CHAPTER 8

Social Formation and Class Formation in North America, 1800–1900*

Conceiving Labour and Capital in Past Times

The positing of the individual as a worker, in this nakedness, is itself a product of history.

*Marx, Grundrisse (1857–8)

The process of proletarianisation in the New World commenced in the late fifteenth century. It was premised not on demographic growth but on demographic destruction. In the words of C.L.R. James:

Christopher Columbus landed first in the New World at the Island of San Salvador, and after praising God enquired urgently for gold. The natives, Red Indians, were peaceable and friendly and directed him to Haiti ... The Spaniards, the most advanced Europeans of their day, annexed the island, called it Hispaniola, and took the backward natives under their protection. They introduced Christianity, forced labour in the mines, murder, rape, bloodhounds, strange diseases, and artificial famine (by the destruction of cultivation to starve the rebellious). These and other requirements of the higher civilization reduced the native population from an estimated half-a-million, perhaps a million, to 60,000 in 15 years.¹

For Marx, this original accumulation was the outcome of economic power, of that brutish midwife, sheer force, cast in new, internationalist dress:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in the mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalised the


¹James 1963, pp. 3–4. See also Williams 1966.
rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.²

By the early eighteenth century, the historical consciousness of the stages of these developments noted by James and Marx was sufficiently rooted to find expression in popular fiction. *Robinson Crusoe*, among other things, can be seen as an allegorical depiction of the origins of the rising bourgeoisie:

My island was now peopled, and I thought myself very rich in subjects; and it was a merry reflection which I frequently made, how like a king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own property, so that I had undoubted right of dominion. Secondly, my people were perfectly subjected. I was absolute lord and lawgiver; they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives, if there had been occasion of it for me. It was remarkable, too, we had but three subjects, and they were of three different religions. My man Friday was a Protestant, his father was a pagan and a cannibal, and the Spaniard was a Papist. However, I allowed liberty of conscience throughout my dominions.³

Crusoe's self-satisfied assessment introduces us to themes of relevance in the history of class formation. We are immediately confronted with a series of relationships: population and property, subordination and superordination, and hegemony and segmentation. But this complacent and controlled caricature of class formation is ahistorical. As Stephen Hymer suggests, we also need ‘the story of Friday’s grandchildren’.⁴ And we need to recognise, as well, that no society, let alone one as vast and complex as that of North America, is an island as simple as Crusoe’s domain.

Capitalism in North America was premised on an initial expropriation of aboriginal peoples. The diversity of paths to this end ran the gamut from the genocidal assault on Newfoundland’s Beothuks⁵ to the less overt, but massively brutal, clearances of Andrew Jackson’s southern ‘campaigns’ (1814–24).⁶ Equally traumatic were the superficially more benign disruptions associated with the range of European interventions – cultural, religious, physiological, social,

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⁵ Upton 1977, pp. 133–53.
⁶ Rogin 1975.