 1886 was, surprisingly, enacted. By this act, crofters – displaced peasants and their descendents – were granted rights and accesses to communal and familial lands – to plant crops, graze herds, recreate, walk around naked, explore, think, and exist – which could not be readily subordinated to the exigencies of the market. While the landlords still retained certain extractive and transactional rights over these lands, the codified instruments of resistance available to the crofters were – and still are – substantial. The Crofters' Holdings Act resembles, in a way, a much more powerful and wide-ranging form of rent control, such as we see in New York City, where recalcitrant pensioners torment landlords by seeing out their

lifelong leases while the units next door sell for millions of dollars on the open market. Beyond assuring a fair and stable rent for a given land or lands, sufficient in size and variety to offer true subsistence to the inhabitants, the Crofters Act furthermore guarantees access to a network of public commons – fields, streams, shores – where the materials of an open, elective life can be animated. Moreover, these rights are not bound to the lifetime of the individual crofter, as rent control is, but rather are granted in a qualified perpetuity to families, individuals, and clans. They exist outside of a certain capitalist formation of time. In its most transcendent stipulations, the Crofters' Act manifests a set of tangible, communal valuations of land in specific opposition to the expropriative, abstract claims of profit, propriety, and growth. Interestingly, the quaintly radical ideals and instruments of the Crofters' Holdings Act have persisted into the current economic matrix. Indeed, contemporary descendents of the original crofters, still holding tenancy over their plots and commons, have engaged in a number of interesting and dangerous actions: coastal mega-hotels and luxury golfing links developments have been successfully blocked, and, in a more creative spirit, rhizomes of individual crofts have been conceived to form extended sanctuaries of extra-market land. Indeed, both the large estate of Assynt and the entire island of Eigg now belong exclusively to crofters' collectives, representing in spirit, if not in material realities, a perpetuation of a certain precapitalist communal form of living within and upon the land, its waters, its microbes, its plants, its other beings.

Although this set of relationships has never been manifested in any major cities of the United States or Europe, it is not unthinkable that there should arise a sort of urban crofters' act or action, whereby longtime inhabitants and users of vacant lots and vacated buildings – the alienated subjects of the violent economic clearances of the past 60 years – are afforded protected, intergenerational access to these spaces. Naturally, this possibility would interpose a sort of stillness at the heart of the transactional economy that the current growth-driven mythos would reject. The spectacle of capitalism could not allow for such an abatement of permanent primitive

accumulation simply in order to accommodate the abjected dignities of a handful of human weeds. Not surprisingly, the monumental and unique achievements of the Crofters' Holdings Act came only after nearly a century of violent and nonviolent peasant uprisings. Organized land raids, protracted occupations, and outright battles with the British Army – called in to enforce landlords' claims – finally culminated in the Crofters' Holdings Act, a measure of conciliation to the peasants calculated to neutralize a growing spirit of rejection and revolt in the precapitalist clan-based communities of the Scottish Highlands. Is it imaginable that today's abjected nomads and wildlings who make their lives among the shadows could come together and formally and effectively rise up against the sequential waves of market subordination? Is it imaginable – and is it reasonable or natural – for others, for – specifically – the very beneficiaries of the recent clearances, to assume responsibility for advancing the vital exigencies of these urban peasants? In an age of permanent growth, who can act for stillness?

