David Harvey

**Comment on Commentaries**

It is always tempting to take up the cudgels of comradely criticism and wage warfare within the labyrinthine trenches of Marxian theory when given the opportunity. I will try not to do that in what follows, but I cannot resist beginning with one picky theoretical point. *Contra* Ben Fine, I actually believe that far more theoretical mileage is to be had out of Marx’s undeveloped notion of monopoly rent than any amount of fiddling around with his theory of absolute rent. And, yes, this does derive from my particular views on value theory and the transformation problem. However, when Fine dubs my use of Marx’s monopoly rent concept a ‘SOP’ he takes things too far. I developed this idea in several talks given in art institutions and at major cultural events (Noel Castree will be pleased to know). At issue was how to understand the role of cultural producers in a world where cultural industries were becoming more and more important to urban development (from Sheffield to Shanghai). I wanted to show how the corporate capitalist interest in authenticity, originality and uniqueness (‘sponsored by . . .’) had everything to do with extracting monopoly rents from commodifying cultural forms, local histories and creativities. The cultural producers got the idea
straight away and it gave a sharp anti-corporate focus to the discussion. Had I used the concept of absolute rent, even if theoretically correct, I doubt anyone would have understood. In this case, however, theoretical consistency and the communicative imperative happily coincided. We have an obligation not only to theoretical rigour but also to communicability.

Consider, from this perspective, my use of the term ‘accumulation by dispossession’. People who know nothing of Marxian theory sense immediately what I mean. I only have to mention pension rights, the illegitimate use of eminent domain, the privatisation of water, credit crunches and loss of health-care rights to get most people to sit up and listen. Eyes glaze over if I insist on ‘primitive accumulation’ as the correct formulation. Now, I do think it theoretically reasonable to refer to what occurred in the originating stages of capitalism as ‘primitive accumulation’ (and it may be perfectly reasonable to use this term in the case of contemporary China). I would argue, however, that the on-going cannibalistic and predatory practices occurring even within the advanced capitalist countries under the guise of privatisation, market reforms, welfare withdrawals and neoliberalisation are better described as ‘accumulation by dispossession’. They are qualitatively different, theoretically, from what happened at the origins of capitalism. I am not arguing that we drop all Marxian theorising and pander to popular understandings, but when an easy shift in language can be far more politically effective why not use it? ‘Account must be taken of the audience’, Ben Fine correctly advises, before expressing his preference for primitive accumulation as the correct term to use.

This idea of accumulation by dispossession does require, as almost everyone observed, critical scrutiny. The term has almost instantaneously been taken up (almost certainly because it is so evocative) and I worry about the indiscriminate way in which it might be (and already has been!) used. I had a similar experience in the past with the concept of ‘time-space compression’. As with that conception, some of my initial caveats have been ignored. In *The New Imperialism* I did not argue that all dispossessions are wrong and should be resisted. Everything depends on the class character of dispossession, and I am certainly in favour of dispossessing the bourgeoisie! To the degree that progressive development of any kind entails some degree of creative destruction, I argued that we should not wax nostalgic for some lost past

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1 See Harvey 2003.