Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land

Marx begins by commenting on the class structure of late medieval England.

By the end of the fourteenth century, serfdom had effectively disappeared. The majority of the population was composed of free peasant proprietors (the 'yeomen'). The feudal bailiff had been replaced by the independent farmer. Agricultural wage-labour was carried out by peasants on top of their labour on their own land, or, exceptionally, by actual wage-labourers. These latter would, normally, also engage in private farming on their own land. They would also, along with other peasants, have access to common lands. Overall, the economic picture was marked by the persistent parcellisation of landed property. ‘In all countries of Europe, feudal production is characterised by the division of the soil amongst the greatest possible number of sub feudatories.’1

The process which concerns us here, the casting of a mass of free proletarians onto the labour-market, begins in the last third of the fifteenth century and the first part of the sixteenth. This movement is precipitated by the dissolution of the bands of feudal retainers. There were two principal motors driving this process. The first was the pressure of the crown – ‘itself a product of bourgeois development’2 – as its strove for absolute power. The second came as a consequence of the expansion of Flemish wool manufacturing, which led to a rise in the price of wool, driving the money motivated ‘new nobility’ – the ‘old nobility’ having been ‘devoured’ in preceding inter-noble feudal wars – to convert relatively labour-intensive arable land into relatively labour-extensive pasturage.

Further impetus to forced expropriation came from the Reformation, as the dissolution of the monasteries and the distribution of Church lands, either as gifts or at nominal prices to the well connected, turfed their former occupants onto the labour-market.3

Despite these processes, even at the end of the sixteenth century the yeomanry formed a more numerous part of the population than did the farmers;4 nevertheless, by the middle of the eighteenth they had all but disappeared.

Following the Stuart Restoration,

the landed proprietors carried out, by legal means, an act of usurpation which was effected everywhere on the Continent without any legal formality. The abolished the feudal tenure of land, i.e. they got rid of all its obligations to the state, ‘indemnified’ the state by imposing taxes on the peasantry and the rest of the people, established for themselves the rights of modern private property in estates to which they only had a feudal title.5

The ‘glorious revolution’ saw the distribution, on a large scale, of state lands; the new landed aristocracy, thus (as well as by the previous passing on of Church lands) benefited ‘was the natural ally of the new bankocracy, of newly-hatched high finance, and of the large manufacturers, at that time dependent on protective duties.’6

The usurpation of communal property7 had begun, generally accompanied by the transformation of arable and into sheep pasturage, in the late fifteenth century; in the eighteenth, rather than remaining a ‘private’ initiative,

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1 Karl Marx, Capital vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1990) [hereafter C.], pp. 877-8. Marx goes on to comment: ‘Japan, with its purely feudal organisation of landed property and its developed small-scale agriculture, gives a much truer picture of the European Middle Ages than all our history books [...].’ (C., p. 878 n3)
2 C., p. 878.
3 ‘However, these immediate results of the Reformation were not its most lasting ones. The property of the Church formed the religious bulwark of the old conditions of landed property. With its fall, these conditions could no longer maintain their existence.’ (C., pp. 882-3)
4 In addition, as Marx points out, they played a significant political role, for ‘they had formed the backbone of Cromwell’s strength.’ (C., p. 883)
5 C., pp. 883-4.
6 C., p. 885.
the usurpation of common land took on a ‘public’ character: ‘the law itself now becomes the instrument by which the people’s land is stolen’ - trough land enclosures by parliamentary decree.

The final act in the expropriation of the agricultural population was the ‘clearing’ of the estates, ‘i.e. the sweeping of human beings off them [...]. When there are no more independent peasants to get rid of, the “clearing” of cottages begins; so that the agricultural labourers no longer find on the soil they cultivate even the necessary space for their own housing.’

As Marx observes, clearing in its most extreme form took place in the Scottish highlands. In the eighteenth century, he points out, the inhabitants of the estates were not only cleared, they were prohibited from emigrating. The end of the process was the creation of the great deer forests (as Marx points out, ‘there are no true forests in England [sic].’

Finally, Marx summarises the process under consideration:

‘The spoliation of the Church’s property, the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property, and its transformation into modern, private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital, and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians.’

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7 ‘An old Teutonic institution which lived on under feudalism.’ (C., p. 885)
8 C., p. 885.
9 C., pp. 889-90.
10 C., p. 892. The deer-forests are of course, misleadingly named, for they ‘do not contain a single tree. The sheep are driven from, and then deer driven to, the naked hills, and this is then called a deer-forest.’ (C., p. 893 n32)
11 C., p. 895.