The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development

Volume 7
Issue 1 *The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development* | Article 7

2022

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The Journal of
International Relations, Peace and Development Studies
A publication by Arcadia University and the American Graduate School in Paris

Primitive Accumulation and Multinational Corporations: The Evolution of Dispossession and Exploitation in the Rubber Industry

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Abstract
I examine how the process of primitive accumulation has led to evolving forms of dispossession and exploitation carried out by multinational corporations in the rubber industry. After a brief review of relevant literature, I outline a novel analytical approach to multinational corporations engaged in natural resource extraction, referred to as the Parasitic Extraction Model. I then demonstrate this approach using three case studies. The first, Leopold II's Congo, showcases the barbaric underpinnings of primitive accumulation in the rubber industry in its crudest form. The subsequent section shifts to the interwar period with Fordlândia in the Brazilian Amazon where I analyze the increasingly imperceptible mechanisms of dispossession and exploitation employed by the Ford Motor Company. The final case looks at Firestone in Liberia, which bears a striking resemblance to the case of Fordlândia. Despite an abundance of similarities, the fates of the two MNCs diverged significantly. I compare the two cases using a most similar systems design and explain the divergence between the two outcomes.

Keywords: exploitation, dispossession, primitive accumulation, foreign direct investment, multinational corporation, global capitalism

Introduction
An adaptation from Adam Smith's *previous accumulation* (Smith 1994), *primitive accumulation* is the historical process by which precapitalist modes of production, such as feudalism, transform into the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1976). It is a process that has unfolded over several centuries, as the capitalist system has spread across time and space, dispossessing humans from their ancestral lands and shepherding them to production centers to sweat and toil for the purpose of accumulating more and more capital. Counter to liberal economic narratives, this process of dispossession has not unfolded naturally by the work of a divine "invisible hand" but has been made possible by the purposive efforts of a capital-owning class with control over the means of production. Interwoven ties among networks of political and intellectual power have reinforced this process, ensuring that primitive accumulation continues to enclose the public commons and displace rural peasantry as capital's search for land and labor grows (Perelman 2000).

Though some have argued that primitive accumulation is an accomplished fact, a relic of the past, this process is still an ongoing reality. As the inexorable quest for growth and profit marches on, new regions around the world are continuously integrated into the global capitalist system (Luxemburg 2015). In present day, primitive accumulation has proliferated beyond the borders of sovereign nation-states paving the way for the expansion of capitalism as an interrelated world-system. For Rosa Luxemburg, global capitalism is defined by two accumulation practices, one related to capital and wage labor relations and the other related to colonization and dispossession through ongoing primitive accumulation. David Harvey's theory of *accumulation by dispossession* builds on the work of Luxemburg (Harvey 2004). Harvey argues that since the 1970s, neoliberal policies of the Global

North have resulted in the concentration of wealth by the few while dispossessing the public of land and wealth through privatization, financialization, management and the manipulation of crises, and state redistributions. For my part, I build on Harvey's work by addressing the specific role of the corporation in the dispossession and exploitation of human beings. The corporation is at the heart-center of the global capitalist system as it exists today. Though we may speak of its various permutations in contemporary terms, such as transnational corporations (TNCs) or state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the focal point of this paper is the multinational corporation (MNC), charting its evolution within the extractive rubber industry.

Why multinational corporations? To understand the process of primitive accumulation as it operates today in the global capitalist ecosystem, the corporation is an essential organism and unit of analysis within this story. With the rise of global value chains, shell corporations, tax havens and subsidiaries, the social division of labor has become increasingly complex and opaque in the 21st century. To begin to conceptualize how structural power is exercised within this amorphous global network, it is incumbent to grasp onto the multinational corporation as a central, tangible node. Observing the evolving nature of the multinational corporation across space and time helps facilitate a better understanding of the mechanism through which primitive accumulation has adapted and persisted.

Why the rubber industry? Not only does the rubber industry represent a useful illustration of the evolving nature of multinational corporations, but it is also broadly representative of extractive industries more generally. Given that many of the earliest multinational corporations were oriented around natural resource extraction and the exchange of material commodities, the rubber industry serves as a model example as it pertains to the dispossession and exploitation of human beings and the environment. Moreover, rubber is a commonplace resource that is neither a high-value commodity (e.g., gold, diamonds, oil) nor is it a low-value foodstuff (e.g., rice, wheat, corn). Rubber is relatively abundant, it can be a final product on its own or it can serve as an intermediary good for a finished product, it can be produced both naturally or synthetically, and its extraction takes place across several continents. All of this is to say that rubber is both an essential, yet ordinary natural commodity. Thus, it serves as an average case among the distribution of resource extractive industries.

A Heterodox Approach to Economic Development

As a part of this examination of the rubber industry, I espouse an alternative perspective on multinational corporations that diverges from traditional neoliberal narratives aligned with Weber's Modernization Theory, in which societies progress from pre-modern to modern (Weber 1949). The influence of Modernization Theory is also evident in works such as W. W. Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth*. According to his model, countries follow a linear economic trajectory, beginning as traditional societies, then climbing successive rungs before eventually reaching the stage of maturity and high mass-consumption (Rostow 1960). In essence, this model represents a one-size-fits-all view of economic development, in which infant states of the Global South eventually grow up to become mature, industrialized economies embodied by the Global North. Though this theory was initially conceived as an abstract model, it has gained an agency of its own, transposed into concrete reality through the vehicle of various policy prescriptions advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank collectively coined as "the Washington Consensus." Nearing the turn of the century, Bretton Woods institutions maintained that states simply needed to imitate a recipe of policy reforms to make progress toward more advanced stages of economic development. Such policy reforms included fiscal discipline, reorientation of public expenditures, tax reform, financial liberalization, unified and competitive exchange rates, trade liberalization, openness to foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation, and the securing of property rights (Williams 1990).

It bears mentioning that these policy prescriptions were not mere suggestions, virtuously extolled and universally embraced. On the contrary, they were imposed upon vulnerable states on the brink of economic crisis, who may not have consented to these reforms in other circumstances. In order to receive bailout loans, states were forced to accept the conditionality clause. This arrangement dictated that states would receive bailout loan packages on the condition that they adopt the specific structural reforms designed by the IMF and World Bank (Rochat 2021). In other words, states had the choice between economic ruin or a lifeboat that came at the expense of determining their own economic policy. With the latter option serving as the only viable solution, states were forced to prioritize short-term needs over the long-term consequences of relinquishing economic sovereignty.

Derived from similar neoliberal ideology as the Washington Consensus, multinational corporations are commonly portrayed as vessels of development that help promote the modernization of underdeveloped economies through an injection of foreign direct investment (FDI). Observed through this benevolent lens, MNCs are depicted as job creators and technology providers who breathe economic vitality into otherwise stagnant environments. MNCs are commonly lauded for their perceived role in generating positive externalities. One of these spillover effects takes the form of infrastructure, with MNCs claiming responsibility for their direct or indirect role in stimulating the construction of roads, schools, hospitals, shipping ports, airports, train networks, electrical grids, sewage systems, and fiber-optic cables, among other physical installations. Additionally, spillover benefits include knowledge transfers and spending stimulus to the host state's economy through an influx of consumption by expats and increased consumption by local wage laborers. Finally, MNCs can serve as a direct source of revenue for the government to tax.

Diverging from this neoliberal view, I reject the notion that underdeveloped states today are simply at a less advanced stage of economic evolution. To accept this view is to embrace a world that is purely economic where political power bears no import. Heterodox in terms of positionality, this paper draws from the intellectual lineage of Dependency Theory and World Systems Theory. Viewed through these related analytical prisms, the world economy is conceived as an interconnected ecosystem in which resources flow from the poor and underdeveloped "periphery" to the wealthy, industrialized "core" (Wallerstein 1976). The peripheral states of the Global South are thus locked into relatively weak positions in the world market economy, as has been demonstrated by the terms of trade, that have deteriorated over time vis-à-vis the Global North's core (Frank 1966).

Though traditionally these core-periphery relations have been interpreted through the nation-state framework, core-periphery dynamics can also be operating within states and not just between them. This is indicative of a globalizing trend of consolidation of wealth in concentrated clusters within the Global South. A process that has been referred to as the "first worldization" of the third world. Concurrently, there has been a growing trend of impoverishment in concentrated spaces within the Global North, where wealth has fled from areas where it was formerly held in relative abundance. This has likewise been referred to as the "third worldization" of the first world (Burbach and Robinson 1999). For the scope of this paper, I focus exclusively on MNCs originating from the Global North engaged in extractive activities in the Global South. However, for future research, this dynamic is worth re-examining with additional nuance. As China's Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates, the ongoing process of primitive accumulation is not solely an imposition of the Global North on the Global South.

With this framework providing the analytical scaffolding, I take a critical approach to examining multinational corporations. In particular, those originating from the Global North who operate in extractive industries in the Global South. Eschewing mainstream approaches, this paper conceptualizes extractive MNCs not as benevolent vessels of economic development, but as parasitic exploitators. Hence, I refer to this conceptual approach as the Parasitic Extraction Model. This begins first and foremost with the ecologically harmful process of extracting resources from the earth to facilitate the accumulation of wealth. Typically, the majority of this wealth is not redistributed among local populations and workers toiling in its production, rather it is concentrated disproportionately among corporate management and shareholders. In practice, this includes the financialization of profits that are siphoned away from the host community and expropriated back to the coffers of financial institutions based in the core. To the extent that physical infrastructure is constructed, it is mostly reserved for and utilized by enclaves of elites and expats rather than locals. This phenomenon was demonstrated in the case of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) known as Mahindra World City in India, where local peasants were initially promised and later denied access to electricity and water. These public goods instead became exclusionary and proprietary, reserved for elites within Mahindra, who kept them guarded within the fenced walls of the city (Levien 2018).

The multinational corporation often employs management from its state of origin, resulting in a limited transfer of technical and managerial know-how to laborers of the host state. In some instances, the expat supervisors working for the MNC do not speak the local language and they often fail to integrate themselves meaningfully into society. The duration of an expat worker's stay can be limited to a specified period of no more than a few years. Expats therefore have little incentive to invest socially or economically in the community. Unless nationalized or forcibly seized by the host government, technological hardware and manufacturing equipment can be taken out of the state as quickly as it arrived. Tax incentives may be offered to attract the MNC, thus reducing the host state's ability to collect rents. Furthermore, the wealth that is successfully claimed by the host state through taxes is susceptible to capture by elites of host states where institutions are weak and plagued by corruption. Like the MNC, these government institutions can similarly be referred to as "extractive" (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Finally, there are myriad negative externalities associated with multinational resource extraction. Chief among them is the risk of pollution and environmental degradation, but an additional concern includes the physical and psychological health of workers who are subjected to long hours, grueling work, and hazardous conditions. In short, the analytical approach of this paper makes drastically different assumptions about the fundamental nature of multinational corporations compared to more mainstream works.

In the sections that follow, I explore how the process of primitive accumulation has led to evolving forms of dispossession and exploitation perpetrated by multinational corporations operating in the rubber industry. I begin with an examination of rubber extraction in the Congo under King Leopold II at the turn of the 20th century. This section highlights particularly brutal, violent forms of dispossession and exploitation that took place under the auspices of the Belgian Crown and several concessionary corporations. This is an illuminating example because it showcases the barbaric underpinnings of primitive accumulation in the rubber industry in its crudest form. The subsequent section shifts across time and space to the case of Fordlândia in the Brazilian rainforest during the interwar period. I conclude with the case of Firestone in Liberia, which boasts the largest contiguous rubber plantation in the world today. Interestingly, Ford and Firestone, two American MNCs from the Global North, opened production facilities in the Global South in the latter part of the 1920s. The fact that the Firestone plantation remains open and profitable in the present-day, while Fordlândia was shuttered and abandoned in 1945 suggests that Firestone was able to succeed where Ford failed. Comparing the two cases using a most similar systems design (MSSD), I provide an explanation for the divergence between the two outcomes that is likewise informed by the case of King Leopold II in the Congo.

Rubber Extraction in the Congo

Joseph Conrad, author of the novel *Heart of Darkness*, once described King Leopold II's colonial project in the Congo Free State as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" (Conrad 2013). Between the time that one man, King Leopold II, established his personal rule over the Congo (today's Democratic Republic of the Congo or DRC) in 1885 until it was reluctantly annexed by the Belgian Government in 1908, it has been estimated that upwards of ten million (Twain 1905) and possibly as many as "20 million souls" were lost (Morel 1904). Though there is little disagreement among historians that a massive decline in population took place during Leopold's reign over the Congo (Gibbs 1991), the specific death toll has been the source of debate, given the challenge of disentangling deaths caused by massacre, starvation, and epidemic disease. Much of which can be attributed to a man who never set foot in the Congo (Ascherson 1999).

The dispossession and exploitation of the people of the Congo was formally sanctioned by the United States and the 13 Eurasian powers represented at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Though he was not in attendance at the conference, King Leopold II managed to convince a federation of imperial powers that the Congo basin would represent a zone of international free-trade, humanitarian work, and Christian missionary intervention under his personal rule. Once the details of this imperialist venture were finalized by a network of bilateral international agreements, Leopold's claim was cemented by a domestic resolution passed in the Belgian parliament. King Leopold II was named the sovereign king of the Congo Free State and granted two million square kilometers of land, more than seventy-six times the size of Belgium, as his property in which he claimed near-totalitarian control. Not a single African was present at the conference where the terms of exploitation of the Congo, and much of the African continent, were dictated from afar (Hochschild 1998).

Made abundantly clear in his letters and memos, as well as in the inscription on the back of a locket that he gifted to a finance minister, King Leopold II spent most of his life resolutely believing that "*Il faut à la Belgique une colonie* (Belgium must have a colony)" (Hochschild 1998). Leopold's motivation to colonize was driven in large part by twin obsessions for wealth and for power, to enrich both himself and his country. At various times, Leopold floated the idea of pursuing strikingly different colonial ventures, ranging from territories in Fiji to Brazil to Argentina to Uruguay. Leopold was not particularly concerned with the geographical location of the colony, nor with the specific resources that would be claimed (Hochschild 1998). What mattered most was a colony that produced wealth. At the systemic level, Leopold was keenly aware of the exploitative nature of any colonial project, which entailed the appropriation of material resources from foreign lands and foreign peoples for the expressed purpose of enriching his home country.

Leopold's venture was not the benevolent humanitarian mission that he had promised. The extent of which was first reported by a black American named George Washington Williams, a minister, lawyer, journalist, politician, Civil War soldier, and founder of a black newspaper named the

Commoner. In a pamphlet titled *Open Letter,* Williams listed the numerous humanitarian abuses he had witnessed in his travels to the Congo during Leopold's colonial regime. Among Leopold's myriad deceptions, his claims of providing wise government and public services were patently false. There were no schools or hospitals, save a few shoddy shacks "not fit to be occupied by a horse." (Hochschild 1998). Colonial administrators would use tricks to fool Congo chiefs into believing that whites had supernatural powers, for the ultimate purpose of coaxing them into signing their land over to Leopold. White traders and officials also took to the habit of kidnapping African women and using them as concubines. These same officers were charged with shooting villagers for sport and coercing survivors into working as part of the labor force (Hochschild 1998).

The labor force was a crucial component of Leopold's plan to reap the wealth of the Congo. Early attempts to make profits through the sale of ivory were initially met with limited success. The nascent colony was plagued by debt and, at times, teetered on the brink of default (Stengers 1969). Everything would change with the natural rubber boom of the 1890s. As rubber exports increased precipitously, the colonial administration sought to implement the Domain System. According to this new system, public lands were declared "uninhabited" and became the direct property of the Crown. Not only did this decree serve to dispossess the people living on this land, but it also brought the forests of rubber trees located in these spaces under colonial ownership. These spaces would ultimately be divided up and parceled out as rubber plantations to various concessionary companies operating in the Congo (Stengers 1969). With headquarters located in continental Europe, these concessionary companies illustrate one of the earliest forms of the multinational corporation. Initially, the four major MNCs granted concessions in the Congo were Société Anversoise, Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (ABIR), Companie du Katanga, and Companie des Grand Lacs (Van Reybrouck 2014).

Once these companies seized control of the land, they needed mass labor to extract rubber for profits. The Red Rubber forced labor system was devised to serve this end, and labor was demanded of the local population as a form of taxation (Renton, Seddon, & Leo 2007). Without any restrictions on the part of the state, these MNCs were left almost entirely unrestrained in extricating maximal profits by any means necessary. This led to the extreme and violent exploitation of workers, who could be more accurately described as slaves. Congolese laborers were subjected to terrible abuse and repression. They were beaten and whipped, had family members held hostage, and were threatened by mutilation, dismemberment, or death in the case that they failed to meet rubber collection quotas. La Force Publique, the colonial military responsible for enforcing these draconian measures, were required to provide severed hands to colonial post commanders as proof of punishment. The severed hand would embody a lasting image of King Leopold II's Congo Free State, as the collection of hands became a form of currency to make up for insufficient rubber production (Forbath 1977).

Under intense international pressure, the Belgian government formally annexed the Congo in 1908, ending Leopold's personal rule over the territory. While conditions improved dramatically in the short-term for much of the indigenous population, many colonial officials and MNC employees retained positions in the Belgian Congo. Prior to the Belgian government's annexation, the concessionary MNCs were facing rebellion, resulting in falling profits. Seeing the writing on the wall, these corporations quietly ceded their concessions back to colonial administrators, allowing the state to takeover control of rubber plantations in 1906 (Harms 1975). In some instances, these corporations dissolved or merely restructured and rebranded to avoid public scrutiny. For a long time, the Belgian Crown refused to reckon with the horrific violence that had taken place. However, on the 60th anniversary of the DRC's independence in June of 2020, King Philip of Belgium wrote a letter to

Congolese president Félix Tshisekedi, marking the first time that a Belgian king publicly acknowledged the enduring legacy of the atrocities committed in the Congo.

The case of rubber extraction in the Congo under King Leopold II demonstrates the process of primitive accumulation and the forms that it embodied during the age of New Imperialism at the turn of the 19th century. Multinational corporations were becoming an increasingly prominent actor in this process of dispossession and exploitation that sought to violently integrate societies into capitalist forms of production. Shifting next to the case of Fordlândia, I examine the continued evolution of the MNC during the interwar period, this time in the context of Brazil.

Rubber Extraction in Fordlândia
As with King Leopold II in the Congo, the multinational project known as Fordlândia can similarly be traced back to the zealotry of one man, Henry Ford, in his quest for wealth and power. From an economic standpoint, the Fordlândia venture was conceived as an effort to vertically integrate within the automotive industry, consolidating large portions of the supply chain under the control of the Ford Motor Company. In this way Ford sought to exert control over the assembly components involved in the mass-production of cars. As it applied to Fordlândia, this necessitated a reliable source of rubber for manufacturing tires (Esch 2018). For Ford, rubber sovereignty was becoming a pressing concern, given the British Empire's steadily increasing monopoly on the world's rubber supply. This was the direct result of bio-thievery perpetrated by British explorer Sir Henry Wickham, who smuggled rubber tree seeds out of Brazil (Galey 1979). These seeds would be spread throughout the British colonies of Southeast Asia, leading to the downfall of the Amazon Rubber Boom and subsequent cornering of the market by Britain and its concessionaires (Voon 1976). The 1922 British Rubber Restriction Act, which more than doubled world prices, signaled to Ford and other Americans industrialists the need to curb British dominance in the rubber industry (Esch 2018).

However, access to affordable rubber was not the only driving force behind Ford's Amazonian experiment. It was also an attempt at what Ford referred to as "men-making," which can more aptly be described as a grand social engineering experiment. In the same manner that Ford molded cars into a finished product, he endeavored to mold men into a more efficient labor force. Fordlândia was not the first time that Ford undertook such a project. In fact, Ford created the Ford Motor Company Sociological Department to inform, and perhaps justify, his various workplace experiments. This research was heavily influenced by ideas on race and development and would be conducted at Ford production plants such as Inkster, Highland Park, Richmond Hill, and River Rouge prior to Fordlândia. For Ford, scientific experimentation was often conducted under the banner of "improvement," which in most cases was highly racialized. The majority of Ford's experiments treaded a fine line between social engineering and racial engineering, containing a heavy dose of white managerialism (Esch 2018). Given the civilizing nature of the project, it would be fair to argue that Fordlândia could be more appropriately described as a colonial venture than a business venture.

Ford's philosophy on race and development was similarly put on display with the formal concession of 2.5 million acres of land to the Companhia Ford Industrial do Brasil in 1927. This land was characterized in a company report as "an immense and savage wilderness uninhabited except for a few wild Indian tribes" (Esch 2018). Such a description appears to downplay the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their land, with the implication that the MNC would serve a civilizing mission with the potential to tame both the "savage wilderness" and the "wild Indian tribes." The extent of ecological harm is also downplayed by this report but carving out a village in the rainforest caused at least 3000 acres of rainforest to be slashed and burned (Esch 2018). Before the process of extracting rubber had even begun, the mechanism of primitive accumulation was taking hold in the form of indigenous land dispossession and exploitation of the earth.

Given that Fordlândia involved constructing a rubber plantation from the ground-up, this was an ideal site for "men-making" and experimentation. Ford could design the plantation in any way he pleased, so he chose to imitate the model of a typical American factory town, complete with a school, hospital, hotel, library, golf course, and swimming pool. Nevermind that this mode of life would be perceived as strangely foreign to the masses of indigenous laborers working and living on the plantation. Though homes were initially constructed with thatched roofs to suit the climate, management was displeased, and subsequent homes were constructed out of wood and concrete in the proper midwestern style. This architectural design was completely inappropriate for the tropical climate, and homes were described as "fly traps" that were "hotter than the gates of hell" (Grandin 2009). The design of the plantation provides a useful metaphor to Ford's project on a larger scale, in which little to no effort was made to accommodate the local environment or the needs of the local population.

Inflexibility and lack of accommodation were also defining elements of the workplace. Workers were commonly described as lazy and undisciplined, and managers developed the habit of rating workers by degrees of "savagery" and "tameness" (Esch 2018). To combat perceived idleness, Ford believed he could instill work ethic through the implementation of strict discipline. This became a feature of Fordlândia in which most aspects of work and everyday life were dictated by managers. This began as early as the hiring stage, where invasive medical inspections were imposed on prospective workers. This reinforced the notion of a civilizing mission, as Western science was used to control the workforce and distinguish whether workers were "sick" or "just lazy" (Esch 2018). Disciplinary control was likewise imposed through a clock system meant to enforce rigid conceptions of time. Described by an article in *Business Week*, clocks were "incongruous devices in the customarily indolent atmosphere of a steaming Amazon jungle." To instill a clock-centered mentality, workers were expected to punch-in their 11 hours of work per day using timecards. Additionally, a system of bells was installed that would sound every half hour, from 5:30 in the morning to 5:30 at night to keep workers on schedule. So unrelenting was this system that, rather than adapting to the climate and allowing the workers to avoid laboring in heat of the day, management was resolute in maintaining the daytime hours of a traditional American workday (Esch 2018).

Language and education were additional sites for managerial exploitation, as it was suggested that the plantation would be better off not to hire workers who weren't civilized enough to speak Portuguese or English. Language instruction was thus incorporated as part of the compulsory education program in which workers were required to take part. This practice would also be integrated into school curriculum taught to children once men's families were allowed to join them on the plantation. This childhood indoctrination of values could be observed in several forms, from the children's required uniforms to the primary instructional textbook, *Moral Education: My Little Friends*. Even family leisure activities were not free from corporate control, as families learned American folk dances and were entertained by motion pictures produced by Ford (Esch 2018). Food and drink were likewise regulated by the Companhia Ford Industrial do Brasil. Consumption of alcohol was strictly prohibited on the plantation in accordance with Henry Ford's personal commitment to teetotalism. Ford was also a vegetarian and followed a strict dietary regime. He sought to impose similar dietary practices on his laborers, whose meals consisted of oatmeal and canned peaches imported from Michigan for breakfast, and unpolished rice with whole wheat bread for dinner (Grandin 2009).

Ford's overbearing rules ultimately led to a worker revolt that took a devastating toll on plantation equipment and infrastructure. The riot broke out on a sweltering evening in December 1930, when management made the decision that workers should line up "cafeteria-style" as opposed to being served at the table. The new system created dysfunction as more and more workers piled up outside of the dining hall. An argument ensued between one of the brick masons and a Ford manager, in which the manager laughed as if to mock the situation. It was like "putting a match to gasoline" as chaos erupted, and workers began breaking everything in sight. Extensive damage and destruction were later reported throughout the plantation. Managers were able to escape, fleeing in boats to the middle of the Tapajós River before the Brazilian army was eventually called in to restore order (Grandin 2009). Though the change in dining hall decorum served as the catalyst for the uprising, it was evident that the episode was the cumulative result of an exhaustive list of grievances traceable back to the exploitative, controlling practices of Ford management.

The revolt marked the beginning of the end for Fordlândia. Though a separate plantation named Belterra was opened nearby for rubber extraction a few years after the incident, both production sites would be shut down after the conclusion of World War II. The war effort kept these rubber extraction facilities afloat for a few additional years as they became more-or-less subsidiaries of the US government (Grandin 2009). Unfortunately, the war only served to delay the inevitable and when Henry Ford II became the president of Ford Motor Company on September 21, 1945, one of his first acts was to sell Fordlândia and Belterra back to the Brazilian government at significant losses. Though, in total, $20 million had been poured into these Amazonian ventures, the closing price paid was $244,200. Like King Leopold II in the Congo, Henry Ford never set foot in Brazil (Grandin 2009). While oppressive treatment of the indigenous laborers was a significant factor in the decline of Fordlândia, plant sickness would provide the coup de grâce. In its natural ecosystem, the latex-producing *heveas brasilis* tree is protected beneath the shelter of the rainforest, in which the distance between trees prevents the spread of fungus. The Ford Company therefore unwittingly unleashed its own undoing by planting rubber saplings on barren land in straight rows that were separated by only a few feet (Esch 2018). This allowed blight to spread like wildfire, where in certain cases it infected nearly 70% of the plot (Grandin 2009). The worker revolt and plant sickness represent symptoms that are emblematic of Ford's failure; a complete and utter lack of accommodation to the local environment and local population. The decline and ultimate failure of Fordlândia is best summarized by Elizabeth Esch in her book, *The Color Line and the Assembly Line: Managing Race in the Ford Empire:*

> Insofar as it produced rubber, the short, unhappy history of Ford in rural Brazil continually teetered between failure and farce. As a laboratory for making men, and later families, it was scarcely any more effectual. But as a laboratory for informal, U. S. corporate empire-building, it cannot be written off so easily: the same national narcissism that compromised company attempts to understand the ecology and people of the region would also provide the terms through which Ford would try to categorize those people as uncivilized, malleable racial material that needed, above all, to be managed (Esch 2018).

Though rigid and controlling, it should be noted that the working conditions in Fordlândia were significantly less brutal and overtly violent than under the concessionary MNCs of King Leopold II's Congo. Another crucial difference between the two was that, in the case of Fordlândia, employment remained voluntary and workers could choose to leave the plantation at any time, as many of them indeed chose to do. Nevertheless, there is a clear continuity in the evolution of primitive accumulation as this process unfolded through evolving techniques of dispossession and exploitation utilized by multinational corporations. Though the indigenous laborers of Fordlândia were not tortured or dismembered, their subjugation was more subtle and imperceptible. Nearly all aspects of workers lives were dictated by the Ford Motor Company in a racist, paternalistic fashion. Even the infrastructure built for the workers was not constructed with the innocent intention of providing public goods, but as an intentional means of exerting control. It was summarily left to decompose into ruins after the decision was made to cut ties and leave. The point of this is not to compare these corporate ventures by arguing that one was more coercive or more humane than the other, rather to show that coercive methods of exploitation can mutate and persist in various forms. Continuing along this line of inquiry, I now shift to the case of Firestone in Liberia. Conceptually-speaking, I incorporate a most similar systems design to compare the cases of Ford and Firestone, examining why these two similar cases led to vastly divergent outcomes.

Rubber Extraction in Liberia

As with the first two cases, the story of rubber extraction on the Firestone plantation in Liberia begins with another baron of the rubber industry and man of fierce ambition, Harvey Firestone. Just as they shared the initials H. F., Ford and Firestone's lives were remarkably reminiscent of one another, beginning with the fact that both were born in the 1860s and raised on midwestern farms (Firestone 1926; Watts 2006). The two became friends and Firestone would eventually become the campaign organizer for Ford's unsuccessful run in the US Senate in 1918. Along with Thomas Edison and John Burroughs, the self-proclaimed "Four Vagabonds" took a series of summer camping trips between 1915-1924 (Brauer 1995). Thus, when the British began to take control of the world's rubber supply, Henry Ford received a letter from none other than Harvey Firestone in 1923, inviting him to participate in a conference of American industrialists and political leaders. The aim of this conference was to develop a plan for counteracting British rubber hegemony that would "make America independent." Firestone's appeal was successful as Ford laid claim to land in the Amazon, Goodyear opened plantations in the Philippines and Indonesia, and Firestone was granted land in Liberia (Esch 2018).

This land came in the form of a 99-year lease that, as witnessed first-hand by W. E. B. Du Bois, allowed Firestone to select "wherever he wished in Liberia one million acres of land at a nominal rental of only 6 cents an acre" (Du Bois 1933). This contract was bitterly opposed by many Liberian officials, given that the contract stipulated that the Liberian government construct a harbor to facilitate the passage of freight and passengers. Lacking the funds to do so, the Liberian government would be forced to pay for the port with a five-million-dollar loan from Firestone. Though the interest rate was initially set at 7%, this would be adjusted several times. By the end, the average rate was estimated to be as high as 17% throughout the duration of the loan (Du Bois 1933). The US government and Firestone would be granted total authority over Liberia's revenue until the debt was repaid in full, which did not occur until 1952 (Rosenau 2009). Discussing the situation with Liberian officials, Raymond Buell noted: "In response to the question why they agreed to this loan in the face of early opposition and manifestly unfavorable terms, all of them gave the same reply: The State Department of the United States told us to accept this loan" (Buell 1928). An alternative way of stating this would be to say that the mechanism of primitive accumulation was churning at full capacity, powering the highest halls of state and corporate authority in the conquest of capital.

From the time that it was established through the end of World War II, Firestone was Liberia's only considerable source of employment and accounted for the vast majority of government export revenue, of which rubber constituted nearly 95% (Church 1969). Such disproportionate power effectively gave Firestone a *carte blanche* to operate its rubber plantations with near immunity, and the Liberian government was all but held hostage until its debt to Firestone was settled. This meant that Firestone was able to manipulate the Liberian state into conducting the unsavory business of providing the plantation with an abundant supply of labor. This was documented by the Committee of the League of Nations in a report stating that "labour for private purposes is forcibly impressed by the Government and used in the Firestone Plantations" (UNMIL 2006). Forced labor would persist until the government of Portugal filed a complaint to the International Labor Organized, whose intervention finally led to the dismantling of a system that had been in place since 1926 (UNMIL 2006).

Though Firestone dispossessed and exploited the workforce at the systemic level, day-to-day treatment of labor was relatively humane. One example being that Firestone provided native workers with huts and access to sanitary kitchens, water supply, and latrines. There was also an effort by the company to sponsor studies on yellow fever, which had afflicted the workforce, and a separate investigation looking into the customs of Liberian natives (Buell 1928). The rubber plantation would eventually develop into a company town by the end of the 1920s, where the cost of housing and prices in company stores were adapted to the level of the workers' wages (Waters 2009). In addition to the construction of as many as 13,000 huts, Firestone was responsible for the construction of "21 schools, 4 churches, 23 playing fields, 7 community centres, 3 electric power stations, 2 hospitals and nearly 700 miles of road" (Church 1969). Firestone management was similarly responsible for introducing techniques of scientific management to its Liberian plantations, including the practice of the eight-hour workday. Outside of these working hours, natives were largely left alone. To the extent that workers did not cause major disturbances, their needs were accommodated (Skrabec 2013). From this description it would be easy to conclude that, in an everyday sense, Firestone was a benevolent employer. This would be an oversimplification. Firestone management understood that, to maintain a productive labor force, a minimal standard of living needed to be ensured. Thus, providing for the material needs of workers was not an act of charity, but a savvy, self-interested business decision.

Similar Cases, Different Outcomes

Derived from the work of John Stuart Mill as one of the five methods for induction (Mill 1843), a most similar systems design is a strategy that compares two cases that closely resemble one another, with the exception that they diverge on a certain outcome or dependent variable (Anckar 2008). According to this method, the reason for choosing similar cases is to keep constant as many extraneous variables as possible (Skocpol 1984), with the aim of identifying the independent variables which explain the presence or absence of a dependent variable. Despite an abundance of similarities, the fates of the Ford and Firestone ventures diverged significantly. I compare the two cases using this MSSD method and explain the divergence between the two outcomes.

In many regards, this narrative is reminiscent of Ford's multinational venture in the Brazilian rainforest. Both cases involve multinational corporations from the United States in the late 1920s claiming land in the Global South while simultaneously dispossessing indigenous people from their land. In both cases, rubber barons set up large plantations for the purpose of extracting rubber, relying on the exploitation and subjugation of native workers to perform most of the strenuous physical labor. Both ventures involved the MNC providing some type of housing and food for the labor force, though typically deducted from the worker's paycheck, in addition to other forms of infrastructure. In both cases, the plantations served as critical sources of rubber for the US military during World War II. By many metrics, these multinational rubber ventures were nearly identical.

This begs the question, what caused the divergence in the outcome for these two MNCs? In other words, what explains the fact that the Fordlândia plantation closed in 1945 as an economic failure, while the Firestone plantation remains open and profitable to this day as the world's largest contiguous rubber plantation? I should specify here that I don't claim to explain the extent of Firestone's success since the closure of Fordlândia. Thus, a more appropriate way to phrase the question is why did Fordlândia fail, while Firestone survived? Perhaps the best response to the question is not what Firestone did but didn't do. For Firestone, the corporate venture was an economic mission, not a social experiment. To this end, Firestone did not try to impose a way of life on Liberian natives. Workers were a means to an end, with that end being profits. Workers were subject to backbreaking labor in sweltering, tropical heat, but outside of that time they were largely left to their own devices. So long as they continued to extract rubber, workers' ways of living were accommodated, not altered. Instead of "men-making" and transforming labor into more efficient rubber producers, Firestone merely appealed to the Liberian government to supply the plantation with more men. Ford, on the other hand, was overbearing and sought to control nearly all aspects of his workers' lives. Not only was this method of management expensive and time-consuming and generally bad business, but it also fostered resentment among the native workers who eventually rebelled against Ford's management, as did the environment.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored how the process of primitive accumulation has evolved over time, in tandem with the expansion of the global capitalist system. Using the multinational corporation as the central focus and fundamental unit of analysis, I looked at the role that MNCs have played in facilitating dispossession and exploitation in the rubber industry across time and space. Focusing on three separate cases, I began by examining the brutality and violence perpetrated by concessionary companies in King Leopold II's Congo. Next, I looked at the case of Fordlândia, where the mechanisms of dispossession and exploitation employed by the Ford Motor Company were less brutal and violent, but nonetheless still operating beneath the surface. The final case was an investigation of Firestone in Liberia, which occupied a middle ground between exploitation and accommodation. Though Firestone's Liberia venture was developed in similar circumstances to Ford's Brazilian experiment, the eventual trajectory of the two MNCs diverged significantly. Conceptualized in such a way, I evaluated these two cases using a most similar systems design and concluded that the fundamental difference between them was the accommodation of the local conditions. The downfall of Fordlândia can be attributed to Ford's resounding failure to adapt to the local population and the local environment, while impressing a specific way of living on the workers. The survival of Firestone's operation can alternatively be explained by an *accommodation of*, or perhaps more accurately, *indifference to* the indigenous laborers' way of life. It should be emphasized that this apparent accommodation should not be misconstrued as benevolence, but as an economic decision. Exerting control over the lives of workers is an expensive endeavor. Compared with Ford, Firestone management were simply more apathetic about what Liberian laborers did outside of their working hours.

This project provides several promising avenues of future inquiry. One such avenue would be to explore how the process of primitive accumulation takes shape in other industries. Rubber provides a useful starting point but looking at multinational corporations operating in other types of extractive industries as well as non-extractive industries would yield additional insight. A second potential avenue for future inquiry would be to explore the corporation and its relationship with the state as it has changed over time in various contexts. The corporate-state nexus was only tangentially addressed in this paper, but given the dynamic nature of the international system, a more in-depth understanding of the co-evolution of these two units is warranted. Finally, this paper emphasized multinational corporations from the Global North operating in the Global South. Given the assumption that core-periphery dynamics do not operate exclusively between states, it would be helpful for future research to look beyond the traditional mold to core-periphery dynamics operating within states of the Global South.

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the support of the Political Science and Global Studies Departments at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Special thanks are owed to Paul Amar and Jia-Ching Chen in particular, for supporting my work and providing generous feedback. Thanks are also owed to my family and friends who help keep me focused and grounded.

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