

# Accumulation by urban dispossession: struggles over urban space in Accra, Ghana

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This article draws on original empirical research in Accra, Ghana to explore the particular dynamics that contemporary processes of class-based dispossession assume at the urban scale, posing the concept of 'accumulation by urban dispossession'. It responds to recent calls to shift the focus of urban theory from North to South and demonstrates how widely used concepts must be interrogated and reworked as they travel from place to place. Accra is home to a large informal proletariat that is excluded from formal wage labour and housing markets and therefore has to create urban commons in order to reproduce itself. Since these commons place limits to capital's ability to valorise the urban fabric, state-led accumulation by urban dispossession is a strategic response that employs a range of physical-legal and discursive mechanisms to overcome these limits through the enclosure of the urban commons and the expulsion of the informal poor. This argument problematises Harvey's capital-centric theory of accumulation by dispossession, which treats enclosure as a fix for capital's inherent crisis tendencies. Furthermore, it demonstrates that primitive accumulation in this context differs from the classic form described by Marx on the grounds that it is based on the expulsion of the dispossessed rather than their incorporation into the capital relation as labour power.

**Key words** Ghana; urban scale; squatting; informality; accumulation by dispossession; commons

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## Introduction

On a hot afternoon in late 2010, a group of young men tend to their crops on a patch of urban scrubland in La, a neighbourhood in the east of Accra. These are no ordinary farmers, they are also urban squatters. The soil under cultivation is in fact owned by the Ghanaian state, and was expropriated from the community of La decades ago for the purpose of development. As the years went by, however, most of the land was never built on, so local residents suffering from unemployment or underemployment quietly re-occupied the land to grow tomatoes, cassava and other crops to feed themselves and supplement their meagre incomes. Behind the toiling farmers looms a high concrete wall, topped with barbed wire and patrolled by private security guards. The wall encircles and protects a development of opulent mansions that would not look out of place in a Californian suburb. When the government decided to build these mansions to house delegates for the 2007 African Union summit and Ghana's 50th anniversary

of independence celebrations, before selling them off for private use, they were met with fierce protests. Community members claimed that the land was their ancestral birthright so should not be sold off by the state to build luxury mansions in the midst of a shortage of affordable housing. Despite the protests, the development went ahead. Now, this imposing wall separates the luxurious mansions from the impoverished, overcrowded, ramshackle township of La where the squatter farmers live. Although many of the farmers were displaced when the mansions were built, others continue to cultivate the undeveloped land adjacent to the mansions. One of them looks at me and then points to the wall: 'This is a Berlin Wall in Ghana, built to separate the rich from the poor'.

This scene, witnessed during a fieldwork visit, is typical of the divided city of Accra, a city increasingly characterised by inequality, segregation and violent class struggles over urban space. These struggles are the focus of this article, which investigates their characteristics with a view to revealing the particular dynamics that contemporary processes of class-based

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dispossession assume at the urban scale. It does so in order to address the failure thus far of contemporary Marxist theories of primitive accumulation, or what Harvey (2003) terms 'accumulation by dispossession', to pay sufficient attention to this scale, particularly in the rapidly urbanising Global South. This article seeks to address this deficit by investigating the actors, mechanisms and struggles that lie behind accumulation by dispossession at the urban scale – or what I am calling accumulation by urban dispossession – in Accra. In the process, it responds to recent calls to shift the focus of urban theory from Northern to Southern cities (Parnell and Robinson 2012; Roy 2009a; Schindler 2015).

Accra is home to a large 'informal proletariat' that is excluded from formal wage labour and housing markets and therefore has to create 'urban commons' in order to reproduce itself. Since these commons place limits on capital's ability to valorise the urban fabric, state-led accumulation by urban dispossession is a strategic response that employs a range of physical-legal and discursive mechanisms to overcome these limits through the enclosure of the urban commons and the expulsion of the informal poor. The physical-legal mechanisms are identified as: the privatisation of communal land for elite development projects; the cleansing of street hawkers from the city's public spaces; and the eviction and displacement of squatters from central Accra. In addition, and in order to justify the use of state force to displace hawkers and squatters to the urban periphery, state actors have resorted to mobilising a revanchist discourse that frames these groups as a source of dirt and disorder whose presence is undermining efforts to transform Accra into a modern, business-friendly 'Millennium City'. Although researchers have identified similar processes of exclusion in cities across Africa, Asia and Latin America (Bhan 2009; Huchzermeyer 2011; Swanson 2007), there has to date been a lack of reflection on what these struggles can tell us about the contemporary character of accumulation by dispossession in the Southern metropolis.

This urban case study has two major implications for contemporary theories of dispossession. First, it problematises Harvey's (2003) capital-centric theory of accumulation by dispossession, which treats enclosure as a fix for capital's inherent tendency to overaccumulate, and adds empirical support to De Angelis' (2007) argument that the new enclosures are a response to the limits to capital posed by the commoning practices of the working class. Second, primitive accumulation in this context differs from the 'classic form' of primitive accumulation described by Marx (1976 [1867]) on the grounds that it is based on the 'expulsion' of the dispossessed rather than their

incorporation into the capital relation as labour power (Sassen 2014). These arguments demonstrate how the 'universalist aspirations' and 'parochial assumptions' of widely used concepts can be exposed as part of the project to shift the focus of urban theory from the Global North to South (Robinson and Parnell 2011, 523).

### From 'primitive accumulation' to the 'new urban enclosures'

Marx (1976 [1867], 899) originally discussed primitive accumulation as a historical phase at the beginning of capitalist development where 'extra-economic force' was employed in order to create the necessary conditions for accumulation proper by transforming common wealth (such as land) into private capital and generating a supply of labour by creating a landless proletariat separated from its historical means of subsistence. Subsequently, however, theorists have argued that primitive accumulation is a perennial feature of capitalist development and that the silent compulsion of market forces continues to operate in tandem with the use of extra-economic force to enclose that which lies outside the market (De Angelis 2007; Luxemburg 2003 [1913]; *Midnight Notes* 1990). David Harvey (2003) has done much to popularise this argument by asserting that the features of primitive accumulation have accelerated since the 1970s and the modus operandi of the neoliberal state is to create profitable opportunities for capital by engaging in 'accumulation by dispossession'.

Critical urban theorists have attempted to analyse the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession at the urban scale by discussing processes of gentrification and displacement in terms of the enclosure of urban commons (Blomley 2008; Harvey 2012; Hodgkinson 2012). However, extant research on urban enclosure has largely focused on the experience of cities in the Global North. Following recent calls to shift the focus of urban theory from Northern to Southern cities (Parnell and Robinson 2012; Roy 2009a; Schindler 2015), there is a pressing need for research into the dynamics of urban dispossession outside of North America and Western Europe. In the African context, writers have theorised various aspects of contemporary capitalism as expressions of accumulation by dispossession, including agricultural liberalisation and the commodification of rural land (Bush 2007; Bush *et al.* 2011) and the ongoing looting of Africa's wealth through exploitative debt and unfair trade (Bond 2006). At the urban scale, scholars have employed Harvey's concept to discuss phenomena such as the commodification of housing and service provision in South Africa (Bond 2005; Loftus 2006) and the promotion of entrepreneurial values by non-govern-

mental organisations (NGOs) in Cairo (Elyachar 2005). However, there has been a lack of analysis of what distinguishes accumulation by dispossession in the African city in a way that complicates or problematises Harvey's conceptualisation.

Although there is a growing critical literature on urban governance in Ghana, this literature has to date failed to engage with theoretical debates around the contemporary significance of primitive accumulation. Urban scholars have engaged critically with a range of urban development processes in Accra, including the repression of informal economic activities (Adaawen and Jorgensen 2012; Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008; Obeng-Odoom 2011); the forced eviction of squatter settlements (Afenah 2012; Grant 2009); and the commodification of communal lands for real-estate development (Aryeetey *et al.* 2007; Owusu 2008; Yeboah 2008). Significantly, Obeng-Odoom (2013b) argues that such phenomena can be understood in terms of the dispossession of Accra's poor of their land, livelihood and shelter. However, this welcome intervention does not explore the implications of this argument for understandings of accumulation by dispossession in an African urban context.

This article seeks to build on this work and contribute new insights into the particular character that accumulation by dispossession assumes at the urban scale in Africa through an empirical case study of struggles over urban space in Accra, Ghana. In the process, it responds to recent calls to shift the focus of urban theory from North to South. While this shift requires the development of new concepts specific to the Global South, Robinson and Parnell (2011, 523) also identify the need for research that challenges the 'universalist aspirations' and exposes the 'parochial assumptions' of existing urban theory as it 'travels' from place to place. Whereas Robinson and Parnell (2011; Parnell and Robinson 2012) themselves have sought to 'provincialise' dominant theories of urban neoliberalism by questioning their utility for understanding the urban process in diverse contexts, this article draws on the Ghanaian urban experience to provincialise established Marxist theories of dispossession.

Fieldwork was carried out between October 2010 and July 2011. During this period, 48 interviews were conducted with a range of participants, including local authority officers, civil servants, government ministers, customary land custodians, civil society and NGO actors, hawkers and squatters. With the exception of government ministers, the names of all respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. Following calls by critical urban theorists for knowledge production to be embedded within struggle (Marcuse 2009), I decided to 'take sides' (Routledge 2003) and live, socialise and collaborate with anti-land privatisation campaigners in the neighbourhood of La with a

view to contributing my time, skills and resources as a researcher to their struggle. As such, my researching dispossession is motivated by a desire to draw attention to injustice as well as identifying 'emancipatory alternatives latent within the present' (Brenner 2009, 201). I also spent time in Accra's CBD, where I made friends with several street hawkers and market stallholders. The arguments presented in this article were informed by observations made during this time.

### **Informal proletarianisation and urban commoning in Accra**

Accra, Ghana's capital, is a historic port city located on the Gulf of Guinea on the country's Atlantic coast. Accra developed from a cluster of small villages into a major urban centre when it was chosen as the capital of the Gold Coast colony in 1877, and it subsequently became the key port for the export of gold, cocoa and other resources extracted from the hinterland (Konadu-Agyemang 2001). Today, the built-up metropolis that sits within the Greater Accra Region (the focus of this research) covers an area of 173 square kilometres, has a population of around two million people and is governed by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) (Grant 2009; Ghana Statistical Service 2012). Ghana is urbanising rapidly and Accra is one of the fastest growing cities in Africa, with an annual population growth rate of 4.3 per cent (UN-Habitat 2009).

Following decades of rural–urban migration, Ghana's capital city is now home to a large 'informal proletariat' (Davis 2006) that is excluded from formal wage labour and housing markets in the city. This population has come to be concentrated in Accra due to the separation of rural peasants from the land, either directly through the erosion of communal tenure by market forces or indirectly through the underdevelopment of the countryside. Both of these forms of accumulation by dispossession (Bush 2007) have their origins in the colonial economy and have intensified since the 1980s following Ghana's adoption of a structural adjustment programme prescribed by the IMF and World Bank (Agyei-Mensah and Owusu 2010; Asamoah 2001; Konadu-Agyemang 2001; Obeng-Odoom 2011; Songore 2009).

Whereas in Europe at the dawn of capitalism proletarianised populations were forced off the land and into mills and factories, industrialisation has not been sufficient to absorb the migrants flooding into Ghana's capital. The urban centres that emerged in Ghana under colonialism were not, as was the case with most European cities, based on labour-intensive industrial growth, but on trading functions appropriate to their peripheral role in the global economy. Furthermore, the mass retrenchment of public-sector and

formal private-sector workers as a result of structural adjustment has led to widespread unemployment and informalisation (Oberhauser and Hanson 2007; Panford 2001; Songsore 2009). Consequently, the informal economy dominates in contemporary Accra, with 71 per cent of all employed persons in engaged in informal employment (UNDP 2007, 28). Although it is now recognised that the formal and informal sectors are linked through commodity flows and some individuals combine formal with informal livelihood strategies, many of these workers have been excluded from regular formal wage labour and its associated protections (Grant and Oteng-Ababio 2012).

The rapid growth of Accra has been shaped by a range of political, economic and institutional factors resulting in the production of an extremely unequal urban geography in which the informal proletariat are excluded from access to housing, services and infrastructure. Due to weak state capacity, inappropriate planning regulations (a hangover from colonialism), and a lack of coordination between municipalities, planning institutions and the customary land sector, development has outpaced planning in Accra (Owusu 2008 2012; Yeboah 2000; Yeboah and Obeng-Odoom 2010). In addition, the marketisation of housing provision following structural adjustment has created a situation in which private developers build high-quality housing for the wealthy, while the masses rely on poor-quality, overcrowded informal housing and squatting (Grant 2009; Konadu-Agyemeng 2001; Obeng-Odoom 2013b). Local government lacks the capacity to provide essential services and infrastructure required by Accra's burgeoning population, resulting in uneven access to water and sanitation facilities and insanitary living conditions in the city's low-income informal settlements (Agyei-Mensah and Owusu 2010; Songsore 2008 2009). The result has been unplanned urban sprawl characterised by a high-quality middle-class building boom on the one hand, and the proliferation of impoverished informal and squatter settlements on the other.

Whereas in Europe proletarianisation involved the incorporation of the dispossessed into the urban industrial workforce as workers and consumers, in Ghana the informal proletariat has been largely excluded from formal wage labour and housing markets. This population has responded by taking direct action to appropriate vacant land and public spaces in order to reproduce itself. Land has been cultivated to grow food crops for subsistence use and to sell at market (Larbi *et al.* 2004; Tettey *et al.* 2008), squatter settlements have proliferated as people have occupied unused state land for residential use (Grant 2009; Songsore 2009) and hawkers have transformed pavements, roads and other public spaces into improvised marketplaces, selling an almost infinite variety of goods and services (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008).

These everyday practices of appropriation can all be understood in terms of the creation of 'urban commons'. Urban commons exist when city dwellers establish a collective property claim over urban space through sustained use and appropriation (Blomley 2008). They afford city dwellers a degree of protection from the market and independence from wage labour by decommodifying urban goods (Hodkinson 2012). In Accra they address unmet needs, providing the informal proletariat with access to low-cost housing in the city centre, public space as a 'livelihood resource' (Brown 2006) and agricultural land to grow their own food, meanwhile creating legitimate collective property claims.

Actually existing commons are 'live relics of the ideal of the commons; they are never complete and perfect and may even have components that contradict the ideal type' (Eizenberg 2012, 765). In the case of Old Fadama, a squatter settlement of approximately 80 000 people on state-owned land in the central Agboghloshie area, for example, the initial process of settlement by squatting has led an informal rental market to emerge, with shacks being rented out by squatter landlords. However, Old Fadama still provides access to centrally located housing at well below the market rate. As such, these imperfect, actually existing commons provide the informal proletariat with 'various degrees of protection from the market' (De Angelis 2007, 145).

Rather than passive victims of dispossession, therefore, Accra's informal proletariat is engaged in offensive action to appropriate and redistribute urban space from the rich and the powerful through everyday acts of 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat 1997). As the next section will explain, these activities have provoked a strong reaction from the state and its partners due to their very different agenda for the city's 'undeveloped' land and public spaces.

### **Building a Millennium City: entrepreneurial urban governance in Accra**

Accra has followed the same pattern as many capital cities by adopting an entrepreneurial approach to urban governance in which the role of the state is to facilitate private-sector growth (Grant 2009; Obeng-Odoom 2013a 2013b). A high priority has been placed on attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) through public-private partnerships, business-friendly planning initiatives and infrastructural investments, and the government has place-marketed Accra as a 'gateway' city – a connecting node between West Africa and the global economy and a regional hub for international trade and investment. The result, Grant (2009) argues, is that Accra is 'globalising' and becoming more integrated (albeit unevenly) into the global economy,

reflected in a construction boom and a dramatic growth in the number of foreign companies operating in the city since the 1980s (see also Owusu 2008; Yeboah 2000).

The persistence of the pre-capitalist customary land system and communal land tenure in Accra is considered a barrier to attracting FDI because investors want to 'lay claim to their property within a legal framework' (Grant 2009, 241). As such, the entrepreneurial state has sought to act as an intermediary between investors and the customary land system. It is thought that over 40 per cent of land in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area has been compulsorily acquired by both the colonial and postcolonial state from local communities belonging to the indigenous Ga ethnic group, supposedly in the public interest (Kasanga and Kotey 2001). Prior to 1957, land was acquired to enable rational town planning and provide facilities essential to the functioning of the colonial enterprise, such as bungalows for civil servants. Following decolonisation, land was expropriated by the developmental state for projects considered to serve the national interest, such as the Accra Industrial Estate (Quarcoo 1992). Today, the state seeks to encourage the construction industry by leasing out public lands in Accra to private developers at below the market rate. Since catering to the preferences of wealthy Ghanaian and transnational elites is the most profitable use of urban land, this land is increasingly used for elite development projects such as gated housing estates (Grant 2009).

Accra's current mayor, Alfred Okoe Vanderpuije, has pledged to transform Ghana's capital into a modern, business-friendly 'Millennium City' (Obeng-Odoom 2013a). A Ghanaian who has spent much of his working life in the USA, Vanderpuije was appointed by the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government in order to draw on his experience of American cities to modernise and beautify Accra (Bob-Milliar and Obeng-Odoom 2011). That he views himself as a radical moderniser is evident from his oft-quoted catchphrase: 'eyes have not seen, neither has it entered into the ears of men, what man is about to see in Accra' (Okwuosah 2012, no page).

In June 2009, following Vanderpuije's appointment, the AMA launched a new 'decongestion exercise' to remove hawkers, illegal structures and squatter settlements from the central business district (CBD). According to the mayor, 'all cities in the world are aiming at beauty and modernity so as to attract tourists, investors and other business activities' and decongestion is necessary to prevent Accra being left 'behind in this race for excellence' (*Modern Ghana News* 2009). Although a similar exercise had been attempted by former mayor Stanley Nii Adjiri Blankson between 2004 and 2008, it had been hampered by a badly

executed relocation project and political interference from central government (Adaawen and Jorgensen 2012; Bob-Milliar and Obeng-Odoom 2011). Determined to succeed where his predecessor had fallen short, Vanderpuije's AMA created a new 'Task Force' with the power to forcibly remove hawkers and demolish illegal structures and passed a new by-law making it an arrestable offence to sell in the street without a permit.

## Accumulation by urban dispossession in Accra

Entrepreneurial urban governance in Accra seeks to facilitate private-sector development by creating opportunities for accumulation through the valorisation of urban space. However, this same space is subject to existing patterns of collective use by the city's working-class inhabitants. As such, the entrepreneurial state is compelled to employ extra-economic means to enclose urban space. The entrepreneurial development strategies identified above (the privatisation of communal land, the cleansing of street hawkers and the eviction and displacement of squatters) can be understood as the state engaging in accumulation by dispossession at the urban scale – or, accumulation by urban dispossession – as they involve the separation of city dwellers from their urban commons. This section examines the mechanics of accumulation by urban dispossession by detailing the physical-legal and discursive mechanisms of enclosure employed by the state in contemporary Accra.

## Physical-legal mechanisms of enclosure

### *The privatisation of communal land*

The state land system in contemporary Accra functions as an instrument of accumulation by urban dispossession that expropriates land historically used as a communal means of social reproduction ('commons') and transforms it into a factor of production for an emerging luxury real-estate market. When interviewed about the state land system, government officials argued that the role of the state was to enable private-sector-led development by facilitating access to land for developers who would otherwise be discouraged by the complexities of the customary land system. According to one official,

most private investors ... find (the land system) a labyrinth or a maze – difficult to navigate through ... what the government is trying to do is take the headache away from the investors. (Ebo, Officer, Ministry of Water Resources, Works & Housing)

As such, the state assumes the role of an intermediary that can overcome the barrier to private-sector

growth posed by communal land tenure by expropriating these lands, transforming them into private property and redistributing them to capitalist developers at below market rates.

This mechanism of dispossession has had a particularly devastating effect on the neighbourhood of La, an indigenous Ga community located to the east of the central business district, with some estimating that the community has lost 80 per cent of its land to expropriation (James, Trustee, East Dadekotopon Development Trust). This has had serious negative socio-economic impacts on many of the town's residents. First, the residents of La have lost most of their living space. As a result, the town of La occupies less than three square miles and is characterised by extremely cramped and overcrowded living conditions (Kotey 2002). Second, this has contributed to high levels of poverty and unemployment in the neighbourhood, as community members have been dispossessed of their ability to engage in agricultural livelihood activities. When asked what the effect on the La people of losing their land was, a local campaigner against land privatisation replied that 'they became poor forever' (Kwesi, Activist, PanAfrikanYemei).

The impoverished and overcrowded informal settlement of La town is now surrounded by opulent developments such as the spacious, leafy Cantonments and Ridge estates, the American-style luxury mansions of the AU Village, and the high-rise commercial centre at the Airport City, all built on land originally expropriated from the community for public use. As such, the expropriation of communal land and its subsequent privatisation for elite development projects is a mechanism that redistributes resources from poor to rich (Kasanga 2001). Another local land activist attributes the poor living conditions endured by the indigenes of La to the expropriation of their land for luxury housing:

Right now when you go there people are living there in slums. Whilst their fathers' lands are being used for private use ... luxurious houses. Which he himself doesn't have. He himself, the rightful owner of the land, doesn't have a place to lay his head. You see? (Ebo, Activist, PanAfrikanYemei)

The starkly contrasting and uneven geography of Accra thus encourages a 'perception of disenfranchisement and impoverishment' among Ga youth (Yeboah 2008, 440). Dispossession is tangible in their everyday experiences of the geography of the city.

### *The revanchist cleansing of public spaces*

The decongestion exercise is a means by which the state dispossesses street hawkers of their urban commons – the public spaces that they appropriate and use as a livelihood resource. Officials justify decongestion as an entrepreneurial strategy to compete with other cities to attract investment and tourism to Accra. The removal

of street hawkers has been justified in terms of guaranteeing the fast circulation of traffic through the city – something fundamental to creating a good business environment that would appeal to investors (David, Officer, AMA Planning Department) – and officials revealed that the multinational banks based on the high street had threatened to relocate to outside of the CBD unless something was done about the number of hawkers on the streets (Sylvia, Officer, AMA Budget and Rating Department). Following the introduction of the decongestion exercise, Vanderpuije publically boasted that 'the commercial entities that were hitherto going to leave this city have, today, taken ownership of the Central Business District and they are enjoying doing business here' (Okwuosah 2012, no page). As such, the state is using extra-economic force to enclose urban public space and exclude those groups whose commoning activities threatens its function as productive infrastructure that aids capital accumulation.

In addition to concerns with the speed of circulation through Accra, officials argue that the visible presence of informality can discourage investors and have a negative effect on property values (Kwesi, Officer, AMA Legal Department; Kwabena Owusu Acheampong, Deputy Minister of Tourism). It was also argued that tourists are repelled when pavements and walkways are 'swamped' by hawkers (Kwabena Owusu Acheampong, Deputy Minister of Tourism). As such, decongestion is a form of enclosure by which the exchange value of the urban environment is preserved so that it can be extracted by real estate and tourism capital. In the process of preserving the exchange value of Accra's public spaces, their use value as a means of reproduction to the informal proletariat is destroyed.

Hawkers complain that the Task Force prevents them from making a living, vandalises their possessions, extorts bribes and sexual favours and is excessively violent with workers who disobey the by-law. Fuseini, a street hawker in the Accra CBD recounted a tale of AMA officials putting another trader into a coma by hitting him over the head with a loose paving stone. Despite repeated attempts by the AMA to decongest Accra, street hawkers have continued to encroach on public space in the CBD (Adaawen and Jorgensen 2012; Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008). One hawker, Oboye, observed bitterly that obeying the by-law is simply not possible when you have a family to feed. Another, Albert, argued that without an alternative source of income he had no option but to continue to sell on the street:

Exactly where do you want me to go? I don't have any place than to sell here. They cannot sack us from here simply because if you sack I don't have any work to do. We will still come back.

As such, the informal proletariat continue to occupy Accra's streets because they rely on accessing this resource for their survival. When asked by a journalist why they had returned to selling on the Kaneshie Road following the introduction of the by-law, one hawker was quoted as saying 'just like your office feeds you, this street feeds me' (Amegavie 2011).

### *The eviction and displacement of low-income squatters*

Around the same time as the launch of the decongestion exercise, Vanderpuije's AMA announced its plans to demolish the Old Fadama informal squatter settlement with a view to reclaiming the occupied state land so that private-sector developers could build high-rise mixed-use developments (David, Officer, AMA Planning Department). The displaced squatters will be replaced by those who can afford to access the hotels, offices and apartments that will replace the shacks that currently occupy this land. Sylvia, an AMA officer, referred to the redevelopment as a form of 'upgrading', but 'not the type of upgrading where we are going to legalise people staying there'. As such, this planned redevelopment is a form of state-led gentrification, defined broadly as the 'class remake of the central urban landscape' (Smith 1996, 39). This resonates with recent studies that suggest that gentrification outside of North America and Western Europe often takes place through the demolition and redevelopment of informal settlements (Ascensao 2015; Nwanna 2015; Shin 2009).

The planned gentrification of Old Fadama will result in the enclosure of an important inner city housing commons. By occupying and transforming a flood-prone wasteland into a vibrant residential neighbourhood, the squatters at Old Fadama have engaged in a form of place making that gives them a legitimate collective property claim to the land in question (Blomley 2008). This claim is based on the use value of the settlement, which provides Accra's migrant informal workers from northern Ghana with much needed low-cost, centrally located shelter, in addition to kinship and community in a strange city. It is for this reason that several residents expressed a preference to remain at Old Fadama rather than be relocated to a new site further away from the CBD (Mensah and Nana, Old Fadama). Nana, for example, was concerned that relocation to outside the city would leave residents stranded a long way away from their place of work:

This place is the centre of Accra business district. So if you want to go to markets, if you want to go to your work, there's no need you to bother a car to your workplace or to the market. You just walk in. But giving us a relocation to a far place, far district and you want to come to Accra or your work is in Accra, everyday you have to board a car, day-in day-out. And it will cost you. Maybe the work that you are doing you are not earning so much money there. So I think

that, I prefer that, to me personally, I prefer that relocation is not the best for the community.

Although the activity of the squatters has produced a housing commons with use value to its inhabitants, it has also created a potential exchange value: what was once dismissed as a peripheral wasteland is now viewed as prime real estate by government officials. As such, the planned gentrification of Old Fadama is consistent with the state's entrepreneurial strategy of facilitating access to urban land for private developers.

### **Discursive mechanisms of enclosure**

In Hodgkinson's account of the enclosure of the public housing commons in the UK, the physical-legal process of privatisation was accompanied by an ideological assault on social housing so that

once popular inner-city mixed working-class communities increasingly became by-words for poor quality housing, unemployment, social ills and welfare dependency, ideologically reinforcing the privatisation momentum. (2012, 514)

In the case of Accra, physical-legal mechanisms are accompanied by discursive strategies in order to engineer popular acquiescence for accumulation by urban dispossession. In particular, state actors have sought to add ideological reinforcement to the strategies of dispossession described above through the revanchist discursive framing of urban commoning practices in terms of dirt and disorder.

Hawkers have been scapegoated for a range of urban problems including street robbery, litter and sanitation problems in the CBD (Kwabena Owusu Acheampong, Deputy Minister of Tourism; Sylvia, Officer, AMA Budget and Rating Department) and Vanderpuije has publicly stated that the aim of the decongestion exercise is to 'stem indiscipline and lawlessness and make the city governable and healthy to live in' (*Modern Ghana News* 2009). The authorities have also attempted to frame Old Fadama as a den of criminality and vice and a threat to law and order. Vanderpuije and other officials have persistently referred to Old Fadama by the derogatory name 'Sodom and Gomorrah', referencing the biblical cities that were destroyed by God because their inhabitants were sinful. Upon serving the community with an eviction notice in 2009, Vanderpuije and the Greater Accra Regional Minister, Nii Armah Ashietey, both claimed that there was a high level of criminal activity in the area, even reportedly labelling Old Fadama a threat to national security (Bentil 2009; GhanaWeb 2009).

By framing hawkers and squatters in these terms, officials have painted them as a threat to efforts to modernise and beautify Accra. Such discursive framings of informality are commonplace across postcolonial African cities (Kamete 2013; Popke and Ballard 2004; Setsabi and Leduka 2008). They represent a

particularly neo-colonial form of revanchism based on an ideological binary between modernity, represented by the desirable traits of cleanliness, order and efficiency, on the one hand, and informality, associated with the non-modern traits of dirt, disease, crime and disorder, on the other. As Yatmo (2008) argues, the discursive framing of informal street vendors in these terms suggests that they are considered by officials to be what Douglas (1966) terms 'out of place' in the context of the modern, planned city. In Accra, this discursive framing underpins efforts to exclude informal street trade from a modernised, globalised urban core in order to create a centre-periphery structure similar to that of the colonial city in which a planned European CBD was strictly segregated from informal indigenous commercial quarters (Grant 2009; Obeng-Odoom 2013b).

Several Old Fadama residents expressed their dismay that the AMA had resorted to portraying a working community as an undifferentiated mass of criminals, somehow separate to the rest of Ghanaian society. According to one resident, Mensah,

there are hard-working young men and women in here who go out there every morning. These porters, carrying the so-called big men or the middle-income people, their things. And then you turn the next day and call them they are criminals. How can that be possible ... these are hard-working people, they pay tax. These porters pay tax on daily basis. And the City Mayor will say 'they are a threat to national security' and people embrace it.

Contrary to the discursive framing of squatters as dangerous outlaws, the vast majority are workers who play a central role in the city's economy – whether through running the wholesale food market, carrying shoppers' goods for them or engaging in a variety of informal enterprises – and who contribute to the local tax base (Afenah 2012).

### Explaining accumulation by urban dispossession

In the context of Accra, accumulation by urban dispossession is co-produced through an 'urban ruling class alliance' (Harvey 1989) between the state and capital. The privatisation of communal land, the 'decongestion' of Accra's streets and the planned demolition of Old Fadama all entail the state working as an agent for financial, tourism and real-estate capital. The traditional authorities have also played an active role in producing dispossession, as the loss of communal land to state acquisition has been compounded by the leasing out of land by its traditional custodians for private gain (Aryeetey *et al.* 2007; Owusu 2008).

It is important to note that the state is not an uncomplicated, monolithic, unitary actor. Although the

current NDC and former NPP governments both appointed mayors they hoped would modernise Accra, both were compelled to intervene at some point to restrain the AMA when they feared that decongestion was undermining electoral support among affected populations (Bob-Milliar and Obeng-Odoom 2011). In addition, the NDC government has established a National Committee on the Informal Economy to promote the informal sector as a possible source of employment and economic growth (*The Statesman* 2010). As such, although Obeng-Odoom (2011) argues that the Ghanaian state has adopted a combative stance towards the informal sector, it is more precise to say that there are certain elements within the state, particularly the city authorities, that view the spatial practices of Accra's informal proletariat as a barrier to progress.

The question remains, however, as to why state actors feel compelled to enclose the urban commons in Accra? In his account of accumulation by dispossession, Harvey (2003) explains the continuous nature of primitive accumulation as a function of capital's need to find geographical 'fixes' to its inherent crisis tendencies, in particular the tendency of capital to overaccumulate. Harvey argues that accumulation by dispossession is the means by which capital feeds on that which lies outside it, with new rounds of enclosure making assets available at a low cost in order to create new opportunities for profitable investment. Within this schema, Harvey (2012, 78) describes the urban commons as a resource that is 'raided and appropriated' by predatory capital.

In the context of Accra, it is possible to argue that the state is compelled to enclose the urban commons in order to create profitable outlets for overaccumulating capital in the built environment. However, this capital-centric account does not acknowledge the political agency of the city dwellers who actively produce urban commons and create limits to entrepreneurial attempts to valorise urban space. Drawing on De Angelis (2007), enclosure in this context should be understood as a reactive response to the limits to accumulation posed by a rival social force – the urban commons. Some of these limits are posed by the persistence of pre-capitalist land tenure discouraging investment in the built environment, while others are posed by the occupation of urban space by hawkers and squatters. As such, accumulation by urban dispossession in Accra is a strategic response to the continuous struggles of the informal proletariat that seeks to overcome these barriers through the enclosure of urban commons. Rather than overemphasising the role of overaccumulating capital in determining the urban process, therefore, this approach acknowledges working-class agency and the role of struggle in engineering accumulation by urban dispossession.

This analysis demonstrates how, as Parnell and Robinson (2012) argue, theories of urban neoliberalism



based on the experience of cities in Europe and North America are of limited use in understanding the political economy of cities in other geographical contexts. Rather than explaining processes of enclosure in Accra as an expression of neoliberal ideology, theorising dispossession in this context requires acknowledging that, in a context of widespread informality and limited state capacity, the authorities are often on the back foot, reacting to other forces that shape the production of urban space (Roy 2009a). Furthermore, while structural inter-urban competition compels the state to behave entrepreneurially in Accra, it is important to also acknowledge the residual influence of other historical modes of governance in the production of dispossession in this particular context (Chalfin 2010; Obeng-Odoom 2013b). In the case of the decongestion exercise, contemporary attitudes towards regulating Accra's CBD are reminiscent of the colonial policy of segregating global and indigenous business activities. Similarly, the activist approach of the postcolonial developmental state regarding land assembly for urban development has created the conditions for the privatisation of land for elite development projects in contemporary Accra. As such, rather than simple 'neoliberalism', these processes of dispossession are a product of the combination of urban entrepreneurialism with the legacies of previous modes of urban governance in Ghana.

### Rethinking primitive accumulation

Orthodox Marxist accounts of primitive accumulation tend to treat the experience of the European industrial proletariat as archetypal. Accordingly, it is assumed that the enclosure of commons is a means to create a supply of labour that can be exploited in the capitalist production process (see, for example, Ashman and Callinicos 2006). This assumption is also evident in the work of non-orthodox Marxists, such as De Angelis (2001) and Federici (1990), who argue that the constant separation of producers from the means of production is necessary for the reproduction of the capital relation through the creation of a disciplined, wage-dependent proletariat. Yet Accra is home to a large informal proletariat that has been separated from the land but whose labour has not been directly employed by capital. As such, this 'surplus population' is a part of the growing army of the global dispossessed, particularly within the Global South, that is excluded from formal wage labour (Denning 2010; Murray Li 2009; Sanyal 2007; Watts 2011). For this reason, it is evident that accumulation by urban dispossession in Accra serves a fundamentally different function to the 'classic form' of primitive accumulation described by Marx (1976 [1867]).

Obeng-Odoom (2010) argues that Vanderpuije's decongestion exercise is designed to benefit capital by

creating a large urban labour surplus to keep wages low and to discipline the workforce with the threat of unemployment. However, this explanation ignores the fact that a huge industrial reserve army already exists in Accra, and that this surplus population is creating barriers to accumulation through its presence in the city, and particularly its commoning practices. As such, Obeng-Odoom's analysis does not capture the contradictory role of surplus labour vis-à-vis accumulation at the urban scale. Although an unemployed 'industrial reserve army' is a structural necessity for capital accumulation, its visible presence in cities undermines urban entrepreneurial strategies to attract capital and fix it in place (Mitchell 2003). As such, the role of accumulation by urban dispossession, in the case of Accra at least, is not to create a labour surplus, but to exclude it from public spaces and displace it from inner city neighbourhoods to the urban fringe so that its presence does not disrupt the circulation of capital.

Following Sassen (2014), primitive accumulation in this case takes the form of the 'expulsion' of unwanted people at the same time as it brings about the incorporation of spaces and resources into the circuits of global capitalism. Whereas Sassen makes this argument in relation to corporate land grabs in rural Africa, this article reveals the particular form that expulsions take in an African urban context. Rather than incorporating the dispossessed into the capitalist production process as workers and consumers, accumulation by urban dispossession seeks to extract wealth by enclosing the urban commons and expelling the informal proletariat to the periphery. This supports Bush's (2007) argument that the plunder of resources, rather than the exploitation of surplus value through the wage relation, is the primary means by which wealth is extracted from Africa. Contrary to orthodox Marxist accounts of primitive accumulation that view the experience of the European (male) industrial working class as archetypal, therefore, the experience of Accra's informal proletariat demonstrates how primitive accumulation is not a uniform experience but has differential effects across the global working class (Federici 2004). This demonstrates how Eurocentric theories of primitive accumulation must be rethought as they 'travel' to other geographical contexts (Robinson and Parnell 2011).

### Contesting dispossession

Whereas orthodox Marxism has tended to view primitive accumulation as progressive because it leads to the creation of the industrial proletariat (the privileged agent of historical change), the case of Accra demonstrates that the defence of commons is strategically important as they enable the informal proletariat to reproduce itself despite its exclusion from formal wage labour and housing markets. Although urban commons

are typically created through everyday acts of 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat 1997), there are several ways in which Accra's informal proletariat are taking collective action to contest accumulation by urban dispossession.

First, there is a long tradition of organised opposition to the expropriation and privatisation of communal land in Accra, particularly from Ga and Ga-Dangme organisations that believe that their ethnic group is being dispossessed to the advantage of other Ghanaians (Quarcoopome 1992; Yeboah 2008). Since 2010, a group of young people from La calling themselves the PanAfrikanYemei Cooperative Society for Community Regeneration has begun to campaign for undeveloped expropriated land to be returned to community control. Second, in response to the decongestion exercise the trade union movement is collaborating with StreetNet International, a global network of informal workers' membership organisations, to organise traders' associations into a coordinated network that is capable of lobbying the state for the right to space in the city (Brown *et al.* 2010). These developments, discussed in depth elsewhere demonstrate how Accra's informal proletariat are taking collective action to claim their 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996 [1967]) by defending their collective access to urban space.

Third, in response to the threatened eviction of Old Fadama, a local affiliate of the NGO Slum Dwellers International (SDI) called People's Dialogue on Human Settlements (PD) was established to organise residents into a community-based organisation called the Ghana Federation of the Urban Poor. PD and the Federation have assumed a leading role in negotiations with the authorities, and can claim some credit for stalling the eviction of the settlement. This has prompted some commentators to praise SDI for enabling the squatters to 'claim their right to the city' (Afenah 2010, 162). However, PD has also cooperated with the government on a plan to relocate Old Fadama to a site 30 kilometres outside of Accra (Afenah 2012). As such, and in light of criticisms of SDI cooperating with governments to displace informal settlement dwellers in other contexts (Huchzermeyer 2011; Roy 2009b), there is an urgent need for this organisation's activities in Accra to be subject to further critical scrutiny.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to address the lack of research on the dynamics of enclosure at the urban scale through an empirical case study of contemporary process of class-based dispossession in a particular urban context. It has also sought to respond to calls to shift the focus of urban theory from North to South by challenging the basic assumptions that underpin the widely used concepts of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession

and posing a modified concept – accumulation by urban dispossession – that better captures the dynamics of urban change in Accra. Why modify an existing, Northern-centric theory rather than breaking with Marx and Harvey altogether? Although it is true that the project to decentre urban theory requires the development of new, contextually specific concepts, research by Bond (2005), Loftus (2006) and Elyachar (2005) has illustrated the value of Marxist theories of dispossession for understanding the urban process in Africa. This article supports this conclusion by demonstrating that the state is engaging in the enclosure of the urban commons in Accra. However, this article has also explored the limits of both Marx and Harvey for understanding dispossession in this context. In posing the concept 'accumulation by urban dispossession', it has sought to provincialise established Marxist theories of dispossession by exposing and challenging the 'parochial assumptions' and 'universalist aspirations' that inform these theories and demonstrating how they must be reconsidered as they 'travel' from place to place (Robinson and Parnell 2011, 523).

An implication of this process of provincialisation is that Accra should not be treated as archetypal of Southern cities. Contemporary patterns of enclosure in other urban contexts may assume a very different dynamic to the processes of accumulation by urban dispossession theorised in this article. As such, there is a need for further research into the dynamics of dispossession in cities outside of the 'usual suspects', such as in those contexts where mega events and mega projects are driving new patterns of urban transformation (Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013; Schindler 2015). There is also a need to build on particular city case studies, valuable as they are, with comparative research that explores how contested processes of urban change converge and diverge in different contexts, particularly between cities of the global North and South. This research must be willing to question things often taken for granted in critical urban theory, such as the dominance of capital and the state over the urban process. Instead, urban theory must pay greater attention to the other forces that shape the production of urban space in specific contexts, particularly the everyday struggles of urban inhabitants for whom the right to the city is a matter of survival.

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