

DAVID HARVEY'S THEORY OF ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION

A Marxist Critique

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Abstract: David Harvey is well known for his extensive writings on accumulation by dispossession (ABD). ABD refers to “the continuation and proliferation of accretion practices” that Marx had designated as “primitive accumulation.” Harvey has sought to update Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation to consider the ways in which dispossession occurs in present-day capitalism in its various forms. His theory of ABD is very problematic. Yet a comprehensive, critical assessment of Harvey’s work on dispossession that considers its intellectual and political problems is missing. This article considers Harvey’s ideas advanced since the 1980s to be problematic on multiple grounds. To begin, the concept of ABD itself is chaotic in the critical-realist philosophical sense: it includes processes which bear no internal relations, and it separates processes which should not be separated. He inflates the causal significance of the concept far too much, and mistakenly considers ABD to be the dominant moment of contemporary capitalism. He generally fails to connect ABD of producers to what I will call “accumulation by exploitation” of proletarians and semi-proletarians. His views on dispossession in the South with which he associates (new) imperialism are inadequate in part because he abstracts from the exploitative character of imperialism as it is rooted in production controlled by imperialist businesses. And the political implications of his theory, which significantly differ from the conclusions that Marx draws from his own analysis of dispossession in *Capital* vol. 1, and which have a dim view of the role of the working class in the anti-capitalist socialist movement, are reformist.

Key words: Marx; primitive accumulation; capitalism; new imperialism; centrality of the working class

In the last two decades or so, there has been a large body of writing that seeks to re-examine Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, and shed light on the ways in which people are being subjected to dispossession.¹ The writings of David Harvey are a very important part of this body of work. Indeed, much of it has been inspired by his thinking on the topic. His ideas have been often accepted and used in a rather uncritical manner, however. To the extent that there has been some evaluation of Harvey's work, this has had three problems: it has more or less focused on his relatively recent writing (especially *The New Imperialism*), it is partial and not detailed, and it avoids any serious discussion of the political conclusions that Harvey draws from his theory. What is therefore necessary is a critical and extended evaluation of the ways in which he has sought to extend Marx's ideas. I seek to discuss his ideas about dispossession from the early 1980s when he wrote his seminal *The Limits to Capital* to the most recent times. I also present a critique of the political conclusions he draws from his theory. I present my critique of his ideas from the vantage point of what I consider is a "stronger" version of Marxist theory than his.

The remainder of the article is organized into five sections. Section 2 provides a detailed discussion of Harvey's theory of dispossession. Section 3 presents my critique. The sections 4 and 5 deal, respectively, with the political conclusions Harvey draws from his theory, and my critique of his politics. The last section provides a summary of the discussion.

From Marx's Theory of Primitive Accumulation to Harvey's Theory of Accumulation by Dispossession

As is widely known, according to Karl Marx (1977, 875), primitive (or original) accumulation is "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production [and subsistence]" and creates the two basic classes of capitalist society (capitalists and workers). In her theory of accumulation and imperialism, Rosa Luxemburg (2003, 350–51) explains the imperative of primitive accumulation, from the standpoint of the global periphery. She says that advanced capitalism is "fully determined to undermine" the independence of non-capitalist formations in the periphery in a coercive manner "in order to gain possession of their means of production and labour power and to convert them into commodity buyers" (Luxemburg 2003, 350).

Harvey's critical appreciation of Marx's and Luxemburg's insights and his realization that in his earlier work (e.g., *The Limits to Capital*) he had under-stressed capitalism's cannibalism constitute a part of the intellectual context for his own theory of primitive accumulation. According to Harvey (2003, 143), Marx assumes that "primitive" or "original" accumulation has already occurred and that accumulation now

proceeds as expanded reproduction under the rules of free, un-coerced commodity exchange. Marx mistakenly relegates, according to Harvey, “accumulation based upon predation, fraud, and violence,” that is, accumulation not based on free exchange, “to an ‘original stage’ that is considered no longer relevant” (Harvey 2003, 144). Luxemburg as well has a problem, according to Harvey: if Marx relegates primitive accumulation to a distant past, she relegates it to a distant territory, one that is outside of imperialist heartlands, associating primitive accumulation “with the imperialist plunder of non-capitalistic social formations” (Harvey 2006a, xvi).

Given these problems in classical Marxism, Harvey (2003, 144) feels it necessary to conduct “A general re-evaluation of the continuous role and persistence of the predatory practices of ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation within the long historical geography of capital accumulation.” Such a re-evaluation requires, first of all, a change in terminology. “Since it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original,’” Harvey (2003, 144; 2006a, xvi) has decided to “substitute these terms by the concept of accumulation by dispossession.”

Harvey’s theory of accumulation by dispossession (henceforth, ABD) is a part of his overall theory of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005, 2007). According to him, “the main effect of neoliberalism has been redistributive” of existing wealth rather than “generative” of new wealth so “ways had to be found to transfer [existing] assets and channel wealth and income either from the mass of the population toward the upper classes or from vulnerable to richer countries” (Harvey 2007, 34). Such processes of transfer of wealth and income can be described “under the rubric of accumulation by dispossession.” Akin to what Marx had included under primitive accumulation (henceforward, PA), the ABD processes include, according to Harvey (2007, 34–35),

- (1) the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (as in Mexico and India in recent times);
- (2) conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusively private property rights;
- (3) suppression of rights to the commons;
- (4) commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption;
- (5) colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources);
- (6) monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land;
- (7) the slave trade (which continues, particularly in the sex industry); and
- (8) usury, the national debt, and . . . the use of the credit system.

And

To this list of mechanisms, we may now add a raft of additional techniques: the extraction of rents from patents and intellectual property rights; and the

diminution or erasure of various forms of communal property rights—such as state pensions, paid vacations, access to education, and health care—won through a generation or more of social democratic struggles. (Harvey 2007, 35)

The additional techniques also include privatization of nationalized industries, which is a form of enclosure of commons and which means that there can be no public control over growth and investment decisions (Harvey 2010, 309).

It is possible to discern some “general” dimensions of ABD which constitute the different aspects of his theory. These are briefly dealt with below.

- a. Ongoing character of PA: Harvey’s list of the various mechanisms of ABD just mentioned shows that “All the features of primitive accumulation that Marx mentions have remained powerfully present within capitalism . . . up until now” (Harvey 2003, 145). Of specific importance is the fact that non-capitalist producers of the world have not vanished as soon as capitalism got established in some countries. Their dispossession is an ongoing process.
- b. Fine-tuning of ABD via financialization: History does not repeat itself perfectly. Some of the mechanisms of PA that Marx discusses “have been fine-tuned to play an even stronger role now than in the past” (Harvey 2003, 147). Such fine-tuning happens through increased financialization (i.e., operation of the financial capital). For example, relative to the early part of the twentieth century (and of course relative to capitalism’s prehistory), and especially since the 1970s, world’s credit system and finance capital have become “major levers of predation, fraud, and thievery” (147). Here one may think of the “Stock promotions, ponzi schemes, structured asset destruction through inflation, asset-stripping through mergers and acquisitions, and the promotion of levels of debt incumbency that reduce whole population . . . to debt peonage” (147).
- c. New mechanisms of ABD: Some features of Marx’s PA continue, and while other features that he talked about have had to be fine-tuned. And, “wholly new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession have also opened up” (Harvey 2003, 147). New mechanisms of ABD include new forms of commodification, both of nature and culture. In relation to the first, the “wholesale commodification of nature in all its form” is occurring, accompanied by the “escalating depletion of the global environmental commons (land, air, water) and proliferating habitat degradations that preclude anything but capital-intensive modes of agricultural production” (147). The “patenting and licensing of genetic material, seed plasma . . . can now be used against whole populations whose [age-old] practices had played a crucial role in the development of those materials” (147–48). Rampant biopiracy and the pillaging of the world’s

genetic resources are benefitting a few large pharmaceutical companies (147–48). And then there is the commodification of culture, that is, of cultural forms, histories, and intellectual creativity that “entails wholesale disposessions”; in fact, “the music industry is notorious for the appropriation and exploitation of grassroots culture and creativity” (147–48). New mechanisms also include the “corporatization and privatization of hitherto public assets (such as universities)” and privatization (of water and public utilities of all kinds), indicating “a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons’” (147–48).

- d. ABD and economic crisis: ABD is a response to the economic crisis, which is caused by what Harvey calls the overaccumulation of capital: it is a situation where “surpluses of capital (perhaps accompanied by surpluses of labour) lie idle with no profitable outlets in sight” (Harvey 2003, 149). ABD releases “a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost,” which means that “over-accumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use” (Harvey 2003, 149). Privatization of social housing, state-owned infrastructures and utilities in capitalist countries has opened up vast fields for over-accumulated capital to seize upon. He has been emphasizing the crisis-credit-PA link since the 1980s: among the various methods of switching over-accumulated circulating capital into fixed capital, “if all else should fail, violent processes of primitive accumulation can continue in the very heart of capitalism as the ‘roving cavaliers of credit’ wreak havoc by making money out of devaluing other people’s capital” (Harvey [1982] 2006, 272).
- e. Capitalism’s “outside” or “the other”: Harvey (2003, 140–42) says that “some sort of ‘outside’ is necessary for the stabilization of capitalism,” and this outside “is subjected to violent dispossession.” There are two types of “outside.” One is a “pre-existing outside (non-capitalist social formations or some sector within capitalism—such as education—that has not yet been proletarianized),” and another is an “outside” that capitalism “can actively manufacture” (Harvey 2003, 141). As regards the first type, “non-capitalist territories should be forced open not only to trade . . . but also to permit capital to invest in profitable ventures using cheaper labour power, raw materials, low-cost land, and the like” (Harvey 2003, 139). State enterprises and state-provided collective consumption also constitute an outside. In relation to the second type of the “outside,” Harvey says this:

As in the case of labour supply, capitalism always requires a fund of assets outside of itself if it is to confront and circumvent pressures of overaccumulation. If those assets, such as empty land or new raw material sources, do not lie to hand, then capitalism must somehow produce them. (Harvey 2003, 143)

The outside is produced in the sense that “valuable assets,” including labor power, “are thrown out of circulation and devalued,” which then “lie fallow and dormant until surplus capital seizes upon them to breathe new life into capital accumulation” (Harvey 2003, 151).

- f. State complicity in ABD: Harvey emphasizes that “the state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in backing and promoting” the ABD processes, including the privatization of its own enterprises, “even against popular will” (Harvey 2003, 145, 148). The state complicity is in the “rolling back of its own laws that protect labour and the environment from degradation” (Harvey 2003, 148). It is also manifested in “the reversion of common property rights” such as “the right to a state pension, to welfare, to national health care to the private domain” (Harvey 2003, 148). In some contexts, the state “decides” that certain industries not in private hands be privatized or close (as in China) (Harvey 2003, 154). Such privatizations result in the loss of welfare benefits of erstwhile workers, expand the reserve army, and make existing companies more efficient.
- g. Geographical-international dimension of ABD: The concept and the practice of ABD are marked by a geographical unevenness at the international scale. In the developing world (as in the case of the “originating stages of capitalism” that Marx talked about), dispossession processes may be covered under PA: “in the cases of China and Russia, it might be reasonable to refer to recent events in ‘primitive’ and ‘original’ terms” (Harvey 2007, 35; 2006b, 158). But what is happening in advanced capitalism since the 1970s is different: “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” (Harvey 2006b, 158). However, Harvey actually uses ABD for the processes akin to PA, and for the processes that happen both in the North and the South. He says:

While I do not think that accumulation by dispossession is exclusive to the periphery, it is certainly the case that some of its most vicious and inhumane manifestations are in the most vulnerable and degraded regions within uneven geographical development. (Harvey 2003, 173)

With respect to “ex-socialist” territories, he says, “accumulation by dispossession can . . . be interpreted as the necessary cost of making a successful breakthrough into capitalist development with the strong backing of state powers” (Harvey 2003, 154). Thus, what he calls ABD is not restricted to advanced capitalism. It is a worldwide process.

ABD is a geographical and an international process in another way. “The primary vehicle for accumulation by dispossession . . . has been the forcing open of markets throughout the world by institutional pressures exercised through” such international organizations as “the IMF and the WTO,” which are “backed by the power of the United States (and to a lesser extent Europe) to deny access to its own vast market to those countries that refuse to dismantle their protections” (Harvey 2003, 181). For example, cheap imports of vegetables from California and rice from Louisiana, achieved under WTO rules, are now displacing rural populations in Japan and the Taiwan region, and foreign competition under WTO rules is devastating rural life in India (161). The international dimension of ABD also includes IMF-mandated closure and/or privatization of state-owned enterprises in poor countries. ABD as it happens in these countries is partly an imperialist process led by the American bourgeoisie seeking to counter the downturn in the world-economy. “Whether or not this is an adequate conceptualization of matters remains to be evaluated” (182). This is indeed the goal of the following discussion, that is, to evaluate Harvey’s own theory.

Harvey’s Theory of ABD: A Marxist Assessment

Harvey’s theory of ABD has encouraged scholars and activists to seriously think about the ongoing character of PA, that is, the modern forms in which Marx’s PA is manifested, both nationally as well as internationally. Robert Brenner (2006, 102) rightly says that “Harvey has done an impressive job of reviving Marx’s primitive accumulation, adapting it for the present day, and demonstrating its value in understanding” not only contemporary capitalism but also “contemporary neoliberal imperialism.” Harvey’s “insistence that these processes have been central to the entire history of capitalism, not just its origins, cannot be gainsaid” (97).

There are many ways in which Harvey has extended Marx’s original concept. For example, he has drawn attention to a fact which Marx did not live long enough to observe: the transformation of “the statist economies of the Soviet bloc . . . in a capitalist direction” (Brenner, 2006: 97). And this is indeed a process that Harvey had admirably predicted back in 1982, and this fact has not been noticed by scholars commenting on Harvey’s theory of ABD. With rising surplus and shrinking opportunities for investment, he said,

Regional alliances build once more and compete for shrinking profit opportunities. The threat of autarky looms again. And with it comes the renewed threat of global war, this time waged with weapons of immense and insane destructive power, and oriented towards primitive accumulation at the expense of the socialist bloc. (Harvey 1982, 444)

He has shown how it is that “corporations, with or without the help of the state, are ripping off precious use-values embedded in precapitalist, often communal, relationships in the Third World, and transforming them into capitalist wealth” (Brenner 2006, 97–98). More generally, Harvey’s theory has included under ABD the privatization of “state industries in both the advanced and developing economies” and commodification of “hitherto essentially free or state-dispensed use-values” (Brenner 2006, 97). It is his work on ABD—more than his work on spatially uneven development (see Das [forthcoming] for a critical assessment of this work)—that actually drew attention to his political economy, of a wider layer of Marxists around the world, especially outside of his (original) “home-discipline” of geography. There are, however, basic problems with his ideas: their relative lack of theoretical rigor (discussed in this section), which in turn has problematic political implications (discussed in the next section).

Harvey (2006b, 158) says, “I am not arguing that we drop all Marxian theorising and pander to popular understandings, but when an easy shift in language [from PA to ABD] can be far more politically effective why not use it?”. The word “but” here is key. Harvey argues,

People who know nothing of Marxian theory sense immediately what I mean [by accumulation by dispossession]. 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. (Harvey 2006b, 158)

Thus, anxious to disseminate an idea that does have a contemporary resonance (among an accepting audience), he seems to suggest that some form of pandering to popularity and some sort of playing with theoretical rigor can be allowed. Harvey himself is aware that “the term [ABD] has almost instantaneously been taken up (almost certainly because it is so evocative)” and that therefore “the idea of accumulation by dispossession,” including the role of the state in it, “does require . . . critical scrutiny” (Harvey 2006b, 158–59). In 2006, he said, “I worry about the indiscriminate way in which it might be (and already has been!) used” (158–59). But he himself has theorized ABD in 2010 and in 2014 in the same indiscriminate way as he did earlier. Harvey admits that “I inflate the idea somewhat” (165). To say “somewhat” is an under-statement.

ABD Is a Chaotic Concept

Harvey thinks that his use of ABD in place of PA merely represents a “shift in language.” However, ABD, *pace* Harvey, is both a concept (a mental reflection of what

is happening) and a term (that is used to describe the concept). I will argue that ABD is a “BAD” concept in many ways even if it draws attention to some of the important processes in the contemporary capitalist world. More precisely, it is a chaotic concept: it puts together processes under its scope which should not be put together as they do not have a mutual relation of necessity, and it separates processes which should not be separated because they are internally related (Sayer 1992, 132).

Harvey says that what he calls ABD is the modern-day version of Marx’s PA (Harvey 2003, 235). It then follows that the modern-day PA processes must be extra-economic in nature, because that is how Marx (1977, 875) viewed it: “the history of . . . expropriation is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.” But Harvey also says that Marx exaggerates the extra-economic and violent character of PA (Harvey 2010, 304) and that the modern-day PA processes are “primarily economic,” and not extra-economic (Harvey 2006b, 159). To support this claim, he says that PA includes the fact that “populations were not so much forced off the land as attracted off the land by employment possibilities and the prospects of a better life offered by urbanization and industrialization” (Harvey 2010, 304). Then, one might ask: in what way is ABD similar to, and in what way is it different from, the PA that Marx talked about?

The problem is not just that Harvey fails to make clear the relation between Marx’s PA and his own ABD. He also fails to maintain an adequate distinction between the numerous processes to which his ABD (his version of PA) refers to. These processes include economic and extra-economic processes; capitalist and non-capitalist processes; and, ABD as a condition for capitalism and ABD as an effect of capitalism. Some examples of Harvey’s conflations are in order. One can agree that a worker’s job or their house is their means of subsistence, just as a peasant’s land at the early stage of capitalism was (or still is in some cases). When the worker is separated from their job due to bankruptcy of the company, or when workers lose income as well as titles to property (e.g., house) due to the operations of financial markets, these processes occur as a direct outcome of what are, more or less, economic processes, and in a context where capitalism has already come into being. Such processes cannot be conflated with peasants forcibly expelled from their land at the origin of capitalism. Similarly, when small-scale producers lose their assets because of their economic unviability, that is, because of competition from big business (in whose “favor” the law of value works), this is the outcome of normal economic process of market-based class differentiation. Such cases of separation of direct producers from their means of subsistence/production are different from the peasants being forcefully expropriated from losing their land which was/is their means of subsistence/production, whether in sixteenth-century England or in twentieth-century Mexico where communal ownership of land (*ejidos*) was gotten rid of.

Given the way Harvey thinks about modern-day PA processes, his concept of ABD loses its coherence to an extent that it is difficult to say what the totality of the practices of ABD explains or is explained by.² In other words, it potentially loses its explanan or explanandum status. To repeat, it is indeed not clear what conceptual advantage one gains by clubbing together all these conceptually diverse processes that ABD is supposed to descriptively refer to: privatization of government-owned companies, mortgage fraud by banks, speculation in housing markets, increase in banks fees/interest and land rents, privatization of pension funds, forcible dispossession of small-scale owners, IMF forcing open markets in a poor country, family farms outcompeted by agribusiness companies, collapse of stock markets and companies causing job loss, degradation of habitats and environmental depletion, and so on. The problem is not just that nearly all of these are economic processes characteristic of normal capitalist production and exchange relations; it is also not clear as to what binds all these into a structure of relations/processes that ABD, like any rigorously-defined concept, would be expected to represent.

Robert Brenner, the Marxist historian, pointedly asks in 2006,

Why would we want to classify as accumulation by dispossession the normal capitalist process of exploitation that takes place when workers take on consumer credit at “usurious” rates, a direct expression of their propertylessness, unless we also wish to classify as accumulation by dispossession workers’ sale of their labour-power itself? (Brenner 2006, 101)

Lo and behold, Harvey (2010, 311) does exactly this 4 years after, or something extremely close: “The extraction of surplus-value is, after all, a specific form of accumulation by dispossession, since it is nothing more or less than the alienation, appropriation and dispossession of the laborer’s capacity to produce value in the labor process.” So, it seems that for Harvey, ABD includes exploitation, and that exploitation is simply a form of dispossession. Harvey’s single-minded focus on dispossession and his view of exploitation as a form of dispossession are disastrously and disarmingly disruptive of Marx’s notion of exploitation, a notion which has immense causal power and undeniable political significance. Subordinating exploitation under dispossession is an enormous epistemological compromise and blunder.

Harvey’s focus on dispossession is linked to his concept of the dispossessed. The dispossessed includes (a) those who are dispossessed within the labor process because they do not own property, and (b) those who are being dispossessed of their property itself (including in means of production and subsistence). In terms of the second group of the dispossessed, his category is a cross-class category in

that it includes three different classes: capitalists (who may lose their property via inter-capitalist competition); peasants and other small-scale producers; and wage-workers who are separated from their means of subsistence (e.g., savings, homes, permanent jobs, etc.). According to him, the loss of workers' employment/pensions and the loss of peasants' land happen due to state policies, and therefore, they both are ABD processes. This is a mistaken view in that the state is always involved in the reproduction of capitalist societies. The fact that the state is involved in economic activities, including in foreign territories, does not automatically make such a process a part of ABD.³ He fails to differentiate between the different forms of state intervention. Similarly, Harvey fails to distinguish between many forms of privatization of property. Privatization of village common property which was of use to peasants working on their own land should be seen as different from the privatization of government-funded education which reproduces what is already a wage-labor class that existed before such privatization took place. On the whole, Harvey elides a series of binaries or under-stresses their mutual differences.

So far, I have argued that Harvey assembles together processes under ABD, which should not be together. But he also separates processes which should not be separated, and this is another reason why his concept is a chaotic one: more specifically, he breaks the dialectical unity of Marx's original concept by, more or less, reducing ABD to the transfer of property to a few. For Marx, PA does not merely mean the transfer of assets from one class to another. If it was so, Marx would be a mere Proudhonian. If PA was merely about the transfer of wealth to exploiting classes (by governmental force or intervention), there is nothing special about PA because that has been happening for hundreds of years before PA. Marx's PA, an important method of the origin of capitalist accumulation (especially in the heartland of capitalism), included the following processes which should not be separated one from another: the rise (and expansion) of the working class consequent to the direct producers being dispossessed of their property, and the rise of the capitalist class from a "proto-capitalist class," and the concomitant conversion, into productive capital, of the property that is separated from the direct producers, with such capital being involved in the exploitation of the working class.

Inflation of ABD and Deflation of Capitalism as a Totality of Production Relations

A conceptual definition of an object of analysis must include its essential properties. It cannot be a replacement for an empirical description of what it refers to. Once the bag of what ABD refers to is inflated to include a wide variety of processes that are more or less mutually exclusive, then it is easy to argue that ABD is the dominant form of modern-day capitalism.⁴ Such an approach also allows

one to downplay the specificity of capitalism as such. The over-inflation of the ABD concept in Harvey’s work, especially since the early 2000s, has resulted in an overaccumulation of ABD research: much more attention is being paid to dispossession (and to similar excesses of capitalism as a predatory and violent practice) and indeed to neoliberalism of which ABD is a most important feature, than to capitalism as such, that is, the system of capitalist exchange relations, capitalist property rights, and capitalist exploitation (based on production relations). The evidence in Figure 1 is in line with this interpretation. There is indeed a cottage industry of ABD (or “ABD by . . .”) studies. In these studies, as in Harvey’s own work, neoliberalism is now capitalism’s main form, and ABD is the form that neoliberalism takes.

Harvey says that during the 1980s and 1990s, ABD emerged “to become the dominant form of accumulation relative to expanded reproduction” (Harvey 2003, 153, 67), which causes “the extraction of income and wealth from vulnerable populations, including the working classes (however defined)” (Harvey 2014, 68). ABD, for him, is the dominant form of capitalism and privatization is the key aspect of ABD.⁵ Interestingly, Harvey’s language is one of income and wealth, and not so much of (surplus) value,⁶ and his language is also one of vulnerability (which is a popular term now) that subordinates to it the language of class.

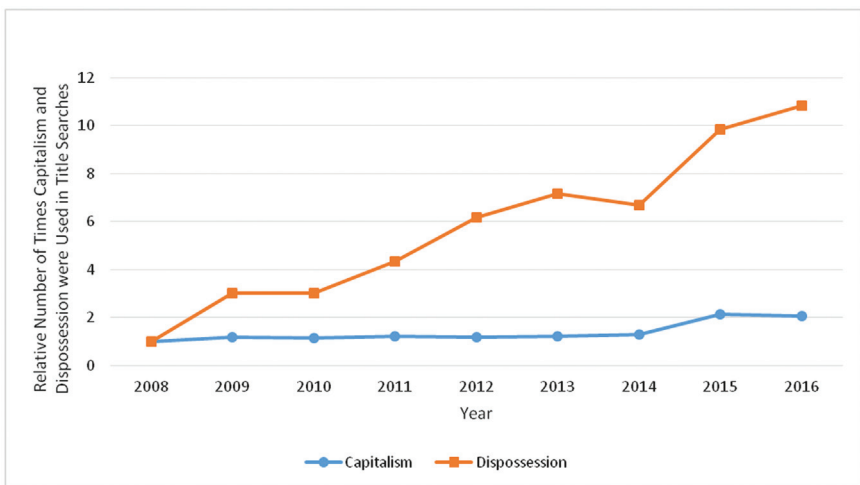


Figure 1 Popularity of “Dispossession” versus “Capitalism”: 2008–2016

Source: Graphed by the author.

Notes: The Web of Science was used to search for articles containing “Dispossession” and “Capitalism” in their titles. For the starting year (2008), the actual frequencies for both the terms were taken as 1. The frequencies for subsequent years were converted into relative numbers.⁷

1. Harvey's one-sided stress on ABD and his relative neglect of production and exploitation raise many questions. If as a process of distribution of wealth, ABD has become the dominant mode of modern capitalism, how does one explain the fact that between the early 1980s and early 2000s, "employment in advanced countries grew by 20%, and by 80% in emergent economies (and 120% in the South)?" (Batou 2015). Also, how does one explain the fact that there has been a massive increase in the production of goods and services in the world-economy since the 1970s, including especially in China, which Harvey considers as a prime example of ABD?
2. How does the thesis of the dominance of ABD explain the fact that imperialist and Third World capitals exploit workers in mines, offices, and factories and on farms in the South, and often over-exploit by paying them below the value of labor power (cost of subsistence)?
3. A part of Harvey's claim about ABD's dominance is his idea that ABD "seems to be the heart of what contemporary imperialist practice is about" (Harvey 2003, 180–81, 176). He thus sees imperialism in terms of dispossession practices in the global periphery. Why does he not consider the fact that imperialism is (increasingly) a system of exploitation—and indeed, super-exploitation—of workers of imperialized countries, by capital of the imperialist countries, with the aid of their militarized states, and complicity of pliant states and capital in the periphery, and that such a system of exploitation in the periphery, by putting pressure on wages in imperialist countries, increases the rate of exploitation in these countries as well?
4. It is one thing to say, as Harvey does, that the crisis of overaccumulation explains the imperative of ABD, but how exactly does ABD feed into expanded reproduction?⁸ And when capital is invested in production or in ABD, when is it over-accumulated capital and when is it not? If ABD in the South happens because of overaccumulation problem in the North since the 1970s, what explains PA in the South during its post-colonial, pre-neoliberal (developmental statist) period?
5. Harvey points to the slowing down of the economy since the 1970s leading to ABD as a response, but what about the fact that capital seeks to counter that slowing down through increasing exploitation of the labor of men, women, and children in production, including that which happens following the transfer of assets to the hands of some capitalists via mergers and acquisitions?

Extravagant and Unnecessary Expansion of Capitalism's Outside

An important way in which Harvey overinflates the scope of ABD is by inadequately imagining capitalism's outside or its other, which is being subjected to ABD. Apart from precapitalist societies, the state and the reserve army of labor are

the examples of the outside. As regards the state, he says that since state enterprises are non-capitalist, a shift of their resources into private hands can provide new resources for capitalist accumulation. But how can the state in capitalist societies be an outside of capitalism? Marxist theory of the state holds that the state, the collective capitalist, creates/provides conditions for the reproduction of the capitalist system which individual capitals-in-mutual competition might not, and that the state takes steps to respond to periodic economic crises (Das 2006). The state has indeed been promoting capitalist accumulation since the 1970s as it has done before. Engels has even gone as far as saying that in some contexts the state erects the capitalist class.⁹ In thinking about the state as an outside of capitalism, Harvey mistakenly tends to imply that the state in the pre-1970s period did not contribute to expanded reproduction and therefore that privatization of state enterprises makes such a contribution now.

Harvey thinks that state ownership of assets represents commons as a product of social democratic struggle and that their privatization constitutes ABD. This is a potentially useful insight, but one has to be careful here. In some cases, as in the former post-revolution societies, state enterprises were a product of class struggle. But in post-colonial countries and in Western advanced countries, where state enterprises existed, they were not generally a product of class struggle, and they came into being to support capitalist accumulation itself more or less directly.

According to Harvey (2007, 35), politically enforced denial of access to “state pensions, paid vacations, access to education, and health care” as means of social reproduction constitutes a modern form of PA. In making this claim, he needs to be more cautious than he is. It is true that the state-provided welfare can alleviate some adverse effects of private capitalism, including by reducing the burden of reproductive work on women, or the “domestic component of necessary labour” (Vogel 2013, 192). Given that people do not have to individually pay for these services, at least, not directly, collective provisioning by the state is a form of de-commodification. However, Harvey exaggerates the magnitude and importance of de-commodification. He seems to forget that some kind of de-commodified social provisioning may be necessary to maintain peace and to supply an educated and healthy labor force, and that de-commodified social provisioning, like state ownership of enterprises, still reproduces the commodity-form of labor (wage-labor), as Ashman and Callinicos (2006) argue. His exaggeration of pre-1970s state’s role reaches its height when he makes a stunning statement, following the likes of Dumenil and Levy, that ABD represents restoration and regaining of class power: “the practices that restored class power to capitalist elites in the United States and elsewhere are best described as an ongoing process of accumulation by dispossession that grew rapidly under neoliberalism” (Harvey 2007, 35). He mistakenly assumes that Keynesian statism or developmentalism before the 1970s led to the

loss of class power of property owners (Harvey 2010, 310; 2007, 28–29) as if that state did not intervene to create conditions for capitalist exploitation and for accumulation of wealth in capitalists' hands, as if it did not suppress workers when they resisted exploitation, and as if a society where there are some state enterprises and where the state feeds/educates some people is not a society where the ruling class, more or less, controls the major means of production, and exploits, and dominates over, the direct producers.

Apart from the state sector, the reserve army is a form of the “outside” of capitalism, for Harvey (2003, 141): ABD releases assets such as labor power at very low cost. But how can the reserve army, which increases the rate of exploitation of the currently employed, be the outside of capital? As Marx says in Chapter 25 of *Capital* vol. 1:

if a surplus population of workers is a necessary product or of the development of [capitalist] wealth . . . this surplus population becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production. . . . [It] belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. (Marx 1977, 784)

The reason for this is that “the general movements of wages are exclusively regulated by the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army” (Marx 1977, 790), the mere existence of which weakens the bargaining power of the currently employed and thus their level of exploitation.

An “outside” may help, but it is not clear why it is considered by Harvey to be necessary for capitalist accumulation. One can agree that “the collapse of the Soviet Union and then the opening up of China entailed a massive release of hitherto unavailable assets into the mainstream of capital accumulation” (Harvey 2003, 149). Then he goes on to ask: “What would have happened to over accumulated capital these last thirty years if these new terrains of accumulation had not opened up?” (Harvey 2003, 149). In other words, just as capitalism would be in trouble without uneven development (a claim he makes) (Das, forthcoming), it would be in trouble without ABD. According to him, “continued existence” of ABD “may well be fundamental to the survival of capitalism” (Harvey 2010, 308; also 1982, 443). Harvey seems to take capitalism’s (important) conjunctural strategies of survival as more fundamental than they actually are. What is ultimately fundamental is not what he says it is. What is fundamental is this: capital’s ability, backed by force (and a degree of consent), to maintain control over private property, to impose/re-impose and expand the imperative of the market and the law of value by converting all transactions into capitalist commodity relations, to exploit and dominate over the workers, and to wreak destruction in the form of imperialist wars.

Harvey's Class-Fractionalist Approach

Harvey's view that ABD as the modern form of capitalism is more distributive than generative of wealth leads him to take a class-fractional approach to capitalism: he fails to view ABD from the standpoint of the capitalist class as a whole or the capitalist system as a whole. It only talks about ABD from the standpoint of a fraction of the capitalist class, the fraction that receives assets, and the pride of place goes to the financial fraction of the capitalist class.

Marx's view is more dialectical when he says that capitalism is fundamentally a system of production relations, which presupposes circulation, and that the circulation process, while it may result in the redistribution of wealth among commodity owners, cannot cause the production of new value or new capital, at the level of the system as a whole. "The sum of values in circulation can clearly not be augmented by any change in their distribution" (Marx 1977, 265).¹⁰ This is the case whether "commodities are sold above their value" or "they are bought at less than their value" (263). So, mere transfer of assets from one capitalist to another cannot cause an increase in the capitalist form of wealth at the level of the system as a whole: the class of capitalist property owners as a whole cannot be the net receivers of assets, it "cannot defraud itself" (266). This view of Marx contradicts Harvey's idea that modern-day capitalism is one that is dominantly based on fraud and predation.

The problem with capitalism that Harvey abstracts from is that as the rate of profit in commodity production has declined, mainly due to the rise in the ratio of investment in constant capital to the investment in labor (i.e., wages), commodity producers, including manufacturers, have invested in financial services (Smith 2010). A capitalist or a group of capitalists (Toyota/Toyota financial services or Brick, a furniture chain-store, and its insurance services) can be involved both in expanded reproduction (the site of what I will call accumulation by exploitation of labor), and in financial services, which Harvey includes under ABD. Toyota as a car producer appropriates surplus value from its workers in the sphere of production, and it is the same Toyota that gives loans to people to buy its cars, and thus makes a profit in the sphere of financialization. Causal powers lie more in internal relations between things and in processes than in the things themselves, which are embodiments/bearers of the relations and processes: both financial and non-financial fractions are embodiments of capital as a relation/process, which must have primacy over the things that capitalist fractions engage in (e.g., ABD). In terms of class-agency, it makes less sense to think of financial capitalists as having more class power over commodity-producing capitalists appropriating surplus value than to treat them as overlapping fractions of the capitalist class as such. This class is "the conscious representative" of the "movement of capital" in which money is invested to make money, the class whose sole "subjective purpose" is the "appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract" (Marx 1977, 253–54).

From Harvey's Theory of ABD to His Politics of ABD

Harvey's Critique of Marxist Politics

Harvey says that before the 1970s, when “the central contradiction was between capital and labour in and around the point of production,” the focus of Marxist politics “was . . . on class relations and class struggles [over wages, etc.] within the field of capital accumulation understood as expanded reproduction” (Harvey 2003, 169). He recognizes that the “single-minded concentration of much of the Marxist- and communist-inspired left on proletarian struggles” produced benefits such as the welfare state (170–71). But these struggles were also problematic: “The politics deriving from the workplace and the point of production dominated the politics of the living space” (170), while “all other forms of struggle and especially struggles against dispossession and urban social movements, were viewed as subsidiary, secondary, or even dismissed as peripheral or irrelevant” (169–70).

According to Harvey, associated with the faulty Marxist view of politics is a certain problematic view of class itself: “The classic view of the Marxist/socialist left was that the proletariat, defined as waged workers deprived of access to or ownership of the means of production, was the key agent of historical change” (Harvey 2003, 169). He thinks this is a mistake: “the classic left-wing configurations . . . have a problem” in the sense that “their notion of the factory worker as the vanguard proletarian figure that is going to make the revolution, I don't think that works; I don't think it ever really worked very well” (Harvey and Rivera 2010). Echoing many critics of Marxism, Harvey thinks that the Marxist left is “obsessed with the figure of the factory worker, as the bearer of class consciousness and as the avatar of socialist ambition” (Harvey 2014, 68). According to him, Marxists mistakenly think that in the two central domains of struggle (labor-market and the workplace), “the proletarian vanguard supposedly fashions itself to lead the way to a socialist revolution” (Harvey 2014, 66–67). To rectify these mistakes, “the left groups need to sit back and ask themselves who is likely to play a vanguard role in the current situation” (Harvey and Rivera 2010), for clearly, the proletariat, to him, is not to play that role that classical Marxism has assigned it. To view the proletariat as “the unique agent of historical transformation” was, once again, “a fatal mistake” (Harvey 2003, 170–71).

Harvey's “What Is to Be Done?”

The weakness of the pre-1970s left politics of expanded reproduction coupled with a growing sense of disillusion with what socialist developmentalism has been able to accomplish has led to “the emergence of a different kind of politics of resistance.” This is politics of ABD which refers to struggles against dispossession

(Harvey 2003, 172). The goal of these struggles—including movements against ecological damage, privatization of commons, austerity, inequality, and so on—is not socialism or communism of the traditional left: it has “a different kind of alternative vision to that of socialism or communism” (172).

Harvey not only says that this is what is happening but also he recommends this form of left politics as the top priority.¹¹ “If the current period has seen a shift in emphasis from accumulation through expanded reproduction to accumulation through dispossession, and if the latter lies at the heart of imperialist practices,” and he agrees that this is the case, “then it follows that the balance of interest within the anti- and alternative globalization movement must acknowledge accumulation by dispossession as the primary contradiction to be confronted” (Harvey 2003, 177). Given that financialization is behind much of ABD, bankers should be made to “look to their responsibilities” (Harvey 2014, 162).¹² Harvey endorses the fact that financial institutions (e.g., IMF) “have quite rightly become the main focus of the protest movements” (Harvey 2014, 179).

When Harvey calls for a movement against capitalism, he has a particular view about agency: “You have to have a broader notion of an alliance of forces in which the conventional proletariat is an important element, but not necessarily an element that has a leadership role” (Harvey and Rivera 2010), an alliance “that can actually do something to check if not transform what a predatory capitalism is about” (Harvey 2006c, 115).

A Marxist Critique of Harvey's Politics of ABD

Harvey says that Marxists must “try to intervene in a way which is going to push society toward more democratic and more egalitarian solutions, and ultimately to solutions that are entirely non-capitalistic” (Harvey and Rivera 2010). This sounds reasonable on the surface. After all, a revolutionary project can certainly include a fight for reforms. But on close reflection, his statements such as the above indicate an approach that is more reformist than revolutionary, especially if these statements are placed in relation to his other utterances which have no notion of transitional demands, or strategies to transcend capitalism. His overall political perspective is not the overthrow of the present dictatorship of capital, including finance capital involved in ABD, but the development of a social movement (not a *socialist* movement) to pressure capitalists' representatives to listen up and throw some concessions (“a new New Deal”) such as investment in infrastructures and some redistribution of wealth. It is unclear how social movements themselves, outside of a proletarian organization, will achieve these reforms and mount some kind of challenge to capitalism, which is backed up by the powerful state (or system of states). According to him, the goal of social movements should be to curtail

the power of CEOs and of financial capitalists, suggesting that there is a capitalist solution to capitalism's problems. He says, "Paradoxically, a strong and powerful social democratic and working-class movement is in a better position to redeem capitalism than is capitalist class power" (Harvey 2005, 153). Harvey's political conclusions justify reducing anti-capitalist politics to political resistance against neoliberalism as the modern form of capitalism, a resistance that would protect capitalism from itself:

A massive counterattack within the US as well as in the other core countries of capitalism against the politics of neoliberalism and the cutting of state and social expenditures might be one of the only ways to protect capitalism internally from its self-destructive and crisis prone tendencies. (Harvey 2003, 75–76)

Arguably, bourgeois economists who are conscious of what is required for the long-term reproduction of capitalism such as Joseph Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, Paul Krugman, Raghuram Rajan, and Amartya Sen would have little trouble accepting these kinds of arguments of Harvey. Lest he would be accused of being reformist by what he considers to be "the far left," he says that his conclusion is necessary because it is, after all, the "ordinary people who suffer, starve, and even die in the course of capitalist crises rather than the upper classes" (Harvey 2005, 153). This is an argument that, to me, smacks of populism in that often reforms of the system, whether from the right or the left, are justified in the name of the suffering *people*.

When Harvey says that the main contradiction in society is between the dispossessed and the dispossessor, and that therefore anti-capitalist politics must revolve around the dispossession of assets, he is also implicitly reducing working-class politics to the struggle over wages and working conditions, that is, to "trade-unionist politics," in Lenin's language (in his "What Is to Be Done?") (Lenin 1977, 132). First of all, Harvey fails to understand that in Marxism, class struggle is more encompassing than what is mere trade union struggle. Besides, why is the struggle over such matters as higher rent and bank fees, cuts in social benefits, and ecological degradation, like gender and racial oppression, all of which disproportionately affect women and minorities of proletarian/semi-proletarian backgrounds, not working-class politics? And why and how is the struggle against the (forcible) dispossession of semi-proletarians not a struggle for the alliance of workers and small-producers to take up? In other words, why is it that much of what he calls ABD is not *class* politics, a proletarian/semi-proletarian political struggle, to be led by the working class, supported by small-scale producers?

All this suggests that his intellectual and political ideas seem to be running away from the Marxist focus on class and from the working class as one that embodies universal suffering caused by exploitation and domination (see Llorente

2013). The politics of ABD that Harvey supports is indeed based on the mistaken view about the working class (and about class itself). Echoing post-structuralists and other critics of Marxism, he says that there is no “simple conception of class to which we can appeal as the primary (let alone exclusive) agent of historical transformation” (Harvey 2005, 202). He adds that “There is no proletarian field of utopian Marxian fantasy to which we can retire” (Harvey 2005, 202). He rejects what he calls a narrow view of the proletariat as “factory workers.” He insists on a definition of working class based on concrete labor, saying that the term should include “all those who facilitate the reproduction of daily life: the care givers and teachers, the sewer and subway repair men [and so on]” (Harvey 2012, 137). What kind of conception of class—and of the working class or the proletariat—this is, one might ask? In Marxism, one does not define the proletariat merely as factory workers: anyone is a proletarian if she/he is separated from the control over the means of production and therefore must generally depend on wage-work to survive. The type of work (i.e., nature of concrete labor) one performs is immaterial to the definition of the proletariat as a class.

In terms of political agency, what Harvey endorses is not the Marxist idea that capitalism must be fought by an alliance of proletariat and semi-proletariat, led by the proletariat, but a (cross-class) social movement, a movement of the dispossessed, of “the indignant.”¹³ For Harvey, the working class has no *essential* political role. Its role, for him, is more conjunctural or contingent: that is, sometimes, in some situations, some groups of workers may play a crucial role. Paralleling his stress on a language of income and wealth rather than value, surplus value and class relations in production is his language of social movement, World Social Forum, and Occupy movement. His is not the language of revolutionary struggle of class-conscious proletarians and semi-proletarians. For Marxism, in contrast, the role of the proletariat is basic as far as anti-capitalist struggle is concerned, and this is for reasons one cannot go into here (see Das 2017; Wood 1998). Harvey’s call for a social movement approach to anti-capitalism differs from Marxist politics. The latter advances the notion of a proletarian organizational framework to promote socialist consciousness, the consciousness in which the economic, political and cultural interests of proletarian/semi-proletarian men, women, and children are fundamentally irreconcilable with the totality of capitalist production and exchange relations, and therefore with the interests of the capitalists.

As we have seen, Harvey arrives at his political conclusions on the basis of a dual critique: critique of classical Marxism and critique of capitalism. His criticism of Marxism includes his critique of Marx and Lenin. With respect to the former, Harvey (2010, 313) says that Marx “was in error in confining” struggles against ABD “to the prehistory of capitalism” and that *Capital’s* “call to the barricades of revolution” is merely “the rhetoric of the Communist Manifesto”

(Harvey 2010, 301). His criticism of classical Marxism actually goes beyond Marx. In an interview (Harvey and Rivera 2010), he said, “within Marxism we also have to . . . be very critical of [the] very conservative, rather dogmatic understandings of the world.” Harvey says that one

can't simply go back and cite Lenin as if somehow this is the solution. What a good Marxist does is to look at the conventional situation and do an analysis all over again given Marx's method to try and understand the dynamics of the situation and therefore try to intervene [politically]. (Harvey and Rivera 2010)

And to intervene, for him, once again, is to more or less engage in anti-neoliberal politics, not the political struggle against the capitalist relation as such.

Underlying his version of progressive anti-capitalist politics is a form of critique of capitalism itself, a critique which is not incorrect, but which is very limited: indeed, his critique of capitalism, like that of many other leftist scholars with various degrees of sympathy for anarchism (which is closely associated with post-structuralism), and with Polanyi, and so on, is increasingly a critique of a form of capitalism. That is, his critique is a critique of a new round of marketization and privatization (of commons), more than a critique of capitalist class relation as a totality. His critique of capitalism is therefore not specifically Marxist anti-capitalism, that is, anti-capitalism from the standpoint of the international proletariat and the building of international socialism (uninterrupted annihilation of the class relation of all forms). His critique of modern-day capitalism which informs his “anti-capitalist” politics is the kind of social-democratic type “oppositional” critique which “is nothing more than a safety valve for mass dissatisfaction, a condition of the stability of the social structure” (Trotsky 2008, xvi). Although he thinks that Marxism has become conservative, it is, in fact, in my view, his own politics that is conservative within the broader spectrum of left politics. The space between Marxism rooted in Marx/Engels and in Lenin's intellectual legacy, that is, the space of genuine, revolutionary, Marxism, on one hand, and Harvey's popular Marxism, on the other, is simply too expansive. The twin pillars of Marxism—its stress on production, value, and exploitation of the working class, and its focus on the need for a revolutionary rupture led by that class—require rethinking, according to him. His Marxism is an important strand of revisionist Marxism.

If it is the case that according to Lenin there is no significant political-intellectual view placed between capitalist and socialist views, where does one place Harvey's?¹⁴ With sympathy for the Occupy type movement, in spite of his occasional comments about the need to connect ABD struggles to struggles against expanded reproduction, it might not be too far-fetched to claim that Harvey occupies a middle ground between reactionary capitalism and revolutionary socialism.

While thinking about the politics of David Harvey, who has, undoubtedly, a vast command over Marx's political economy, it is difficult not to be reminded of the likes of Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, who were subjected to ruthless criticisms by Lenin and Luxemburg, respectively.

Conclusion

According to Harvey, since the 1970s, capitalism has taken the form of ABD. The latter refers to "the continuation and proliferation of accretion practices" constituting the modern-day version of Marx's PA. These practices include privatization-commodification of commons, forcible expulsion of small-scale producers, predation by financial capitalists, extraction of rents from patents and intellectual property rights, diminution of state-provided welfare, privatization of nationalized industries, and financialization. The ABD practices also include various other ways in which people lose their assets through capitalist exchange relation (e.g., small farmers going out of business because of competition from big enterprises; loss of jobs and pension benefits due to bankruptcy of companies; people losing their houses because of their failure to make mortgage payments; proletarianization caused by voluntary movement to cities for jobs). According to Harvey, it is not the capital-labor relation in the realm of expanded reproduction but ABD that defines the central contradiction of modern capitalism. He thinks that the dominant contradiction to be politically confronted is between the dispossessor and the dispossessed, and not between the exploiter and the exploited. Struggle against ABD is more crucial than struggle against the exploitative, expanded reproduction of capital.

Harvey's views are problematic theoretically and politically. Harvey's concept is far too encompassing, so it is incoherent. It is a chaotic concept as opposed to a rational abstraction. In extending the temporal scope of a concept, he bundles together a larger variety of numerous things relative to those covered under Marx's original concept. It is not clear as to what binds all these various things together. How can, for example, peasants losing their land because productivity on their farms is lower than that on large-scale capitalist farms, be included under the same category of PA that also includes the forcible expulsion of peasants? Harvey also inflates the significance of ABD at the expense of accumulation based in production relations.

Harvey fails to pay attention to an important aspect of Marxist philosophy, that is, levels of generality (Ollman 2003): this concept points to the different levels at which capitalism (including its spatiality) should be examined. In defining capitalism in terms of ABD, he focuses far too much on a feature of a modern form of capitalism, and he fails to adequately consider the following: in what ways does the

dynamics of capitalism-as-such sets limits within which the dynamics of capitalism-as-ABD works? Harvey fails to distinguish between accumulation of wealth characteristic of PA and accumulation of wealth that is more trans-historical across class societies (e.g., theft of wealth), in the same way that one might fail to distinguish between misery (a descriptive category which may be trans-historical and evocative) and exploitation and capitalist exploitation (the categories which have precise causal meaning, explanatory power, and political significance but which may sound “technical”). He fails to distinguish between PA as it was caused by the dynamics of capital’s prehistory (a situation where capitalist accumulation was just originating and where PA was a condition for capitalism) and ABD as an effect of the crisis of capitalism, which leads to the need for cheaper resources.

It should also be noted that while, for Harvey, modern capitalism has become a mode of accumulation which is based on predation and fraud as opposed to market relations, it is in fact true that much of predatory and fraudulent process of accumulation could be seen as (re-)imposing the market relations and the law of value, and that the predatory character of capitalism is therefore not to be separated from, and contrasted to, the imperative of market relations at national and global scales, without which capitalist production relations cannot exist.¹⁵

The first form of the collateral damage of (a) the lack of attention to the different levels of generality and (b) the over-extension of the ABD concept is the fact that Harvey elides a series of binaries or under-stresses their mutual differences and that in his conceptualization of capitalism, he separates processes which should not be separated. The second collateral damage is that his analysis of capitalism allows for reformism, and that he indeed draws political conclusions that are reformist (whether as an individual he is a reformist is beside the matter). If the central contradiction of capitalism is not between capital and labor anymore, then the politics of anti-capitalism, more or less, becomes the politics of resistance against a form of capitalism (i.e., ABD), that is, resistance against dispossession. If the center of accumulation has moved from the hidden abode of production and exploitation to mere politically enforced transfer of wealth and income in the sphere of exchange, then the focus of the fight shifts from the working class struggles to struggles of those who are politically marginal to the process of production of value and surplus value. If capitalism has basically taken a predatory form, we need to then seek a capitalism that is a little nicer, one without (coercive) dispossession. Such a view ignores the inevitability that, for example, small-scale producers, if their asset/land is not forcibly dispossessed, will, over time, lose their property in the process of class differentiation, leading to (proto-)capitalists, and to wage-laborers, including those with small amounts of property (Lenin [1899] 1964).

Inflating the predatory nature of capitalism which can be somehow regulated amounts to deflating the importance of the law of value, which is not much

amenable to long-term regulation (at the global level). Diluting the centrality of class relation between capital and labor is not only theoretically but also politically problematic, even if it may be academically popular and may serve short-term political expediency. I disagree with Harvey saying that “when an easy shift in language [from PA to ABD] can be far more politically effective why not use it?” (Harvey 2006b, 158). It is not clear how/why an intellectual and political project that focuses on ABD as the dominant contradiction of modern-day society at the expense of the totality of capitalist relations, including class-exploitation, class-differentiation and dispossession, is politically more effective and theoretically better than the classical Marxist tradition: this tradition rightly sees class struggle as the struggle against attacks on democratic rights (which encompass, importantly, rights of women and ethnic/racial/religious minorities) and against attacks on the living standards of working men, women, and children, including those that are caused by various forms of dispossession, as a part of, and as creating conditions for, the struggle against the multi-scalar totality of the complex capitalist class relation itself. The political program Harvey advances in which the proletarians do not have the central role is very problematic from such a Marxist standpoint.

Given the numerous problems with Harvey's theoretical and political analysis of the modern-day version of PA, there is clearly a need for an alternative way of looking at it, one that appropriates his useful insights but one that is fundamentally based on Marx's own theory of PA, and that takes value and production as well as class and the working class more seriously than Harvey's approach allows for.

Notes

1. Here is a sample of the recent literature that speaks to Marx's ideas about primitive accumulation (1977, 873–940): Ashman and Callinicos 2006; Batou 2015; Bonefeld 2011; Brass 2011; De Angelis 1999; Frank 1977; Glassman 2006; Gillespie 2016; Gordon and Webber 2008; Hartssock 2006; Millar 1978; Patnaik 2008; and Perelman 2000.
2. Although Harvey (2006a) regrets that he did not stress ABD enough in *The Limits to Capital* written in early 1980s, as I have been showing, there is a lot of continuity between his recent work and what he said in *The Limits to Capital*:
 as capitalism exhausts the possibilities for primitive accumulation at the expense of pre-capitalist and intermediate social formations, so it has to look elsewhere for fresh sources of labour power. In the end it has only one place to go. It has to cannibalize itself. (Harvey [1982] 2006, 437–38)
 By this, he refers to the transfer of assets within the capitalist class which is, however, a purely capitalist process.
3. As Brenner notes (2006, 102): Harvey assimilates to ABD “virtually any step a capitalist state might take to politically privilege its own national capitals at the expense of those of another capitalist economy—protection, subsidies, currency manipulations, and so on.” So, the fact that in normal times the state works in the interest of capital can get potentially lost.

4. Harvey gives dispossession two meanings. In its “restricted” meaning, dispossession means redistribution of assets. In its broad meaning, dispossession includes exploitation. Here there is a potential contradiction: his view that exploitation is a form of dispossession contradicts his claim that dispossession has become a more important aspect of capitalism than expanded reproduction, which is the site of exploitation. Thankfully, Harvey, for the most part, uses dispossession in its narrow meaning. This article is a critique of his theory of dispossession where the term is used in its narrow meaning.
5. Note that the proceeds of privatization per year worldwide are roughly 0.1% of annual world GDP of \$72 trillion (Mercille and Murphy 2017, 1044).
6. Indeed, now-a-days, Harvey even talks about “anti-value,” which refers to the idea that commodities are not exchanged at their value.
7. Taking 2008 and 2009 as examples, relative frequencies of appearance of “Dispossession” (6 and 18) and “Capitalism” (303 and 354) in the literature were calculated as shown below for 2 years.

2008	6	303	1	1
2009	18	354	3	1.1683

8. Harvey paid a little more attention to how PA feeds into expanded reproduction back in 1982 than he does more recently. The following is a rare instance in his post-2000s writing when Harvey (2003, 154) writes about the potential connection between expanded reproduction and PA:

Hitherto successful state and township/village enterprises around Shanghai (which provided component parts to major industries in the metropolitan area) have in recent times either been forced to close or be privatized, thus shedding social welfare and pension obligations and creating a huge pool of unemployed and asset-poor workers. The effect has been to make the remaining Chinese enterprises far more fiercely competitive in world markets, but at the expense of the devaluation and destruction of previously viable livelihoods.

9. Engels (1977,145) wrote,

The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens do it exploit. The workers remain wage workers—proletarians.
10. This view does not negate the fact that the transformation of non-capitalist sector to the capitalist sector can increase the capitalist form of wealth which appears as an “immense accumulation of commodities” (Marx 1977, 125) and which is used to make a profit.
11. Could one say that there is a disjunction between his theory of modern capitalism (which might be right) and his political strategy (which is problematic)? This would not be a sound interpretation. Harvey says, as mentioned earlier, that his “purpose of introducing accumulation by dispossession is to emphasize that appropriation [of value and surplus value] can *sometimes* try to do without production” (Harvey 2006b, 162; italics added or in the original). What does *sometimes* mean? Does it mean that ABD is a temporary phase? But the idea that ABD might be a temporary phase does not seem to be a possibility because he clearly suggests that something fundamental has changed which is why the old traditional left politics of proletarian-led class struggle will not work anymore. Or could it be that the ABD’s dominance is a temporary phase but the need to transcend the class struggle politics of the old left is a permanent one, such that if capital-labor contradiction does ever become the key contradiction, proletarian struggle as in the old left politics will still not be necessary?

12. For me, to insist that bankers merely “look to their responsibilities”—and hear us—is to agree that they have a right to exist as bankers in the first place.
13. Harvey is actually one among many present-day leftist scholars, including those influenced by Marxism (e.g., Hartsock 2006), who believe in the efficacy of social movements as opposed to proletarian struggles.
14. See Lenin (1977, 121–22), “[T]he only choice [for the working masses] is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a ‘third’ ideology . . .).”
15. Wood (2002, 20) says that Harvey’s “emphasis appears to be on the concentration of wealth rather than on the transformation of social-property relations,” including the market imperative.

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