

# LESSONS FROM PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

An impressionist landscape painting featuring a field of pink and purple flowers in the foreground, a line of trees in the middle ground, and a hazy, cloudy sky. The style is characterized by visible brushstrokes and a vibrant, somewhat muted color palette.

## OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

- §1. A Discourse on Method
- §2. Introducing Primitive Accumulation
- §3. Debating Primitive Accumulation
- §4. Loose ends and locating the question



# TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Tiohtià:ke (Montreal) has and continues to be a life force for many Indigenous peoples, including those from the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations. McGill University is on Kanien'kehá:ka lands. For the past two-hundred years (particularly) on Turtle Island, settler institutions, policies, and practices of dispossession and elimination have enacted and continue to reproduce the structure of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is not an 'always already' condition, but rather one that had a beginning and will have an end.

The "Mohawk Warrior Flag," (designed by Kahnawa:keronon Karoniaktajeh Louis Hall in 1974), has become an emblem of pan-Indigenous solidarity since the Red Power period.





# §1. A DISCOURSE ON METHOD

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

— WALTER BENJAMIN, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” §V.

[T]o confront the hegemonic structure by denouncing the gap or contradiction between its official values and its actual practice—with greater or lesser success—is *the most effective way of enforcing its universality*.

— ÉTIENNE BALIBAR, “Ambiguous Universality,” 162 (emphasis added).

Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*:  
how Benjamin pictured the  
“angel of history.”





## §2. INTRODUCING “SO-CALLED PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION”

- Borrowing from Adam Smith: original or previous accumulation as the original theological sin
- A preliminary definition: the forcible separation of the immediate producers from the social means of production and subsistence, thereby generating the system of capital and wage-labour.
- What does primitive accumulation have to do with colonization or colonialism?
  - Edward Gibbon Wakefield and “The Modern Theory of Colonization”

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562





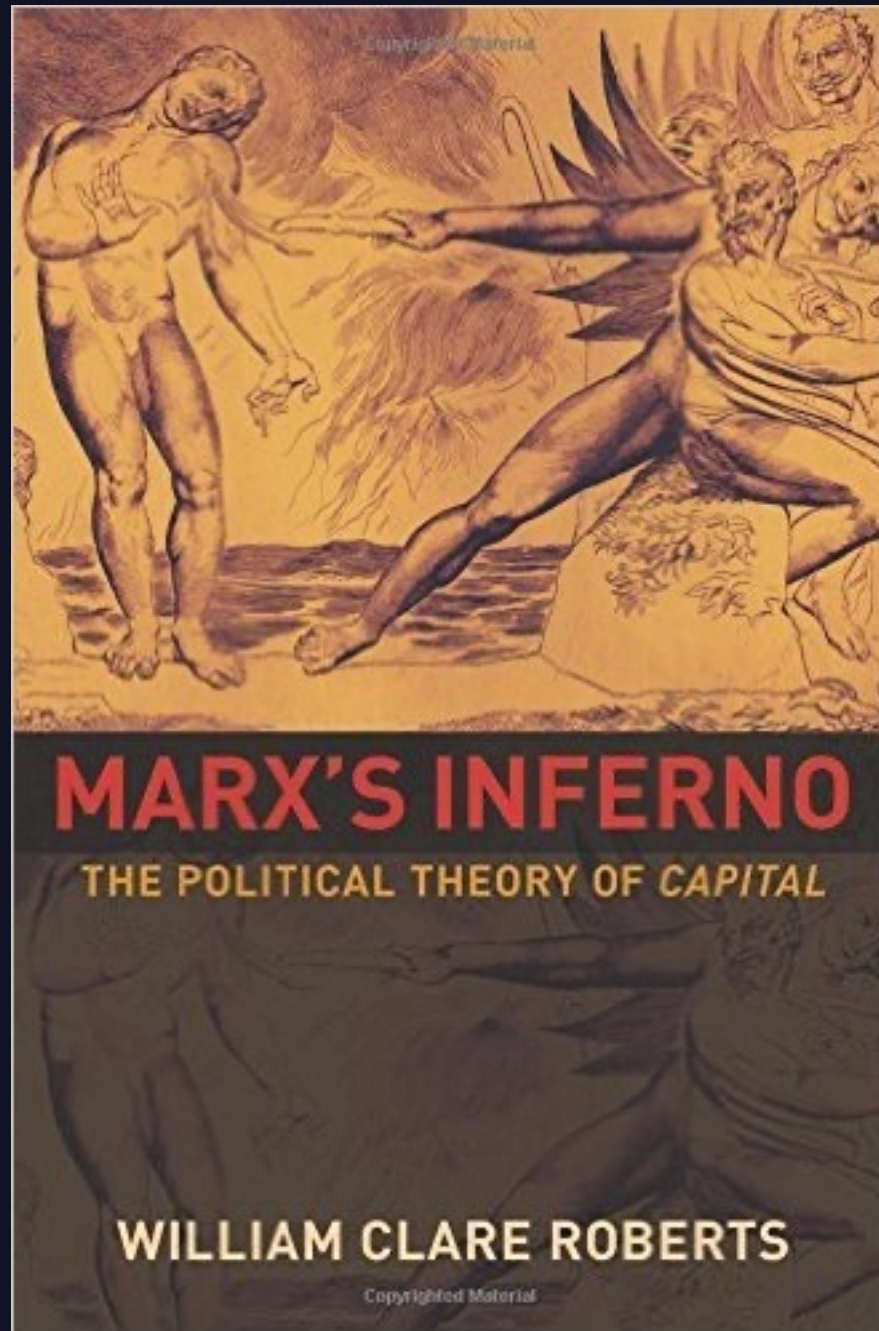
### §3. DEBATING PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION: AN OVERVIEW

- Main Problems with PA:
  - Teleological and developmentalist
  - Consignment of PA to the “pre-history of capital”
  - Can we separate the descriptive and analytic registers of PA?
- Do we reformulate, rename, extend, or disaggregate PA?

Adolph Menzel, *The Iron Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclopes)*







§3A. WILLIAM C. ROBERTS,  
“WHAT WAS PRIMITIVE  
ACCUMULATION?  
RECONSTRUCTING THE ORIGIN  
OF A CRITICAL CONCEPT”

- (i) the wealth/capital distinction;
  - (i) The uniqueness of capitalism.
- (ii) why is the state, in most cases, the agent of PA?
  - (i) Socialist strategy

### §3B. ONUR ULAS INCE, “PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION, NEW ENCLOSURES, AND GLOBAL LAND GRABS: A THEORETICAL INTERVENTION”

- “[F]irst in Europe, then elsewhere” (Ince 109): what are the consequences of adhering to Marx’s model based off the English Enclosures and the Scottish Highland Clearances?
- The horizon of Luxemburg and Marx
- Early-modern colonial empire as a framework
- In situ displacement and beyond the enclosure of the commons

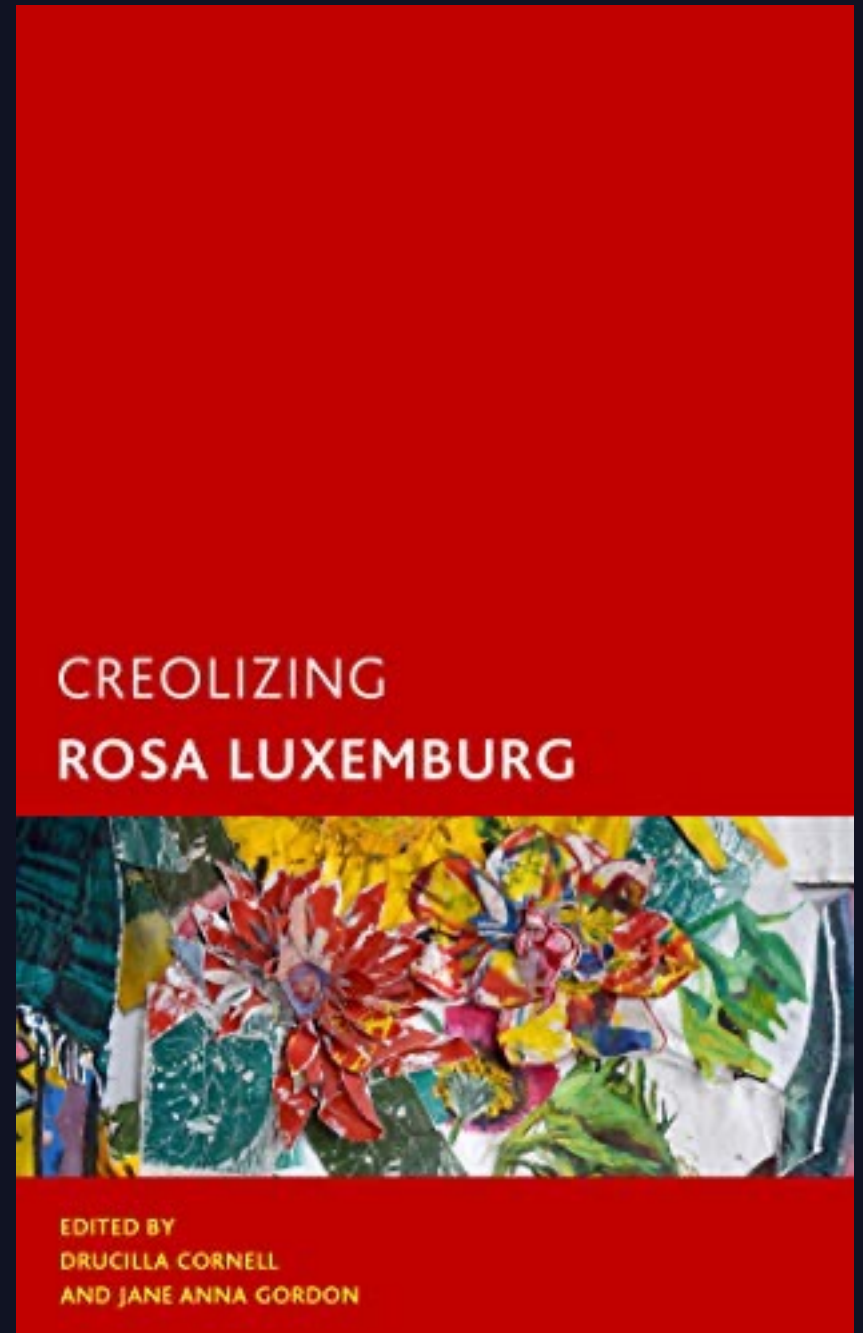
## COLONIAL CAPITALISM AND THE DILEMMAS OF LIBERALISM



ONUR ULAS INCE

### §3C. ROBERT NICHOLS, “DISAGGREGATING PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION”

- Criticism of David Harvey’s renaming of PA as “accumulation by dispossession”
- Method: disaggregating the component elements of primitive accumulation (dispossession, proletarianization, market formation, and the separation of industry and agriculture) in order to conceive of alternative relations between these elements.
- Making dispossession distinct and the special status of land





## §4. LOOSE ENDS, LESSONS, AND LOCATING THE QUESTION



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