Book Reviews

Ian Angus, *The War Against the Commons. Dispossession and Resistance in the Making of Modern Capitalism*, Monthly Review Press, New York 2023, p. 277.

The history of the progressive privatization of common lands certainly does not begin with the modern age. As early as the 16th century, we see the first closures of fields in favour of private individuals. The revolt of 1549 is undoubtedly the most emblematic of the period because it was not just a question of a slow transformation of the production system tout court, but rather the slow dominance of commercial capitalism that began to challenge the ancien régime economic order by introducing the principles of accumulation, savings, and profit-seeking as increasingly recognized values at social and state level. The state authority, becoming increasingly dependent on capital – because of the increasing expenditure for warfare, for example – becomes more and more dependent on the forces of capital to which opens more and more prospects for investment, profit, and power. The closing of the fields is the result of the growing strength of commercial capitalism and its ability to control material life by controlling the conditions of exchange in an increasingly interconnected world. Closed fields, the end of community rights in favour of local communities, and the moral economy that governs them reflect a rationalization in favour of commercial inward and outward inputs. English wool became a valued product for European wool manufacturers (think of Flanders and Italy).

The closure of the English fields is framed within a principle of progressive market rationalization and production under the forces of mercantile capitalism leadership. However, the interests of capital did not yet converge with those of the state. In the England of Henry VIII, for instance, the enclosure of the fields and the end of common rights led to a dangerous depopulation of the countryside and thus less possibility for local lords to raise an army in case of need. War is also at the root of the sales of common land to private individuals. Given the need to find the necessary resources for the conflict, the sovereign authority did not fail to put the land up for sale to private individuals. In 1543, Henry VIII himself made one of the first large sales. However, privatization also entailed a reduction in revenues in terms of taxes and tithes. In addition, privatization and marketization of society created a new social pyramid based on those social forces bound to this newly born system (the merchants, financiers, and new owners) and those who remained outside (old feudal lords, small owners, and the masses).

In 1607, 20% of cultivated land had already been "privatised", and the percentage only increased over the following centuries until the 'great sales' following the Private Enclosure Acts starting in 1710. The English parliament eagerly promoted these privatizations, especially the House of Commons that was increasingly made up of bourgeois elements of society who were very interested in privatization. However, the course of the enclosures follows that of English political history. Before 1640, there would be a succession of decrees against and favouring enclosures. After this date and the victory of the bourgeois forces over those of the ancien regime, no one would ever again question the enclosures or make any real attempt to hinder their expansion. Moreover, after this date, successive English governments began to progressively dismantle all the feudal remnants still present in society in favour and to the benefit of a new order based on capital.

This progressive privatization destroyed the social habitat of the peasants by increasing their proletarization. At the same time, the peasant owners (Yeomen) began to disappear in favour of the new bourgeois or former feudal nobles (although it is difficult to make a clear distinction since many bourgeois became nobles by acquiring titles directly or indirectly through marriage ties or state merits). The emergence of resistance movements such as the Levellers and Diggers is a consequence of this ongoing transformation process. It is a social backlash so well described by Karl Polanyi, i.e., in every phase of market enlargement, there is a social resistance movement to these changes.

Deprivation of land exposes the farmer to the contradictions of the market and the game of supply and demand. Land allows the farmer and his family to escape these contradictions to some extent, giving the farmer and his family the possibility of self-support outside the market. The more common property is privatized, and the larger property absorbs the smaller peasant property, the more a mass of new workers willing to work for large property is brought onto the market. After 1620, the percentage of those who no longer owned a small plot of land rose from 11% in 1560 to 40%. This proletarization was also imposed by law according to the following principles: unemployed women and men between 12 and 60 had to be forced to work; wages and working hours were sanctioned by the various local judges who colluded with the bosses (whoever offers or accepts higher wages is imprisoned); no one could leave work without authorization, failing that he could be imprisoned and whipped.

Capital needs the forces of living labour to carry out a process of accumulation. With the end of slavery in 1834, the necessary labour power was now found through "necessity", hunger, the absence of common goods, and the law. Let us add that it is no coincidence that the Poor Law was passed in the same year, which is a further instrument to compel the masses to be employed in the new productive sectors. The coercion takes place through moral condemnation, police threat, and judicial repression. The two initiations mentioned above resulted from the Reform Art of 1832, which opened the doors of power to large landowners and prominent merchants. This led to a further step in institutionalizing capitalism (mainly agrarian and merchant capitalism) as the production system of reference.

In the first half of the 19th century, we witnessed a rapid destruction of all social, productive, cultural, and economic relations based on the ancien regime. The landlords and bourgeois government now run public affairs. By 1830, all open fields and common lands had been fenced off and privatized. In 1803, the wealthiest 1% of the population held 49% of the land, while the richest 5% held 86%. This was a massive transfer of common property under the ownership of a few individuals. The latter used their economic power to force those left without a livelihood to sell their labour force.

According to the author, enclosures caused profound damage to peasant and rural populations. After 1740, food production per person dropped dramatically, and agricultural British output could hardly keep up with population growth. The labourer's average daily calories intake was much lower than that required for adequate survival (p. 162). This caused a kind of Malthusian trap of keeping wages low to increase accumulation and profit.

With the end of the Corn Laws in 1846, the forces of industrial capitalism won out over those of agrarian capitalism and the resulting transformations are beyond the scope of our review and of Angus's work but are indicative of how the process of industrialization needed a constant import of foreign agricultural products to keep the British working masses on an acceptable standard of living for keeping working profitably. This shows that Britain had a deficit in agricultural production well before the 19th century. Thus, British colonialism and imperialism served to find the necessary resources to fuel this expansive process that increasingly depended on Britain's ability to dominate international trade. This policy had profound effects on colonial territories. Agricultural production was oriented to supply the centre of the

Empire, exposing the peripheral countries to famine due to a lack of diversification, forced exploitation of workers in the countryside, and destruction of the old production systems in favour of the British one. In addition, massive privatization of land for overseas production has been initiated in those semi and peripheral countries. Great Britain had been experiencing a food deficit since 1790. The famine in Ireland (1845-50) and India (1876-78, 1896-1902, 1943-1945) could be read under this interpretative key. The process of rationalization and privatization extended worldwide with heavy social direct or indirect outcomes for the colonized countries.

In conclusion, Ian Angus' book is certainly a good summary of the process of land privatization and the end of common rights in England and Scotland. He also addresses the colonial question, although one might have expected something more regarding the deeper connections between the centre and periphery both inside and outside England. But we realize that this risked turning the book into something else. The reading remains easy, never heavy, and it is certainly helpful to understand how the genesis of modern capitalism was also based on general dispossession in favour of a few individuals in England and in many other parts of Europe.

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