

Twitter Thread by William Clare Roberts



William Clare Roberts

@MarxinHell



I wasn't planning to do the year-end collection of writings thread, but I would like to bury all the rather unpleasant notifications coming in from my critique of Stock, so...

I did not *write* much this year, but I was lucky to have a few things published anyway:

1. My essay "What *was* primitive accumulation?" — which has been online since 2017 — got its permanent published form in @EJPTheory vol. 19, issue 4: <https://t.co/KA4riXBU7q>

The article argues against the recent revisionist accounts of primitive accumulation.

The ongoing critical redeployment of primitive accumulation proceeds under two premises. First, it is argued that Marx, erroneously, confined primitive accumulation to the earliest history of capitalism. Second, Marx is supposed to have teleologically justified primitive accumulation as a necessary precondition for socialist development. This article argues that reading Marx's account of primitive accumulation in the context of contemporaneous debates about working class and socialist strategy rebuts both of these criticisms. Marx's definition of primitive accumulation as the 'prehistory of capital' does not deny its contemporaneity, but marks the distinction between the operations of capital and those of other agencies — especially the state — which are necessary, but also external, to capital itself. This same distinction between capital, which accumulates via the exploitation of labour-power, and the state, which becomes dependent upon capitalist accumulation for its own existence, recasts the historical necessity of primitive accumulation. Marx characterizes the modern state as the armed and servile agent of capital, willing to carry out primitive accumulation wherever the conditions of capitalist accumulation are threatened. Hence, the recent reconstructions risk obliterating Marx's key insights into the specificity of a) capital as a form of wealth and b) capital's relationship to the state.

2. My highly critical review of Gareth Stedman Jones's biography of Marx was published in Historical Materialism: <https://t.co/tTh3FUaW1s> An excerpt:

Finally, and most importantly, there is a basic disconnect between Stedman Jones's characterisation of Marx as a reductionist for whom class consciousness is an automatic reflex of industrialisation, and Marx's entire life of political activity, in which he consistently opposed the apolitical and anti-political tendencies within socialist circles and the workers' movement. It was Proudhon and Bakunin who resisted any concession to 'the representative principle'.^[7] It was British Owenites who dismissed any effort to reform the constitution as futile in the face of a monetary system that cheated workers to benefit money-owners. It was artisan communists like Wilhelm Weitling who believed that an immediate moral community among poor workers could destroy all traces of the bourgeois political realm. These were Marx's *opponents*. In the context of nineteenth-century socialist and workers' discourse, Marx incessantly promoted the view that workers should organise themselves by, and for the sake of, intervening in politics at the level of the modern representative state. This basic fact disappears in Stedman Jones's portrait, and its disappearance demonstrates that his effort to restore Marx's political interventions to their original condition has gone badly awry.^[8]

3. My engagement with [@martinhaeggglund's](#) This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom appeared in [@LARReviewofBooks](#), as part of a symposium on Häggglund's book. <https://t.co/ubTmdjBpmr>

In it, I make two major arguments. The first is more Marxological:

What is really distinctive about Marx's political project is not his desire for capacious and equitably distributed free time, or his belief that we should exercise conscious, methodical control over the material production process. These are widely held socialist goals. What is distinctive is that he holds *free association among producers* to be the fundamental precondition for both of these goals. Marx's *free association* evokes the *free city* of republican thought, an association of people, insulated from dominating power, who cooperate in ordering their social and natural world. This is what Marx — following the working-class militants of 1848 — called *the social republic*, or the republic of labor. It is a *social* republic because it extends republican government — “the republican and beneficent system of the association of free and equal producers” — into the heart of society, the factories and workshops.

None of this contradicts anything in Hägglund's reconstruction of Marx. But it is absent, and I worry that its absence betrays an apolitical tendency in Hägglund's democratic socialism. Individual freedom, for Marx, was both the freedom to develop one's powers and capacities in an open-ended way *and* the freedom from domination that is the prerequisite for free development. Association free from domination is the political basis of socialism on Marx's account.

The second is more independent of Marx, and applies broadly, I think, to attempts to reconstruct a socialist politics today:

As a consequence of seeing the macroeconomy as an expression of the microeconomy, when Hägglund turns to outlining the case for and principles of democratic socialism, he often writes as if democratic socialism will require both an ethical transformation on the part of everyone and a single collective decision-making process about how to structure the economy. Thus, he tells us that “[t]he first principle of democratic socialism is that we measure our wealth — both individual and collective — in terms of socially available free time.” This seems to imply that everyone in a democratic socialist state must be a democratic socialist, or that every individual measure their wealth in terms of socially available free time. Similarly, the second principle of democratic socialism — collective ownership of the means of production — implies, for Hägglund, that “we cannot have private property in the abstract sense that transforms property into a commodity that can be bought and sold for profit.”

Hägglund rightly criticizes Fredric Jameson for excluding “institutions of freedom” from his vision of socialism. But I would challenge Hägglund to amplify this insight. Institutions of freedom do not simply decide upon common purposes, and are not, therefore, exhausted by “collective projects of self-determination.” Institutions of freedom also include processes by which we negotiate *not to* collectively determine our purposes and come to terms with one another’s projects without trying to fit them into some overarching common pursuit.

Finally, the pandemic was a time for being way too online, so I’m going to append some of my big threaded arguments from this year. Tempted to put them on my CV given how this year has gone:

4. On Adorno and exploitation <https://t.co/cejOfqx4Hs>

Thoughts on Adorno, exploitation, the bounds of agency, and control vs. domination.

I think this bit in Adorno is of a piece with the Frankfurt School’s anti-positivism, even if it is an extreme pole within the school. 1/ <https://t.co/T02vqKLFDd>

— William Clare Roberts (@MarxinHell) [May 19, 2020](#)

5. On Althusser <https://t.co/jSe4OKG3Y6>

Been meaning to get back to this \u2014 here is a thread on the value of Althusser\u2019s reading of Marx: 1/15
<https://t.co/j8vLXMP3hc>

— William Clare Roberts (@MarxinHell) [September 4, 2020](#)

6. On “cancelling” <https://t.co/0ruvrN4kXW>

In defense of cancel culture, a thread:

One of the markers of canceling is that it is crowd action. Being canceled is not being fired, being jailed, being excommunicated. It can lead to these things, but they are separate acts, carried out by agents with official power.
1/10

— William Clare Roberts (@MarxinHell) [July 8, 2020](#)

7. More on cancelling, in response to @tmbejan <https://t.co/T8EJoG2Fuv>

Last week I gave a qualified defense of canceling on democratic grounds. Today I want to say something about this thread by Teresa Bejan.

(Prof. Bejan is going to be a colleague for a while this next year, so, COVID permitting, we\u2019ll be able to discuss this IRL.) 1/20 <https://t.co/IHFbJIVUPa>

— William Clare Roberts (@MarxinHell) [July 17, 2020](#)

8. On @owasow's important paper on “Agenda Seeding” <https://t.co/OUWySSfRxy>

I just had a very fruitful discussion (with some of the McGill poli sci grad students and my colleague @KrzPelc) of @owasow's much discussed APSR paper, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protest Moved Elites, Public Opinion, and Voting."

And I have questions!
1/20

— William Clare Roberts (@MarxinHell) [July 2, 2020](#)

I have a couple things in the pipeline for early next year:

1. An essay on Lissagaray and the Commune, forthcoming in [@NCFS_journal](#)
2. An essay on CLR James in The CLR James Journal
3. A small provocation on Rawls

I wish everyone a better year in 2021. See you on the flipside!