**Terra Economica: Waste and the Production of Enclosed Nature**

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**Abstract:** This essay provides an analysis of the “dirty” history and geography of enclosure, as both an instance of primitive accumulation and a production of nature. Specifically, I reconsider the English enclosures as a struggle over the land-use designation of “waste”. Whereas both open fields and common waste lands were an essential and valuable part of the common right economy, advocates of enclosure came to see these same lands as wasted commons; lands that were potentially, but not yet, improved. This dialectic of waste and potential permeates the fabric of the nature produced through enclosure, which I name *terra economica*. Typically, this terrain has been understood as a passive repository of free resources, extending across absolute space. While such accounts consider the making of nature into a universal means of production, it is equally important to consider the ways in which nature is produced as a universal condition of production.

**Keywords:** production of nature, enclosure, waste, primitive accumulation, commons

The history of the English enclosure movement figures centrally in Marx’s discussion of so-called primitive accumulation, the process whereby capital as a mode of production emerged out of a non-capitalist world, “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (1976:925–926). The “bloody” implications of this process—the fate of a laboring population made landless, and the forceful coercion that was required to make men, women and children into wage labor—have and continue to provide an important corrective to dominant narratives of enlightened progress. Yet far less attention has been paid to the “dirty” aspect of this process—the great efforts required to produce a qualitatively new kind of land for this new population of waged and unwaged workers to toil upon. The production of this new land, what I am calling *terra economica*, is the focus of this essay.

While open fields and common waste lands were an essential and valuable part of the common right economy, advocates of enclosure came to mark these same lands as wasted spaces, targeting them for enclosure. Beyond a simple redistribution of property, the erection of fences, or even the emergence of Newtonian space, enclosure produced a new concept of nature that was teeming with profit-making potential, “pregnant with advantage” as the outspoken advocate for enclosure Arthur Young wrote in 1808. And when these same lands were left to waste in an unimproved state, they were to the contrary, pregnant with something far less savory, “the best nursery for idleness and thieves in this kingdom” (Young 1808).

Understanding this shift, from common wastes to wasted commons, provides a key to understanding the production of *terra economica* as a universal condition of production. This differs from the majority of accounts, both of primitive accumulation and the production of nature, which primarily consider the production
of nature as a universal means of production. In this essay, I hope to make two key observations: terra economica is a landscape of wasted potential, in which all of the world is potentially, or not yet, capital; the production of this enclosed nature entails a violence of erasure, forever supplementing capital’s expanded accumulation. The first section contextualizes this inquiry in relation to accounts of primitive accumulation and the production of nature. The second then provides an account of the production of terra economica, focusing on the enclosure of the English countryside and in particular, the transformations in “waste” that accompanied this process. In the final section, I briefly return to theories of primitive accumulation and the production of nature to assess the implications of this analysis.

Clearing the Ground
The term enclosure, borrowed from English agrarian history, has gained significant traction in radical social sciences, serving as a proxy for numerous forms of commodification, privatization and outright dispossession. The concept arrives via Marx, whose account of the transition to capitalism, which he refers to as so-called primitive accumulation, affords enclosure a pivotal role. As with much of Marx’s work, the specific character and duration of this process remain open to debate. This is true of inquiries into the historic emergence of capitalism (Brenner 1977; Wood 2002), as well as inquiries into ongoing forms of “accumulation by extra-economic means” (Glassman 2006; see also Bonefeld 2001; DeAngelis 2004; Roberts 2008). Yet underlying these debates are some notable points of congruence. Each account centers upon the separation of the laboring population from their means of production and reproduction. This process, by which the doubly free laborer is produced—free from his/her means of production and reproduction and free to enter into wage relations—figures central to Marx’s analysis in Capital. Michael Perelman (2000) has aptly described primitive accumulation as a concerted and generalized assault against self-provisioning, with the express intent of pushing a newly “freed” laboring population into the wage-labor market. This process, albeit variable, messy and incomplete, represents the “bloody” dimension of primitive accumulation, extending from enclosures through colonialism, the slave trade and into the disciplining of wage labor.

Another point of congruence—with some notable exceptions to be discussed below—is the relative lack of attention to any qualitative transformations of the land, or what we might consider to be the “dirty” side of primitive accumulation. To the extent that land, or nature conceived of as the extensive, non-human world, figures central to these accounts, it is only as that which is dispossessed; that which is taken from some and used by others. By contrast, there are a number of excellent works that have detailed these transformations of the physical and ideological landscape (Barrell 1972; Cronon 1983; Olwig 1984, 2002), yet they do so without specifically drawing connections between their analyses and primitive accumulation.

Connections between the disciplining of land and labor do come to the fore in feminist-Marxist accounts that link primitive accumulation to the misogyny of the enlightenment, in both thought and action (Federici 2004; Merchant 1982; Mies 1986). Witch hunts, colonialism, and the savage dismantling of peasant uprisings
garnered their legitimacy from a worldview that collapsed women, land, and the uncivilized Other into a feminized nature in need of rational, scientific control. Accordingly, nature became a feminized, passive resource that, along with the labor of social reproduction, was no longer considered to be actively productive of value. The de-activation, or death of nature, so-called, is meant to explain a shift where power over nature comes to replace the power of nature.

Whereas for Merchant, this is an account of nature’s domination, Neil Smith (2010) interprets this transformation as a production of nature. Smith presents the production of nature thesis as a challenge to analyses such as Merchant’s, which he argues, ultimately rely upon a bourgeois conception of “first nature” separate and distinct from the social world responsible for its domination. With the emergence of capitalism, Smith argues, the relationship between the human and non-human world is fundamentally transformed, the latter now being thoroughly produced by and as a part of the former. Hence the “first nature” that appears to be the object of man’s domination is in actual fact a historically specific product, and not a transhistorical given. Nonetheless, both Smith and Merchant agree that unlike the organic, living conception of renaissance nature, the new nature that emerges with capitalism is conceived of as a lifeless, mechanical, interchangeable whole: extensive, universal, and operating according to its own timeless laws. Kenneth Olwig (1984) describes this as a transition from a processual and normative concept of nature to a spatial and objective one. What was, from ancient Greece to renaissance Europe, a concept of becoming, or potentiality, had become after the enlightenment, an inert object to be possessed, protected, or otherwise acted upon.

However, as Olwig ultimately notes, nature’s potential does not cease to exist with the rise of capitalism. It is radically transformed, ceasing to appear in the same form, but present nonetheless. Marx suggests something similar in the Grundrisse (1973), discussing the separations necessary for capital to emerge as a mode of production. Though subsequent theorizations of primitive accumulation have not paid much attention to it, διναμεί figures central (pronounced dunamei, it is translated as actuality, potentiality, virtuality, and was used by ancient Greek philosophers to discuss the potentiality inherent in nature):

[T]he process of dissolution, which transforms a mass of individuals of a nation etc. into free wage labourers διναμεί . . . which divorced a mass of individuals from their previous relations to the objective conditions of labour . . . and thereby transformed these individuals into free workers, this same process freed—διναμεί—these objective conditions of labour—land and soil, raw material, necessaries of life, instruments of labour, money or all of these—from their previous state of attachment to the individuals now separated from them. They are still there on hand, but in another form; as a free fund, in which all political etc. relations are obliterated . . . [E]ach of these appears in a negative relation to the other—the (potentially) free worker on the one side, capital (potentially) on the other (Marx 1973:503).

The separation at the heart of primitive accumulation does not produce capital, or nature already commodified. It produces (potential) capital, which must be
understood, I argue, as a condition—as opposed to means—of production. James O’Connor (1998) is most commonly associated with the concept of conditions of production, which he identifies as all of the non-commodified, yet necessary factors of production—such as the process of social reproduction and the many “free gifts of nature” that prove essential to capitalist production. While O’Connor’s “second contradiction of capitalism” focuses on capital’s tendency to destroy these conditions of production through the process of its expanded reproduction, a number of approaches to ongoing primitive accumulation also explore the ways in which these conditions of production must first be produced (Katz 1998; McCarthy 2004). For instance, Cindi Katz argues that while prior forms of enclosure expanded extensively over absolute space, seeking resources to be extracted as-is, new enclosures are expanding intensively, by producing and making available spaces of potential intellectual property, such as bio-prospecting reserves and the intracellular space of genomes. For James McCarthy, provisions in NAFTA that protect corporations from “regulatory takings” are a new form of enclosure that both targets and produces conditions of production, allowing multinational corporations to establish the potential profitability of their holdings, and then sue host states if that potential goes unrealized due to regulatory actions. Unlike the classic form of enclosure, argues McCarthy, which aims at keeping discrete parcels of nature closed off from others (as private property), this new form of enclosure entails gaining private access to “transform and exploit general, social nature in ways that will directly harm others” (2004:337).

Both Katz and McCarthy focus on the newness of these qualitative productions of social nature, implying that their foil, a classic form of enclosure to be found in Marx’s narrative, entails only quantitative extensions of capital into more absolute space, to find more means of production, to control more private property. Yet, as will be shown below, the intensive production of nature as a universal condition of production, is as integral to the “classic” enclosures of the English countryside as it is to the new enclosures unearthed by these critical geographers. Enclosures, new and old alike, entail both the qualitative production of land—nature as property and the properties of nature—as well as the quantitative expansion of control over that newly produced terrain. These are simultaneous and inseparable dimensions of enclosure, even those “classic” enclosures, to which I now turn.

**Enclosure and Improvement**

Just as many of the constituent elements of capitalism—wage labor, private property, usury, merchant trades, etc—pre-date capital as a mode of production, enclosure pre-dates primitive accumulation. When the Statute of Merton authorized the enclosure of manorial waste lands in 1235, it required that the lord doing the enclosing leave sufficient commons to provide for his tenants’ subsistence, ensuring that commoners would not be completely separated from their means of production and reproduction. Most historians, Marx included, agree that it was not until the fifteenth century that enclosure took its infamous form as a mechanism of dispossession and agrarian change, carried out “by means of individual acts of
violence against which legislation, for a hundred and fifty years, fought in vain” (Marx 1976:885; Yelling 1977).

In the wake of massive depopulation due to the Black Death, English Lords facing significant labor shortages used enclosure as a mechanism to transform underpopulated (or unpopulated) common fields into sheep runs and subsequently into farms operating according to the newly emerging standards of improved husbandry. Early improvements did not significantly depend on new technologies (the wheel-plough being a major exception). They mainly entailed wider implementation of existing technologies and the introduction of new techniques, such as more complex crop rotations, new drainage practices, and an increased reliance upon short-term contracts for waged labor (McNally 1993; Wood 2002). An improver was a farmer who cultivated the land for profit. As improved practices spread throughout enclosed lands, disparities between income generated on fixed rents paid by customary tenants and economic rents, determined by the market, became increasingly apparent. Tenant farmers and manorial lords alike were tempted by the possibility of increased yields that could be produced through scientific management, as opposed to the local standards of customary practice.

The nature of these temptations is the subject of some debate. While improvement was clearly articulated within the discourses of scientific rationality, this alone cannot explain improvers’ limitless drive to accumulate wealth through the rational management of production. Ellen Wood argues that the shift towards profit-maximizing agriculture was less a choice made by rationally acquisitive actors responding to market opportunities, than an imperative imposed by market forces. The high costs of enclosure—as a process—as well as the high rents that would follow an award, made profit maximization a requirement if one was to maintain access to land. While a portion of the peasantry actually benefited from and advocated for enclosure, the vast majority lost their land and their livelihoods through the process. This could occur either through outright and immediate dispossession—which landless commoners such as cottagers often faced—or through a slower and more prolonged process in which landlords put economically unviable plots of enclosed land in the hands of less affluent tenants, and then patiently waited for them to default on loans, or to pre-empt their inevitable failure with a sale.

By insisting on this strict distinction between opportunities and imperatives, Wood makes it difficult to assess the less direct cultural and social forces at play. Freedom, as an ideal, may have been worth pursuing, even if it came by way of a market that presented new impositions and constraints. Perhaps it is better to understand market opportunities and imperatives as simultaneous moments, one coercive and the other liberating, complicating the rise of capitalism. Enclosure really did provide a route out of feudal domination, but it also really did lead to the immiseration and dispossession of the vast majority of rural families. By the nineteenth century, a tiny minority of wealthy owners controlled an overwhelming majority of arable land, which they dedicated to improved husbandry, or (as was increasingly the case by the eighteenth century) reserved as private hunting grounds and pastoral idylls. In either case, the removal of commoners was the *sine qua non* of the improved landscape.
Wood, Brenner and the Production of Nature

Along with Robert Brenner, Wood has forcefully criticized historians and Marxists alike for ascribing to the “commercialization thesis”, which explains the impetus behind enclosure and therefore the transition to agrarian capitalism as the unfettering of a profit-maximizing rationality that pre-exists capital as a mode of production (Brenner 1977, 1995; Wood 1995, 2002). The parallels with Neil Smith’s critique of the domination of nature should be apparent. Just as Smith critiques this work for presuming first nature to be a given condition as opposed to a historic production, Wood and Brenner argue that the commercialization thesis presumes rational capitalist actors as a given condition, and not a historic production.

Adam Smith provides the classic example of this commercialisation narrative, with mankind’s natural propensity to truck, barter and exchange progressively developed through successive stages of human civilization. This is the “Robinsonade” myth that Marx explicitly challenges in Capital, eventually offering his alternative account of primitive accumulation in the final section of the text. In place of the divine frugality and rational management of Crusoe, Marx presents the far less savory history of agrarian dispossession and colonial conquest. This is a departure from Marx’s earlier writings about the transition to capitalism, most notably in the German Ideology and the Communist Manifesto, where his conception of historical change still closely resembles Adam Smith’s progression through successive stages of general human social development (Brenner 1977; Comninel 1987; Marx 1970; Wood 1995).

Here we arrive at the twist: whereas Wood and Brenner largely dismiss the historical narrative presented in Marx’s earlier works, Neil Smith relies on it almost exclusively to explain the rise of capitalism’s production of nature. Smith recounts an abstract progression from production in general through a number of increasingly complex stages of human social development (sexual division of labor, manual/mental division of labor, cooperation, etc) until finally culminating with the separation of town and country. This last division creates irreconcilable tensions that inevitably result in bourgeois revolution. As Smith writes, this whole process represents the unfolding of “an abstract potential in the origins and fundamental character of human labor” (Marx 1970, quoted in Smith 2010:79).

This abstract potential is an historic production of nature. It is not a “fundamental character” of either human labor or the land labored upon. Just as there were no capitalists waiting, for millennia, for their acquisitive inner nature to be unfettered by a bourgeois revolution, there was no first nature waiting to have its potential unfettered by capital. The process of enclosure produces the potential that it then seeks to rationally control.

Marx critiqued political economy for presuming the historic triumph of homo economicus—capitalist rationality presumed to be human nature. I intend to compliment this critique by showing how the land upon which homo economicus operates is also a social production, as opposed to an ontological given. Those “free gifts of nature” that O’Connor identifies as capital’s conditions of production, are what I am calling terra economica, the historic production of a whole earth available to be worked upon and made profitable by rational economic actors (or those masquerading as such).
The Production of *Terra Economica*

Beginning in 1489, the Tudor and then Stuart monarchies tried to regulate enclosure, fearful of its threat to public order. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 put these efforts to an end, and over the course of the following century, the ruling classes consolidated the fragmentary and uneven process of enclosure into national policy. In 1793, Parliament created a Board of Agriculture to serve as the unified mouthpiece for land reform domestically and abroad. If improvement abroad required the subjugation of unwilling natives in the colonies, improvement at home required enclosure, and the subjugation of unwilling commoners. Each entailed the domination of a perceived economic and political foe. The Board’s first director, John Sinclair, writes:

> We have begun another campaign against the foreign enemies of the country ... why should we not attempt a campaign against our great domestic foe; I mean the hitherto unconquered sterility of so large a proportion of the surface of the kingdom? ... Let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt, or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common; let us conquer Hounslow Heath, let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement (1837:111).

The remaining commons peppering the British countryside were an affront to ascendant understandings of capitalist value production. Their “unconquered sterility” was measured in relation to financial, as opposed to subsistence needs. Open fields and common wastes were recast as wasted commons, and it was the Nation’s responsibility to subdue these lands, along with the people living upon them, in order to make them profitable. This shift, from common wastes to wasted commons, is central to the production of *terra economica*.

To make sense of this transformation, we must first understand the particular non-capitalist social relations out of which enclosure emerged, and against which it was decisively aimed.

**Common Right**

The classic story of a common field community begins with a village nucleus and its arable land, surrounded by vast meadows and waste lands serving as pasture. In the “Champion” system of common field agriculture, which prevailed through much but not all of Britain, the arable land was divided into three open fields, each further divided into individual strips, farmed by individual tenants. These tenants could hold the rights to any number of strips, most likely divided relatively evenly between the three fields, but scattered throughout them. As property, their holdings were enmeshed in a web of common right and custom that prescribed within relatively narrow bounds how land could be used—what could be planted, when, where, and how (Baker and Butlin 1973; Gray 1959; Neeson 1993). More than simply redistributing property, enclosures were primarily concerned with eliminating these customary land use regulations, facilitating a qualitative transformation in the way one was able to access land as property. Enclosure enabled landowners to have a “real interest” in the land, or to hold it as “real estate”, and as such to do with it as they will. Accordingly, only enclosed lands could be cultivated according to the
rational and scientific standards of improved husbandry, as opposed to the local standards of customary practice (Comninel 2000).

As enclosures came into effect, fences and hedges besieged the landscape. Not only were these markers a forceful symbol of possession, but they also served a practical purpose, managing the flows of living bodies, animals and humans alike (Blomley 2007; Olwig 2002; Seed 1995). Such improvements in the technology of territorial control were a direct challenge to the collective memory-making practices, the “testimony of repeated performance”, that grounded customary property claims and established their legitimacy (Bushaway 1983:5). These claims were determined by an overlapping and ever-changing web of customary rights that extended from manorial lords to the lowliest peasants, from byelaws recorded in the manorial court rolls, legitimized by local clergy and enforced by manorial officials to locally accepted custom, established through a collective history that emerged out of regular practice, and which asserted customary rights to have held from “time out of mind” (Bushaway 1983; Neeson 1993; Thompson 1991).

Any one resource might have a number of overlapping claims made upon it, all of which governed who could use it, as well as when and how it could be used. So, for instance, one customary restriction on the gathering of dead branches from the waste was to only allow branches to be collected “by hook or by crook”. This meant that one must use either a weed hook or a sheep crook to pull off branches, hence only allowing field workers and sheep herders to gather branches, and only in relatively inefficient ways (Hartley 1979:32). The very same trees might also afford other rights to local inhabitants, or some portions of them, such as the right to cut the tree or parts of it down, to graze swine on its nuts that have fallen to the ground (which was termed *pannage*), to gather mushrooms growing at its base, or in the case of a manorial lord, the right to tax any of these other uses. In almost all cases, the uses of any common resources were restricted to the local economy; producing for anything other than the local market or direct household consumption was almost always expressly prohibited. Value was, in this context, an inherently local and particular social relation, mediated by common right and custom (Bushaway 1983; Neeson 1993; Thompson 1991).

**Common Wastes**

Many of these customary use rights were exercised in and upon waste lands. Whether the balks between cultivated strips in an arable field, the spaces lining pathways and roads, or entire fields and forests without other designation, the economic centrality of these geographic margins often goes underappreciated. This can in part be attributed to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), which defines waste lands as “Uninhabited (or sparsely inhabited) and uncultivated country; a wild and desolate region, a desert, wilderness” (OED 2010). The OED’s definition conjures images of a vacated wilderness, a frontier beyond the reach of human civilization. And, in the shadow of T S Elliot’s famous poem, which presents the waste land as something of a black hole of modern sociality, it is difficult to imagine alternative conceptions that have not already been flattened into an abandoned, empty, or socially vacuous space of one form or another.
Such definitions can in no way account for the majority of the wastes, which were, in the broadest sense, simply lands not being used directly for cultivation (Everitt 2000; Neeson 1993). Waste lands were often teeming with a diversity of plant and mineral resources, providing important resources to local communities as well as lucrative taxes for manorial lords (Baker and Butlin 1973; Gonner 1966; Thirsk 1964). In this regard, they can best be understood as a productive remainder. A wide range of occupations for cottagers, very literally “cottage industries” relied on the waste’s resources, from charcoal burners and brick makers, to “spindlers, spooners, truggers, [and] cloggers” (Everitt 2000:217).

The names of waste lands were equally diverse. Alan Everitt lists those he found near Kent alone: chart, minnis, warren, hoath, leacon, lees, tye, forstal, scrubs, bushes, roughs, roughetts, frith, shaw, weald, hurst, moor, plain, wold (2000:230).

Commoners seamlessly integrated these wastes into their everyday life. They might provide bark for tanning, bees to collect honey and wax, grasses to cut as hay, pastures for animals, and even small game. Poorer members of a village community heavily relied upon the resources they could glean from waste lands, effectively allowing them to function as a social safety net of sorts (Birtles 1999).

Regardless of one’s economic standing, work on the waste was largely the domain of women and children. They did much of the gathering work, and were largely responsible for the subsequent use of the waste’s products (Humphries 1990; Neeson 1993). Children grew up not only working and foraging, but also playing in the waste. These activities were often inseparable; what Katz has called, in another context, the “workful play and playful work” of child labor in a self-provisioning economy (Katz 2004). And so, while these uncultivated remnants were not, categorically speaking, unused lands, that is how they came to be seen through liberalism’s narrow lens, which still to this day refuses to see the activities of women, children, or the poor as productive labor. Consider the OED’s second definition of waste in this light, “A piece of land not cultivated or used for any purpose, and producing little or no herbage or wood ... a piece of such land not in any man’s occupation, but lying in common” (OED 2010).

**Wasted Commons**

In 1794, one of John Sinclair’s first actions as Director of the Board of Agriculture was to commission a series of countywide reports, intended to assess the agricultural prospects of the nation, county by county, and the possibilities for further enclosure and improvement. Sinclair selected fellow proponents of improvement, landowners with large holdings in each of Britain’s counties, to provide these reports. John Barrell characterizes the authors of Sinclair’s county reports as members of the “farming interest”. This emerging rural professional class was composed of a few thousand practical farmers, surveyors, land agents, and agriculturalists that were firmly committed to enclosure and improved husbandry—many of them by necessity. As Barrell writes:

The determination of large landowners who had invested in enclosure—an enormously costly process—to see a quick return on the capital thus invested, helped also to create
a new order of tenant-farmers, literate, experimental, and business-men enough to survive the rack-renting system and establish themselves in rural society as men of some consequence (Barrell 1972:71).

In his report to the Board of Agriculture on Wiltshire, Thomas Davis provides a direct definition of waste lands, two actually, that are worth repeating. He first distinguishes the un-improvable Downs from other local waste lands, such as common marshes and meadows, which could be and to the greatest extent already had been enclosed and improved.

In the common acceptation of the words “waste land”, namely “land in a state of nature, capable of cultivation, but of very little value in its present condition”, the Wiltshire Downs are undoubtedly not “waste land” (Davis 1811:103).

Davis has accounted for uncultivated lands, such as common wastes, but what about the open fields, which commoners had already proved to be very much “capable of cultivation”? He continues,

“But in another sense of the words ‘waste land’, viz. land already cultivated, but in a defective manner, ‘common-fields may be called the worst of all the wastes’” (103–104).

With these two definitions of waste, Davis has collapsed waste lands and open fields into a single category of wasted lands. In fact, by the turn of the nineteenth century, distinctions between forest lands, waste lands, meadows, common fields, fens, etc—all of the myriad commons and wastes, were more or less discarded, and collapsed into a general category of unused or inefficiently used lands, interchangeably called waste or commons. In the appendix to his 1808 General Report on Enclosures, Arthur Young presents a table listing all of the remaining wastelands of the British Isles. The list of wastes includes entries such as “commons and waste lands”, “forests and commons”, “wastes and commons”, “wastes and forests”, “wastes, moors, & marshes”, “commons and fens”, “wastes and hills”, and simply “unimproved lands”. This last designation is ultimately what binds all of these various types of land together—they are all unimproved, and as such, designated as waste (1808:139–141).

Yet, as Davis makes clear, it is not that these waste lands are simply unimproved. If that were the case then the aforementioned Downs would have to be included. Waste lands must also hold within them the potential to be improved. Sinclair provides another example in his first report as President of the Board of Agriculture (1796). He bemoans the “wild barren commons over-run with heath, furze, fern, or brush-wood” (14). Yet, he then goes on to extol these same barren wastes for their fantastic potential, as a “source of infinite wealth and benefit to this country” (30). Open fields and waste lands were not barren; they were simply barren of improvement. What is telling in Sinclair’s remark, as we will see below, is that these wastes are a potential source of wealth “to this country” and not “to the commoners” who were already employed upon them. While enclosure, in converting commoners into wage laborers, may have been to the advantage of the nation, this was a nation “to which, of course, the people who have been ‘converted’ do not belong” (Marx 1976:888).
Laying Waste

As a nation, Britain was increasingly being defined, in agricultural terms at least, by the farming interest. Over the last half of the eighteenth century and first quarter of the nineteenth, the farming interest was responsible for a proliferation of local agricultural societies as well as a relatively profuse output of farming journals. They were also responsible, in more practical terms, for the actual work of enclosing land. Land surveys were central to this process, determining both the value and legitimacy of common right claims to the land, as well as the potential market value of the lands, once enclosed.

The work of William Petty, regarded by Marx as the father of political economy, offers a much earlier and influential example. In 1654, after Cromwell’s successful invasion of Ireland, Petty was tasked with surveying the newly conquered territory, so as to divide it into market-valued parcels that could be used to repay the campaign’s financiers. As with enclosed land at home, Petty anticipated that newly acquired Irish land would be used according to the rational standards of improved husbandry. Hence, he could not rely upon historic yield data, as these yields were a result of the Irish peasantry’s unimproved practices. Instead, he needed a measure of fertility and of potential yields, which would only be realized once the land was improved. Petty deployed scientific measures such as the number of seeds yielded by a single stalk of grain, or the weight of hay produced per unit of land, in an effort to create a quantifiable measure of the island’s potential value (McNally 1990).

By contrast, surveyors’ estimates of common right values were always low. They often failed to account for many of the less formally recorded rights, many of which were rights to use the wastes (Birtles 1999; Thompson 1991). Omissions were justified by claiming that the common waste could barely support any healthy animal—let alone a healthy family—due to overgrazing and poor quality of the land (Humphries 1990). Needless to say, those commoners who stood to lose their means of subsistence did not always agree with the surveyors’ assessments. Commoners pitted their understanding of bountiful common wastes against the improvers’ allegations that common lands were being left to waste. Thomas Davis may have considered the open fields to be “the worst of all the wastes”, but John Clare, the peasant-poet from Northamptonshire, offers this rebuttal:

Ah cruel foes with plenty blest
So ankering after more
To lay the greens and pasture waste
Which proffited before
Poor greedy souls—what would they have
Beyond their plenty given?
Will riches keep ‘em from the grave?
Or buy them rest in heaven? (Clare 1986 [1818]:44).

Both in Clare’s poem and Davis’ county report, a second conception of waste is being introduced: the process of laying waste, or the act of wastage. In the simplest sense, wastage was the exhaustion of another person’s use-right. It could just as easily result from material devastation, political contestation or legal restructuring (Amt 1991; Kerridge 1969; Middle English Dictionary 2010;
A village devastated by war was laid to waste, as was a dyke improperly maintained. In legal terms, a tree felled or stone quarried in defiance of common right was laid to waste, even if that tree was subsequently put to profitable use (Bannister 1928). In the common right economy, wastage was primarily understood relative to specific use rights, and not as a general condition.

Enclosure pivoted on the transformation of wastage, from a political (and particular) to an economic (and general) offense. If wastage was the act of exhausting or diminishing another’s common right claim to a resource, then advocates for enclosure challenged that the entire edifice of common right was itself a wastage of the improvers’ economic right—presented as a natural right—to realize the maximum productive potential of all things, at all times, and in all ways. Wastage may have entailed the exhaustion of property, but enclosure fundamentally transformed what property was in the first place. What was formerly defined relative to a web of local use-use rights, specific to individual manors and communities struggling amongst and against one another to define these rights, came to be defined as discrete units of private property, relative only to the market and its abstract conception of value.

Enclosure brought land and labor under the sway of what Postone (1993) calls abstract domination, which is to say, domination by way of an abstract market principle, as opposed to direct coercion or violence (though both, of course, persist). The enforcement of rights to land and labor shifted from the direct political violence of feudal lords extracting a surplus from their peasants, to the less direct violence of wage labor relations, where surplus extraction could hide beneath the veneer of market equality. Waste was transformed accordingly, from an abrogation of political rights to an abrogation of abstract value, which presumed, as given, the surplus product of wage labor. Waste became a dual injunction against not working for a wage in the case of people, and not being worked upon by wage-laborers—not being improved—in the case of land.

The first of these injunctions entails the “bloody” production of a laboring population available to the wage labor market. The murder of women accused as witches and of people accused to be thieves, the disciplining of workers who were intolerably inefficient and of the landless who refused to transform themselves into workers, all contributed to this production and management of wasted lives (Federici 2004; Mies 1986; Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Werlhof 1988; Thompson 1991). But the story does not end here. This “bloody” transformation was inseparable from the “dirty” production of wasted land. By collapsing waste lands and wastage into a single designation of land not-yet improved, terra economica was born. Waste lands could no longer be understood as a productive remainder. They were now, along with all not-yet-improved lands, part of the universal field of wasted potential, a whole earth available to be worked upon by wage laborers, or otherwise wasted.

**The Community of Money**

While on the one hand enclosure entails the closing off of land, by turning it into private property, there is another, equally important sense in which enclosure pries open land and labor, making them available to the community of money. In the
Grundrisse, Marx writes, “Where money is not itself the community, it must dissolve the community . . . Money thereby directly and simultaneously becomes the real community since it is the general substance of survival for all, and at the same time the social product of all” (1973:224, 225–226). This real community needs a real terrain, a produced nature upon which naturally competitive, naturally acquisitive bearers of wealth (homo economicus) can employ wage labor to increase their fortunes. The community of money makes its home accordingly, in and upon terra economica.

Turning briefly to Locke’s theory of property, we can see how the production of this always available terrain entailed the erasure of any pre-existing communities that might otherwise provide obstruction. Locke imagined that prior to its conquest, the vast American continent was mired in a pre-civilized state of nature. The missing ingredient there, as in all pre-civilized spaces, was money (Caffentzis 1989). By serving as a store of value, money enabled accumulation beyond immediate use. Only in a monetized world could productivity be abstracted away from the exigencies of local needs and instead oriented towards the accumulation of endless amounts of value.

Locke thought that the reason such vast tracts of the world still lay in waste was because their inhabitants had not “joined with the rest of mankind, in the consent of the use of their common money” (ch 5, section 45). In actual fact, the production of transportation infrastructure figured central to the monetizing of land, as did state-controlled land markets that could insure “appropriate” access to newly exploitable land—as Wakefield understood a few centuries later, if land was too cheap, wage labor could not be retained, too expensive and capital would not be attracted (Marx 1976).

What Locke never directly acknowledges is that the New Worlds’ inhabitants, while not consenting to the monetization of their land, may very well have consented to other forms of communality, out of which other forms of social wealth were produced (Cronon 1983:79). Locke outright denies the need to consent to such non-monetized, non-improved polities. He writes:

We see in commons, which remain so by compact, that it is the taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state nature leaves it in, which begins the property; without which the common is of no use. And the taking of this or that part, does not depend on the express consent of all the commoners. Thus the grass my horse has bit; the turfs my servant has cut; and the ore I have digged in any place, where I have a right to them in common with others, become my property, without the assignation or consent of any body. The labour that was mine, removing them out of that common state they were in, hath fixed my property in them (ch 5, section 28, my emphasis).

In this oft quoted passage, attention is usually placed upon the conflation between the labor of a servant and that of a master, each equally conferring a legitimate claim of ownership to the master (Gidwani 2008). Yet equally important is the condition of possibility being asserted, that value can be removed from the commons without the consent of the commoners. Locke presents as a natural god-given condition that which was only possible in Britain after an act of enclosure dismantled the local common right economy. Hence, his theory of property can be read as an outright
affront to the common field economies of Britain, where uses were always bound by rights, and as such constrained by the consent of commoners (Wood 1984).

Enclosure was the mechanism whereby landowners could legally and practically not-see the value of common right and commoning, so that what remained, land stripped of these non-capitalist social relations, could be seen as potential capital. Cronon’s account of the colonization of New England details these occlusions masterfully. None of the Native Americans’ conscious activity, from the management of hunting grounds and game-stocks to the management of crops and pests—all of which played a major role in the “natural” abundance that the colonists encountered—was apparent to Europeans who merely saw an unimproved landscape, going to waste. Cronon writes, “If English visitors to New England thought it a paradox that Indians seemed to live like paupers in a landscape of great natural wealth, then the problem lay with English eyesight rather than with any real Indian poverty” (1983:54–55).

Yet, as Cronon makes clear, this problematic way of seeing was not reserved for the English alone. Colonists did not actively change the landscape while Indians stood by and passively watched. In fact, as he shows, the Indians’ social property relations were themselves transformed—becoming increasingly monetized—and those who survived the colonial encounter actively participated in the further transformation of their land, often at their own gain. It is certainly the case that many individuals, from laborers and small holders to large property owners, benefited in specific ways from specific acts of enclosure. Yet insofar as enclosure is considered as an instance of primitive accumulation, it is important not only to consider the fate of specific individuals, but also to consider how and in what ways any individual—whoever they may be—is able to benefit from the land (and labor) that they hold as property. If enclosure is understood as a transformation of social property relations, as opposed to being reduced to a sometimes violent act of redistribution, it must therefore manifest as both a transformation of the relationships between individuals, and a transformation of individuals themselves. Or as Marx explains, the conditions of production can change form, even while remaining in the same hands (Marx 1973:503).

Miserable Profits
While the material losses and gains of enclosure, both old and new, can be registered in terms of who is ultimately able to possess the commons, discourses of enclosure are, as with development, overrun with accusations of inefficiency, impropriety, immorality, unprofitability, or, in the most general terms, a social, political and economic invective against waste. Vinay Gidwani demonstrates this in his Capital, Interrupted, which pieces together a history of capital’s uneven, and incomplete development in Gujarat, India. Though Gidwani’s narrative begins in the mid-nineteenth century, it resonates directly with this earlier history of enclosure in Britain. When advocates of enclosure recognized the value that the commons had to the commoners, they considered this to be an inferior form of value, in both an economic and moral sense. As such, the discourse of enclosure often took on something of a missionary zeal. Enclosure would save the reluctant
commoners from their irrational attachment to what Sinclair referred to as the commoners’ “scanty means of subsistence” or their “miserable profits derived” from the waste (1796:11, 12). Commoners were presented as a vestige of some ancient past, “the people, who, generation after generation, pass their lives in the enjoyment of their privileges, and draw from (sic) them the whole of their miserable existence” (Young 1808, quoting Sir Goerge O. Paul). In this regard, enclosure was a transformation from one moral conception of value to another, from a miserable existence based on the enjoyment of privileges to an improved existence working for wages.

In Britain, the self-sufficiency and independence of English peasants lay at the very heart of the nation’s self-conception (Humphries 1990). Not only was this independence recast as a dependence upon the commons, but further, it was held that the land itself was responsible for breeding laziness and inefficiency. The commons came to be seen as a deterrent to individual enterprise. Commoners either ran themselves ragged working in a less efficient manner than their improved competitors, or they simply wasted too much time at market or in other trivial pursuits. Mavor writes, “Wherever there are large wastes, and particularly near forests, the lazy industry and beggarly independence of the lower orders of people, who enjoy commons, is a source of misery to themselves, and of loss to the community” (1809:328–329). The very existence of wasted commons threatened the entire landscape of value production, by enabling peasants to continue self-provisioning and therefore to avoid wage dependence (Perelman 2000). As Young explains, “It is not an easy undertaking, to endeavor to ascertain the value of an object which in some cases has no value at all, and in others, must be arranged as minus, in inquiries relating to profit” (1808:3). As far as Young was concerned, these wasted lands were not simply less valuable, but in fact held a negative value.

This terrain of potential profitability, *terra economica*, was not simply a dead nature, waiting patiently to be dominated or produced by man. It was an actively malfeasant nature, in need of discipline; a nature that cannot not be improved. Understood in this vein, enclosure is more than a particular historic technique of land reform in feudal England, and more than a collection of individual acts of theft or an uneven distribution of land and resources. It is, pace Gidwani, liberalism’s problematic, a general way of seeing the world, that is itself out of sight, “what liberalism can no longer think without” (2008:11). Fences and hedges may have provided a new visible demarcation of absolute space, but there was an invisible transformation as well, a transformation of the intrinsic nature of these spaces, materially and conceptually, as waste available to become capital. The dynamism of this produced nature cannot be reduced to commodification or the coercive laws of competition. *Terra economica* is a particular (and persistent) logic of expropriation, produced in and as part of the land itself, what Gidwani has called an “incitement to a regime of value” (2008:xxi). With the production of *terra economica*, the imperative to become capital appears to no longer be imposed from without, but instead to emerge from within, as the realization of what Neil Smith identified as an “abstract potential in the origins and fundamental character” of the land itself.
Primitive Accumulation and the Production of Nature

There is no denying that enclosure is, as Smith writes, a “remarkable historical creation of absolute space” (2010:116). By exploring the production of *terra economica*, my aim has been to push Smith’s “lower geographical boundary” (2010:186) one step further, beyond the parcellization of private property, to the nature of this land as capital’s conditions, as opposed to means, of production.

This is not meant to supplant Smith’s account of the production of nature, but to complement it. In *Uneven Development*, he writes, “In search of profit, capital stalks the whole earth. It attaches a price tag to everything it sees and from then on it is this price tag which determines the fate of nature” (2010:78). Here I offer two caveats. First, this whole earth is in fact *terra economica*, a produced nature that is not-yet, but potentially commodified. Second, the “fate of nature” is determined both by what capital does and does not see. Potential commodities may eventually be seen and given a price, but there is much that falls outside of this field of vision, whose fate is determined by *not* being priced. In other words, capital’s constitutive outside is also a produced nature. Feminist-Marxists have gone the furthest in exploring this dimension of Marx’s analysis (Costa and James 1972; Federici 2004; Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Werlhof 1988). Their key insight points to the ways in which the capitalist wage relation has hidden within it an unwaged relation, where the work of social reproduction is devalued and yet essential nonetheless, serving, along with nature, as a “free gift” to capital (Roberts 2008). This realm of unwaged work, along with a non-human world conceived of as a store of available natural resources, are capital’s conditions of possibility; a realm of material and social wealth that is both necessary, and necessarily de-valued.

For McCarthy, whose work runs parallel to this feminist critique, these sorts of “free gifts” are best understood as fictitious commodities. This fiction, as explained by Polanyi, rests on the fact that such conditions of production are necessary for capital, and yet impossible to be produced as commodities, making them, for the time being, “impossible subjects of enclosure” (McCarthy 2004:337). And yet it is precisely these impossible subjects that McCarthy, Katz and so many others have identified as the natures being targeted by new enclosures. As I have attempted to show, there is nothing new about this process, insofar as we understand it as the production of *terra economica*, or the making available to capital of ever more seemingly impossible subjects of enclosure. In Katz’s account, this impossible subject is the genetic information potentially gleaned from life forms in a bio-preserve or genome. For McCarthy it is the state revenue that is expected to insure the potential profitability of multinational companies operating in Latin America. In each case, one further dimension of social nature is being produced as *terra economica*, its autonomous existence erased so as to accommodate the community of money’s incessant drive to find ever more places to call home.

New examples of this ongoing process continue to emerge. For instance, speaking in support of a market in carbon futures to the Council on Foreign Affairs, Richard Sandor, founder of the Chicago Climate Exchange says, “[Y]ou can’t live in this planet without air. So why shouldn’t these public goods be valued at enormous
prices? They deliver life, and they have to be rationed” (Henwood 2010:3). He wants to sell us air? Impossible subject? Not if we don’t fight to keep it that way. The struggle against modern day enclosures cannot wait until privatization is already underway. It begins even earlier, in these subtle assertions that more and more of the world, intensively, extensively, human, non-human, can and should be seen as terra economica, available to become capital—or otherwise wasted.

One final thought: without romanticizing any presumed ecological or social sustainability of the English common right economy, or any other forms of non-capitalist production for that matter, it does remain important to recognize just how dramatically different the work, life and nature of these worlds, past and present, are from the “community of money” into which they are dissolved. Not only do these differences alert us to the violent erasures that are always supplementing the wage relation, but also to the potential, lurking in all of capital’s wastes—past, present and future—for us to become something else, something decidedly not-capital. The question then becomes: how else can nature be produced? And by whom?

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Endnotes
1 There is a parallel story of nature’s preservation, including the production and worshipping of wilderness, which also emerges during this long history (cf Cronon 1996; Olwig 2002). Whereas improvement entailed opening the land up to its productive appropriation as capital, preservation entailed a closing off of land from capital, an active attempt to keep it out of productive circulation. Both required enclosure, and both entailed a complete erasure of any prior use rights to the land.

2 While antiquity, or time out of mind, was an accepted ground for common right, this was an ever-changing antiquity, which adapted to the times along with the minds out of which it emerged (cf Hobbsbawm and Ranger 1983; Olwig 2001).

3 Care must be taken not to overstate the “commonality” of these inherently local economies; no one example or set of examples could account for the diversity of field systems that proliferated throughout England (Comminel 2000).

4 Truggers made trugs, a flat, boat-shaped basket. Spindlers made chair spindles, spooners made wooden spoons, and cloggers made wooden shoes.

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