

Revolution for Life

A Philosophy of the New Forms of Protest

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Introduction

Take care that when you leave the world
You have not merely been good, but are leaving
a better world!

Bertolt Brecht, *St Joan of the Stockyards*

This book is about life. At times, it is about life as dancing, as narrating, as harvesting, as thinking and as acting. And it is about the natural conditions which make our lives possible: oceans, clouds, earth, forests and the air we breathe. But above all, it is about life in a more specific sense: as emancipation from capitalism.

This emancipation is not a remote, exalted aspiration but an urgent task. Because capitalism destroys life. Another reason why emancipation from capitalism is more than just an aspiration is that it is already happening in various places. We are experiencing a revolution for life. For almost ten years, a new type of protest has been emerging. This protest is neither a renewal of the social revolutions of a century ago, nor simply a continuation of the civil rights movements which have been in progress for over fifty years. The new forms of resistance start from a mobilisation for lives which are acutely under threat, and fight for the possibility of a shared life which would be protected and organised together in solidarity. A revolution for life can be found when anti-racist activists mobilise against police violence, when feminists fight against femicide and when climate protesters confront us with the horrific image of a dead planet. All these movements see themselves as anti-capitalist, but they organise their struggle not as the resistance of the workers against wage labour, but as the resistance of the living against the destruction of life.

Under the conditions of a global pandemic, this fight is becoming more tangible and more omnipresent. It is also becoming more desperate. Once more, whole sectors of wage labour have turned out to destroy life.

Wage labour is the almost mechanical movement of wrists that are swollen with cold, cutting meat from the carcasses of pigs. The heavy, stiff pieces are sliced up by motorised blades and

thrown onto conveyer belts. They are vacuum packed in plastic by machines or shredded together with fat and intestines to make sausage or cat food. Every now and then, the blades slide from the grasp of the cold, slippery fingers, or they grate against cartilage: the workers cut themselves. But anyone who goes to the doctor too often will face dismissal. Most of the work contracts are organised by subcontractors, with fictitious probation periods and fake self-employment. The first workers to be infected with Covid-19 are told to cover the illness up. When almost a quarter of the 7000 workers are ill, the Minister President of the federal state offers the same explanation as the company's spokesman. Supposedly, eastern European workers became infected when visiting their home countries. Naturally. After all, in the heart of the western European economy, everything is in perfect working order.

This combination of exploitation, brutality and defamation is not found in every workplace. Even in that same company, the spokesman is working under better conditions. But even if it were possible to keep these cruel working conditions in check through reforms and sanctions, the functioning of capitalism would still rely on the same brute logic. It may not look like this everywhere, or for everyone, but this is how we live. This is how we make our food, how we build up wealth, even if we close all the abattoirs. The burning of fossil resources over the course of the last two hundred years, which has been the basis of almost all of our production, has transformed the planet into a greenhouse that is heating up uncontrollably. And this greenhouse is a slaughterhouse. Every day, 130 species of animals and plants become extinct. If we calculate the biomass of all wild animals on the earth – adding together the weight of all their bodies – then the sum total has decreased over the last fifty years by 82 percent. Each ordinary day in a rich industrial country slaughters animals more quickly than the culling facility in any sausage factory. We are not only destroying the foundations of our own way of life, but continually cutting into our own flesh. Why, though? Why does capitalism – why do we, within capitalism – create such brutal conditions?

The term “capital” refers to a particular kind of property. It can be understood as investment which allows the private owners of the means of production to make a profit. Factory owners buy pigs and hours of work and sell the sausage for more than they have spent. Historically, “capital” referred at first only to the share of wealth which a person brought into a trading company. From the seventeenth century, it came to be a term for the whole of a company's basic stock. So capital is property that can be used to do business.

However, the root of the word reveals an even older meaning. In Latin, “caput” originally means “head”, but comes to mean “cattle” and “property.” In agricultural economies, before there were stable currencies, cattle (counted by the head) were the best unit for estimating wealth. The term reappears as “chattel” in the definition of modern slavery, a system of white supremacy which was based on legally protected and economically transferable ownership of Black people. In the portrait of capitalism which I paint in this book, I will foreground the form of property rather than just criticise its distribution. Capital can only increase property if property takes a particular shape; it requires us to have a destructive relationship with the world. This destructiveness is inherent in the modern concept of property, which gives owners the right to use their power arbitrarily. It translates into a range of social relations of domination. So analysing the way in which capitalism fixes property in a certain form means keeping the skull visible – the “caput” or “chattel”. When we read the word “capital”, we should not only hear the clink of profit, but also decipher the death’s head on the label.

In his work *Black Marxism*, the African American thinker Cedric Robinson suggested that we should understand capitalism less as a standardising machine of modernisation – as the Frankfurt School does, for example – but as a tool of division. Capitalism overlays the world with distinctions which are increasingly based on racist markers – think of the above-mentioned trick of blaming the eastern European workers for the filth and the infection risks of their workplace. Robinson explains these divisions as a continuation of the feudalist hierarchies which characterised the context in which capitalism emerged in Europe. But capitalism has its own particular way of creating divisions. It imagines hierarchies in new and different ways, because its approach to property is also new and different.

Modern property brings about a particular relationship to the world: it means that we can dispose of the world as we like, and damage it if we so wish. We assert “dominion” over the world: that is the term I use to refer to this relationship. We can see the effects of dominion when a worker at the abattoir cuts an animal into pieces. And we can see it when the life of the worker is in turn treated as dispensable and exposed to the danger of infection, while the wealthy work from home and order in steak.

It is from our relationship to the world, from many everyday practices and performances, that we derive our concept of ourselves and our sense of superiority. Modern identities emerged from the interplay of institutions which created titles of ownership over people – ownership of a whole person in slavery, ownership of a whole lifetime in forced labour, and ownership

of sexuality and care work in patriarchal marriage. These identities, based on the structures of dominion, have outlived the institutions which once guaranteed their power. In fact, those who used to have the right to control their property often begin to behave in a more bestial manner after the limb of their power has been amputated. They continue to defend an empty claim on their property. They become “phantom owners”, or what the older Frankfurt School called “authoritarian characters”. When those in power continue to lay claim to their past property, they reduce and reify the people over whom they rule, treating them as phantom possessions. Even after the abolition of slavery, Black lives continue to be regarded as disposable, even after the demise of patriarchal marriage, the female sex is seen as prey, and even after the introduction of workers’ rights and social security, workers are pushed to surrender every last bit of energy. All of that is phantom possession, and all of that – alongside raw materials, energy and slaughtered animals – is what capitalism builds on.

The capitalism which Robinson describes as a tool of division makes two kinds of cut. The first cut is marked by property, and runs between the owner and the object which is labelled as being at the owner’s disposal. The second cut divides the object itself. When we decide to exploit things for their value, we draw a line between goods and waste, between value and worthlessness. Often, it is wage labour that is charged with making this division, which is then ratified by the market. The mess and the skeleton go in the trash, the bloody water runs into the sewers, and the meat goes into the tin. As a commodity, wage labour itself is defined by this same division: on the one hand, there is work that can be exploited, and on the other, free time or people who are deemed “unemployable”. There is the hand which can hold the knife – and there is the doctor’s note or the wounded stump. Those divisions are still reproduced when we produce vegan schnitzels or work from home. Soya monocultures encourage land grabbing in the global South; the difference between creativity and procrastination is dictated by profit. We reproduce this brutal system. It rules because of us, and it rules over us. “Because” of some of us more than others – but the interplay of both is necessary.

This book, which is slightly less gory overall than this introduction would suggest, nevertheless sets out to find ways of escaping this system. It is not only about the capitalist destruction of life, but also about the revolution which has already begun to take place in certain in-between spaces. It is a revolution for the sake of life, and for a different life, a revolution which can be understood as an attempted “self-clarification [...] of the struggles

and wishes of the age” (this was how Karl Marx defined the task of critical philosophy at one point). Under the heading of a “revolution for life”, I will bring together an incomplete collection of political groups which I see as examples of protest against capitalist dominion. I see their forms of protest not only as resistance to abuse and to the divisions described above, but also as an anticipation of a different order.

When Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion bring the climate catastrophe to our attention, we can see signs of a position which breaks through the hardened indifference to the world beyond one’s own property – an indifference which typifies us within the modern system of dominion. We could live differently; we could reproduce different patterns in our everyday actions. There are alternatives to destruction.

Black Lives Matter, with its absolute insistence on the importance of lives which have been devalued by racism, with its active interventions against all racist systemic violence – police violence, but also the violence of toxic industries and militarised borders – opens up a fundamentally new political horizon. We could save lives instead of destroying them.

Latin American feminists use the slogan “Ni una menos” – “not one [woman] less” to protest against the never-ending number of femicides by partners and ex-partners. Through their women’s strikes, they show that we could work differently. Instead of exhausting ourselves and nature in the name of profit and phantom possession, we could have a regenerative effect: we could nourish, care – and dance.

With their targeted attacks on coal power plants in Germany, the activists of Ende Gelände (meaning “here and no further” or “that’s it!”) insist that society must think about how we produce goods and what we do with our resources. Rather than exploiting resources, we could share them – or simply leave them in the ground.

The backbone of the international movement for climate justice, to which Ende Gelände also belongs, is formed by indigenous resistance groups. One example of their fight is the blockade of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which pipes oil through the tribal territories of the Sioux, threatening their water sources. The protests under the slogan “Water is life” – “mni wiconi” in Lakota – are not based on modern property rights, but on the duty to care for the

land and for habitats. We could care for what has been entrusted to us, rather than subjugating it.

The world of capitalist dominion is a slaughterhouse. But as Bertolt Brecht summarises the impulse behind all the more detailed dialectical reconstructions of contradictions: “Certainty is never certain. It will not stay the way it is.” And we do not need a big explosion to go from here into a new present. Because “the way things are” is not the same everywhere. We can look for places to start, and we can create those places ourselves, moving from many directions and locations at the same time to forge a relationship with the world that is not destructive. We can save life instead of destroying it, we can regenerate work rather than exhausting it, we can share resources rather than exploiting them, and we can care for property rather than controlling it. Wherever we start that process and wherever we continue it, a revolution for life will grow.

CONTROL

(Property)

When we imagine nature, or when we actually go outdoors, we see a landscape which has been divided up. Hedges, embankments and fences separate individual fields and meadows from each other, forests have edges, and ditches have clear contours. In a way, property has grown into the world.

In his *Discourse on Inequality*, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau lamented the fact that fences existed at all. In 1755, he wrote that humanity would have been saved a lot of suffering if “the first man who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, *This is mine,*” had been stopped. Like many critical thinkers since, Rousseau wanted to understand why European societies cause harm even when they follow supposedly enlightened ideals. Greed and enclosure seemed to him to be important factors. However, he made the mistake of equating the way in which his own contemporaries thought of property with the idea of property itself – as if all fences always meant the same thing. But they don’t. Rousseau’s critique of civilisation as a whole is not precise enough. So when we run up against fences, it is worth taking a closer look at what they are made of.

Stutenberg (Mare’s Hill)

I grew up with a story about the enclosure of an estate which later belonged to my father’s ancestors for a while. It is the story of Stutenberg, which translates as Mare’s Hill.

In the 15th century, the region of Ermland (Warmia), which had previously been colonised by the Teutonic Knights, was placed under the sovereignty of the Polish-Lithuanian crown, following the Thirteen Years’ War. The King rewarded one knight for his distinguished service by giving him as much land as he could ride around in one day. The knight rode out in the morning at a full gallop from a small hill, and returned in the evening to the same place, where his horse collapsed under him and died. Hence the name “Stutenberg” or Mare’s Hill.

Similar stories are connected with so many different places that we have no way of knowing whether these events really did take place somewhere. At any rate, I was always confused that people told the story in a tone of triumph. Why should that guy get an estate? How could the last few acres of swampy land be more valuable than his best mare? Why wasn't the story about a man who lost his way?

But in this exact form, the story can help us understand the oddities of modern property. The first peculiarity can already be seen in the fact that the circle has to be closed. Because it is only when something is clearly enclosed that it becomes controllable. We have to be able to distinguish what is part of it, and what isn't. Plenty of things, like land and natural resources, do not have a clearly defined or self-contained form. Unlike a horse or an apple, they do not offer an obvious way of knowing what the property consists of – even “natural borders” such as rivers or mountain ranges have to be defined as such. And in fact, even horses have to be defined in some ways: they are sold with a halter – because a horse which cannot be held is a bit too much of a flight risk. If today's landscapes seem to be divided clearly into different fields, then the hedges and embankments reflect their century-long treatment as property. Nature only took on this form gradually. It is not naturally like this, but was shaped by countless moments such as the enclosure described in the story of the knight. As cartography and administration developed, we no longer had to rely on physical markers to define boundaries. It is not the hedges, but the land registers which now divide the surface of the earth in such a way that it can be quickly and unambiguously transferred to a different owner. These lines obscure what came before. Even riding around an area in a day already implies some of the abstract distance of a map. The land is assigned in a strangely autocratic way: as if nothing was there before. The titles of ownership are not sealed by the knight's relationship to the land in question, or by his knowledge of its particular characteristics, but only by the force he is able to exert. The fantasy that this is an untouched landscape veils the fact that further force will be necessary in order to rule within the circle. But in fact, the Masurian lowlands were not uninhabited; pagan Baltic Prussians lived there. Uncharted territory has only ever existed from the point of view of the conquerers. Simply by measuring again, drawing a new circle, all previous claims are wiped away. Property gets a new history – that of its triumphant annexation. Everything that went before is drowned out by that story, because in the myth of conquest, there is no space for living connections, or for traces of the past.

In this story, the owner is external to the property. The enclosure of the estate also separates it from him. Perhaps that is why the connecting link has to be sacrificed. After all, the mare is

part of the property, but at the same time an extension of the owner's body. It is only thanks to her strength that he was able to impose his will on this territory. And her strength is a reminder of the land. She will have grazed before daybreak, she will have stopped now and then to drink water. Getting rid of her, putting her in the ground, helps to obscure the join between the owner and what he controls. With the mare, the knight buries the traces of his dependency – the fact that he never would have won the land by himself. This means that the pure will of the rider – the determination to draw exactly the right line – stands sovereign over the lifeless territory.

What makes modern property stand out is the new relationship to the object which is owned: the owner has unlimited power over it. Modern property gives owners the right not only to control and use, but also to misuse and destroy their property. In the late medieval tale of Mare's Hill, this aspect is only present in the frame story. After the ride, the knight's sovereignty would initially have been over, because the estate itself, the land which was taken, would not be fully at the disposal of its owner. He himself and his firstborn male descendants would manage it in the name of the crown. This land would still have premodern hedges; it could not be destroyed or sold by its manager. The mare which is ridden to death foreshadows the fate of modern property, but initially it stands for something else. The point is not so much to maximise property, because the land could not be valuable enough to justify the extra effort to gain slightly more. Instead, it is about proving aristocratic strength and ruthlessness. The rider cannot sacrifice his horse simply because it belongs to him – it is only later that this logic comes to be taken for granted. Instead, he is demonstrating that he has the ruler's virtue which befits his newly acquired aristocratic status. If "virtue" is the word.

Land and people, land without people

The version of property which seems entirely natural to us is historically unique. Only in this understanding of property does "this is mine" mean that I can do what I want with something. The form which the modern West has found for ownership can be called "absolute dominion". It rests on the idea that our property is entirely at our disposal, and with colonialism and capitalist globalization it has conquered every corner of the earth. This principle has infiltrated both our everyday connection with the world and our boldest visions – even when we are not thinking about property directly.

The idea of property was gradually modernised until we reached the concept of absolute dominion which has now become normal. Already in the eighteenth century, British legal

scholar William Blackstone, a contemporary of Rousseau, defined this new form of ownership emphatically as “that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world.” After the French Revolution, the “despotie” of owners was explicitly expressed as a right in the Code Napoléon, for the first time in history. Owners not only had the right to use or to transfer their property, but also the right to abuse it – the *ius abutendi*.

Today, we still understand property as full dominion, even if few titles accord absolutely unlimited control. Any limitations must be added explicitly to the basic right, and stem from the interests of other owners, not from the notion of property or from the things themselves – the paradigm of modern property stands, even if most of the world falls.

In order for our relationship to property to become synonymous with absolute dominion, it first had to be released from the structures of feudal rule. The feudal system was based on a range of rights and obligations established in common law: the peasants living on the land were obliged to pay tithes, and in return the landlords were obliged to protect them. Ruling the land always meant ruling the people too. It was only in modern times that these two forms of authority were separated. They were divided in such a way that rulership (Latin *imperium*) only applied to people, who were regarded as free and at least potentially capable of consent. Meanwhile, ownership (Latin *dominium*) was limited to things and at the same time intensified.

When ruling became separate from owning, it meant that people could become owners independent of rank. Now, any male citizen could own property, if he was able to acquire it. Acquiring property became linked with work, which legitimised it in a new way. John Locke argued that people should be able to keep what they had worked for themselves – an idea which still makes sense when we consider the examples he used, writing more than three centuries ago: collecting nuts, or cultivating land and keeping the harvest.

However, in fact, the processes by which people acquired property still continued to include conquest. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch empire was at its peak. Great Britain was building its trade posts in India, taking over the Caribbean islands and settling North America in growing competition with France. The people who already lived in the supposedly “new” world interacted with nature in ways that were discredited as “non-work”, and the land could therefore be regarded as unclaimed or ownerless. Already among critics at the time, it did not go unnoticed that the North American tribes of hunters were prevented from keeping their

prairies, while the English king was allowed to own Sherwood Forest. After all, it wasn't as if he did anything there but ride around and shoot the occasional deer.

But royal sovereignty was actually losing its justification as a purely inherited title.

According to the new social contract theories developed by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the modern monarchy should not only legitimise itself through inheritance, but also prove itself as a guarantor of property.

The new order of property created a new type of equality among male Europeans, which was reflected in the fact that serfdom began to be abolished and estates became transferable through sale and purchase. But above all, it created a promise of radical freedom which had not been thinkable before: the idea that people could do as they liked with their worldly goods.

Meanwhile, for western European women, the legal situation deteriorated in the seventeenth century, as they were only rarely allowed to hold property in their own names. When a woman married, her property always passed to her husband under the laws known as *coverture*. Here was another sort of conquest, and never solely one of the heart.

Thus, modern property arose from the crumbling feudal system. At the same time, it paved the way for capitalism. With the change in the form of property – i.e., with the question of what was meant by “belong” – came a shift in the relations of ownership, i.e., the question of what belonged to whom. Landowners now owned their land in a new and more radical way, as they were no longer obliged to uphold established rights or look after their subordinates. They made use of that in the early modern enclosures – especially in Great Britain and Southern Germany – which presented a new, more tangible way of separating the land from the people. They fenced off meadows and commons, and used the land for more profitable agriculture or for livestock, driving the local people away rather than letting them use it for subsistence farming. Karl Marx studied this process mainly through the late example of land grabbing in the Scottish Highlands, and saw it as a pre-condition for capitalist economy. In what he described as “so-called primitive accumulation”, wealth was concentrated and an early form of agricultural capital was created. At the same time, a class of uprooted landless people was forged, who could be used as a workforce in the growing manufacturing sector. This development starts with a picture of paradoxical emancipation. The former serfs were now free. They had the right to become owners themselves. But in fact, they had just lost their livelihood. As free people, they owned themselves. But initially, they had no desire to sell their labour to the new mills and factories. They were used to the economy of the

commons, and to a feudal and communal system in which they were entitled to support. They were not looking for employment, but for alternative forms of self-sufficiency. Why shouldn't they travel around and seek their fortune on the road: why shouldn't they make use of the wilderness, or take from those who had more than enough? Even when the law clamped down on them, most would rather be vagrants than wage labourers, and they went on gathering – often led by women – to attack the hedges and fences surrounding the fields and commons that had once been theirs. This became a downright mass movement of tramps and vagabonds, only halted by draconian punishments. Those who were caught were branded in the same way as animals or enslaved people.

Order would probably never have been restored if it hadn't been for the additional kinds of fictive objects of ownership which emerged alongside private land. The social order needed compensatory property for the self-owners who had been robbed. And so, blurring the supposedly clean line of separation between rulership and ownership, *imperium* and *dominium*, a new form of domination emerged: “dominion” among people. From now on, people, too, could be treated like things.

Dominion

The new, unlimited freedom promised by ownership – the idea of being able to do absolutely anything with the things we own – must have sounded very hollow to most of the early modern population. Because they did not own anything. Being freed may have ended the drudgery of serfdom, but unlike the landlords who suddenly ruled freely over meadows and forests, the landless lacked any object that would have assured them of their new freedom. This was all the more so when they lost their most immediate freedom – the freedom to go wherever their legs would carry them – as vagrants were increasingly persecuted. So what could be gained by those who had no fortune? Why did they not simply continue to rip out the fences? Apart from being crushed by brute violence, for instance during the Peasants' Wars of the sixteenth century, vagrants and rebels were pacified when many of them attained the status of owners. Not by gaining material goods, but by gaining social power that resembled ownership. As social relations were reified according to the pattern of ownership, the white male unpropertied classes were allowed their own kind of dominion. Their “fictional” property took shape as power concentrated in their hands; within the modern institutions of slavery and patriarchal marriage, they were entitled to rule over others. The propertyless, we could say, were compensated at the expense of the powerless.

The puzzle of why it should seem like an attractive freedom to own nothing but one's own skin is solved immediately when the contrast is not with serfdom and access to common land, but with modern slavery.

The institution of slavery was not designed along racist lines from the start. In the seventeenth century, white indentured workers were not uncommon in the Caribbean colonies and in the southern states; among them were many women. During Bacon's Rebellion in the state of Virginia, in 1676, forced labourers with English and African backgrounds still joined forces against the owners of the plantations. One generation later, the Virginia Slave Code underpinned white dominance with deliberate legislation to break the solidarity between propertyless people and codify the objectification of unfree Black people. From that moment on, mixed marriages were no longer allowed, whipping enslaved people was legal, and enslavement was inherited. Being white became, even for those without property, an assurance of superiority, since free Black employers could no longer employ white people, and whites could no longer be enslaved under any circumstances. People were defined as either Black or white according to outward characteristics and lines of descent, and this definition was introduced explicitly as a mark of property. Skin colour became a label in the economic order of the plantations and in the international system of the slave trade, a label that showed who was to be seen as an owner and who as property. In the USA there were no in-between forms, since all children with a mixed background were regarded categorically as Black, in order to increase the enslaved population and exclude the illegitimate children of plantation owners from the line of inheritance. In the history of colonialism and the slave trade, the classification as "Black" therefore became a sign that someone's work, mobility and status as a human being were potentially available to be appropriated by someone counted as "white",.

Not only for overseas workers, but also for European workers who were informed about it, slavery served as a point of contrast for their own fate. Only in the context of white dominion over Black people was it possible to get enough out of the wretched freedom of being a self-owner to sell one's own work and lifetime willingly in wage labour. However, in spite of this stabilising contrast, impoverished self-owners lacked an external sphere of power – after all, one's own labour had to be transferred immediately to the manufacturers, factory owners, captains and masters. It was patriarchal dominion that allowed a proportion of the landless in Europe – like the propertied and the white settlers in the colonies – to enjoy the despotic freedom of the owner.

The new relationship between the sexes did not emerge without violence. In her stunning reconstruction of the persecution of witches, the materialist feminist Silvia Federici has shown the extent to which this two-hundred-year campaign of terror against women contributed to the early modern transformation of property relations. For Federici, the demonisation of the knowledge circulating among women with regard to birth, contraception and abortion is a continuation of the expropriation of the commons which had provided a shared life. She deciphers the historical struggles over female obedience, solidarity beyond patriarchal influence, sex changes and sodomy, sexual excess and sexual unavailability, as resistance to the expropriation of women by the rulers of church and state. In the Inquisition and in the stricter patriarchal marriage laws, however, the transfer of existing wealth was not the only thing at stake – at the same time, pre-modern gender relations were being transferred into a new form that would correspond to the relationship between sovereign owner and disposable resource.

Marriage under coverture gave every husband access to an enclosed piece of life. He owned all of his wife's care work in the broadest sense: he had a claim on her property, the power to decide whether she was employed, the right to sexual intercourse, and control over any offspring. These different aspects can be summarised as “reproductive capacity”: everything a person can actively offer in terms of care and regeneration. The fact that it even became possible to circumscribe this entire domain of human activity as “femininity” is thanks to the modern separation of the sphere of domestic care work from wage labour outside the home – a bourgeois ideal which met with great resistance from the working classes. For the workers, it made much more sense to bring small children to the factory and feed them there, rather than leaving them at home in the care of siblings, let alone remaining at home without pay. This spatial separation, along with bourgeois morality and sexuality, helped to separate out reproductive powers and to present them more and more as an attribute of physical traits rather than as an area of human activity. In order to uphold such a binary logic, gender identity was tied to the binary of cisgender bodies at the cost of criminalising and persecuting trans and other gender non-conforming lives. Like Levellers tearing down newly erected fences, transgender people lift an infrastructure for appropriation which power would have us mistake for nature. Gender as we know it came after dominion.

The formative subjugation to male volition in the isolation of an individual marriage caused an unease that structures violence towards women even now: they are supposed to belong to their husbands, and yet they are still alive enough to call that exclusive control into question. After all, witches were not burned as defenders of the commons, as Federici sometimes

implies, but as property. They just happened to be the property of the wrong man: in this case, the devil.

Social dominion means controlling aspects of other people as if they were property. For this purpose, that aspect – be it skin colour or gender – has to be enclosed, separated out and subjected to external violence. And it must be controlled fully and entirely, according to the norms of modern property – as if everything that was circumscribed in that way were a thing. The “property” being enclosed, separated out and controlled was not always there, at least not in this form. It is created in the process of marking. Our bodies are the result of four billion years of evolution, but they are also shaped by human power relations. There are fences and walls here too, which have grown into the landscape of our bodies.