Layered Historiography. 
Re-Reading the So-Called Primitive Accumulation

Accumulation Street

Marx wrote to Mrs. Wollmann on 19 March 1877:

Should you wish to leaf through some of Capital, it would be best to start with the last section, p. 314 [Le procès d’accumulation du capital]. In the scientific exposition the arrangement is prescribed for the author, although some other arrangement might often be more convenient and more appropriate for the reader.¹

The capitalist mode of production does not produce its own premises out of nothing. It is fed by external/internal elements punctuated by historical temporalities that it tries to synchronise. It needs workers who are formally free, shaped by the combination of practical emancipation, the dissolution of the authority of intermediate bodies and the concentration of force in the hands of the state. Struggles against the estates, through which the servants freed themselves to become wage-workers, lost their emancipatory dimension as soon as the estate-structure was destroyed. The aspect oriented to freedom, which shone in the light of opposition to the estates and inequalities of status, became opaque in the equality

¹. Marx 1991a, p. 212.
of juridical subjects and the equality of the market. This was the beginning of the epoch of synchronisation. The time of the church was replaced by abstract time measured by clocks and merchants. Workers’ lives are marked by the ‘despotic bell’, at the command of which they must eat, drink and sleep.\(^2\) The affirmation of this capitalist temporality is, however, syncopated by the counter-times of ‘workers’ uprisings’ that aim to silence the ‘Werkglocke’.\(^3\)

The structure of *Capital* is not that of a more or less Hegelian logical monolith, but is rooted in conflicting temporalities that show how synchronisation functions. The ‘Preface’ to the 1867 first edition of *Capital* shows the presence of anachronistic [zeitwidrigen] social and political relations and their combination in the present.\(^4\) These anachronistic relations, such as those found in Germany, lead to working conditions worse than those existing in a more-developed capitalist country like England, where the ‘counterweight of the factory legislation’ puts a limit on exploitation; the consequence is that Germany is oppressed by modern miseries, and also by its anachronism:

> a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production…We suffer not only from the living, but also from the dead. *Le mort saisit le vif*!\(^5\)

This is the problem: the interaction between non-contemporary levels of a historical *multiversum*.\(^6\) If synchronisation is given by socially-necessary labour-time, there still remains the question of anachronisms, which should be understood both as times that are not synchronised by the capitalist machine, and as workers’ counter-times. Working conditions in England are less brutal not because capital is more civilised, but because the English working class has managed to impose factory-laws that put a limit on exploitation. The conquests of the class-struggle do not proceed in a linear and gradual fashion, but according to a syncopated rhythm. These different temporalities constitute the specific problem of Marx’s analysis: how the different temporalities of the class-struggle interact among themselves and with the time of capital.

Without state-violence, without the existence of proletarians, without the dissolution of the authority of the *Hausvater* and of corporate bonds, without the disciplining of formally-free workers, without a new ethic, without

\(^3\) Le Goff 1980, p. 29 ff. On the new discipline imposed on time in the eighteenth century, see Thompson 1967, p. 32.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) I refer frequently, in what follows, to Bloch 1985, pp. 104 et sq.; see also Bodei 1979.