From The Old Enclosures Of The Land To The New Enclosures Of Cyberspace

Capitalism in the Industrial and Information Age: A family history

by Stefan Wray

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To The New
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A family history

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Preface

This pamphlet was created as a project for a graduate class called Introduction to Marxian Economics taught by Harry Cleaver at the University of Texas at Austin. It is also written for an audience of family, friends, and associates. It may be of greater interest to people who already know something of my perspectives and it is not necessarily for a wider audience, but it can be.

I should say that while I have come to borrow certain concepts from Marx, that I am not a Marxist. As more of an anti-authoritarian or anarchist I have traditionally veered away from Marx's work. In fact, until recently I had on blinders and believed that Marx was of little value. However, much of critical social theory that I've been exposed to while a graduate student in communication originates with Marx. It is a mistake to ignore his ideas or to think that because of the fall of the Soviet Union and collapse of communism that automatically Marx should be shoved into the dustbin of history.

The primary ideas from Marx that are expanded upon and used as a basis for explaining more contemporary phenomena are his notions on enclosures expressed in the section of the first volume of Capital called "So-Called Primitive Accumulation." This section is useful because of its examination of the origins of capitalism. But as capitalism is a constant process of conquest and control, the notion of the enclosure of the commons has equal applicability today as we see commonly used cyberspace being taken over and commodified.

The title of this piece – Enclosures Old and New – refers to this historical continuum of commonly held social space being run over and destroyed by capital. This social space can be real land or virtual cyberspace, but it is all social territory or terrain. Because capitalism is not a total system, there is still social terrain that has not been assimilated. This common space has never been completely wiped out and exists to varying degrees depending on the levels of domination and resistance. Sometimes their are cracks and fissures on capital's surface through which ruptures can explode. Other times capital casts a seamless web.

Introduction

Like a pendulum, this brief essay swings back into the past and then swings forth into the present. It begins with probably the most promising manifestation of resistance to global capitalism in recent time — the efforts of Mexico's Zapatistas and the global network that's been created around them. But it then takes a more personal turn. Unlike many political, and especially academic works, I invoke my own personal history. Pealing back the layers, this piece moves from cultural aspects of neoliberalism, to culture identity issues, to my own identity as Croatian-American, to my grandparent's past in a small village in Croatia, to an understanding of the enclosures in Croatia, and finally back to Marx, to his notions of enclosure of the commons, which effectively mark the beginning of capitalism.

Pivoting on Marx, this work then moves forth again through my grandparent's migration to Pittsburgh, to Pittsburgh now in the Information Age. The thread of enclosures is picked up again in relation to privatization of cyberspace, to other new enclosures, and to current peasant (indigenous) struggles. Finally it returns to the subject of the Zapatistas. A message I interpret from the Zapatistas is the importance of looking for ways to define our separate struggles and identities as part of a global movement by stressing our links and interconnections.

Perhaps, as I have done here, by unraveling our lives and family's cultural histories, by pealing back the layers to those moments when we were forced off the land and into waged labor, we can see how much more alike we are than different.

Each of the following sections or short chapters should stand alone. Meaning that one section ought to be able to be read and understood independent of what comes before it or after it. This piece conceivably can be read backwards and still make sense. The size of the sections are purposefully short with the thought that this work could easily be adapted to a webpage.

Concluding Remarks

I'm not going to conclude by reiterating or summarizing everything that I've written to this point. This piece isn't long enough to warrant that. I just want to mention a few after thoughts.

One thing I didn't mention was the difficulty I have in maintaining a sense of Croatian-American identity. In Austin I don't know of any Croatian restaurants, clubs, associations, or ethnic enclaves. I only know one person who is from Croatia, an older man in his 80s. Even when I've lived elsewhere in the United States outside of Pittsburgh, this has been true. In popular culture, in film or on television, I rarely if ever see any representations of Croatians or even of Slavic peoples. There is nothing in this culture to remind me of where I am from. To have this awareness, I have to force it upon myself. It is something that is being lost.

Another thing that I've not mentioned in this piece is the war and conflict that's been happening since the early 1990s in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, and the rest of what was once Yugoslavia. Even though intellectually I recognize the stupidity of what is basically modern inter-tribal warfare and I often think that these people just need to grow up, sometimes I catch myself being nationalistic, siding with the Croatians in the struggle. This was especially true when I learned that the village where my grandparents came from, Kovacevac, was destroyed by the Serbs and that my living relatives there had become refugees, torn from the land yet again.

I hope that in this brief essay I've shed some light on whiteness. I think I've raised some points that could be the subject of discussion and debate in developing continued analysis of culture aspects of neoliberalism. The Second Intercontinental Encuentro Against Neoliberalism and For Humanity will be in Europe in 1997. This might be an appropriate venue to pursue these and other cultural ideas. In addition, notions about old and new enclosures might be useful to introduce in future expanded pamphlets or other writings prepared for the next Intercontinental Encuentro.

Critique of the National Commission for Democracy in Mexico

The National Commission for Democracy in Mexico, a group based in El Paso, Texas, has been criticized for being hierarchical, bureaucratic, representative of an old left mentality, and interested in maintaining power and control over the pro-Zapatista movement in the United States. Certainly these allegations are debatable. There are clearly people who will defend the NCDM against these charges.

One aspect of the NCDM's strategy that relates to the previous commentary on deconstructing "whiteness" has to do with the way in which this organization wants to construct solidarity along racial and ethnic lines. There is a tendency within the NCDM discourse to assert that the Zapatista movement is first and foremost a struggle of Mexicans and in the United States a struggle of Mexican-Americans. In other word, the NCDM believes that the pro-Zapatista movement in the United States ought to be lead by Chicanos.

This contrasts sharply with the more universal claims that we've been hearing from the Zapatistas themselves. Invariably, Zapatista communiqués and documents are addressed to "all people" on all continents. Discovering commonalty of living under neoliberalism and seeking routes to resist together is at the heart of their message.

I, as a Croatian-American variant of a European-American, have shown how my own cultural roots are bound to living on the land, to the forced removal from the land, and effectively to the forced migration to the United States. This is an experience shared by many current peasant and indigenous peoples. But I suspect that many other European-Americans can tell similar stories if they were to examine their families' pasts.

I think it is wrong that groups like the NCDM put forth a position that suggests that Mexican-Americans or Chicanos have a privileged position vis a vis the Zapatistas. And as I said, I believe the Zapatistas think it is wrong as well. They know that we need to be developing an analysis that moves us forward together.

Intercontinental Encuentro Against Neoliberalism and For Humanity

The First Declaration of La Realidad Against Neoliberalism and For Humanity, issued in January, 1996, in the Zapatista village "La Realidad," was the first call for the assembling of the Intercontinental Encuentro, an historic meeting that took place in Chiapas between July 27 and August 3, 1996. The First Declaration text was distributed globally, primarily via the Net, to groups and individuals who had been part of the pro-Zapatista struggle since this movement's inception after the January 1, 1994 Zapatista uprising. The declaration outlined a process of holding five Continental Encuentros in the spring in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, which would be followed by the Intercontinental Encuentro in Chiapas several months later. The document also set an agenda by suggesting four aspects of neoliberalism be discussed: the economic, political, social, and cultural. Later a fifth aspect, identity, was added. These aspects were to be addressed in terms of neoliberal policies, in terms of how people lived under neoliberalism, and in terms of how people struggle against and resist neoliberalism.

Accion Zapatista, a University of Texas at Austin group that has been part of the global pro-Zapatista struggle — largely through involvement on the Net — began preparing at an early stage for the Continental and Intercontinental Encuentros. This preparation included discussing various articles and book sections that dealt with the subject of neoliberalism and the hosting of a local Austin Encuentro attended mostly by people from other action groups like Earth First! and Austin Class War. One of the more concrete outcomes of this work was a series of seven bilingual pamphlets that addressed the above mentioned five aspects of neoliberalism, while adding Zapatismo in Cyberspace and Global Revolution.

AZ members attended both the Continental and Intercontinental Encuentros, participating in the latter in the Economic, Political, Social, and Cultural Mesas. There is now an initiative to expand upon the pamphlets, to double the length and incorporate new ideas. Some of the ideas that follow can hopefully be directly applied to that project.

Neoliberalism: Cultural Aspects

Since early 1996 Accion Zapatista discussed aspects of neoliberalism both at weekly meetings and on the Net using the group's own listserv. On-line we focused attention on the five aspects of neoliberalism in 'threaded' discussions. Each person who was part of the Accion Zapatista listserv had the opportunity to comment and contribute.

Following these on-line discussions and weekly meetings, and immediately prior to the Intercontinental Encuentro, AZ produced seven bilingual pamphlets. One called Neoliberalism: Cultural Aspects defines culture as a "dynamic and plural process" and says that culture "refers to all the ways by which we make sense of struggle in the world, including images, stories, desires, identities, spirituality, and intellectual and aesthetic work. Moreover, axes of differentiation such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are constitutive of cultures, . . ."

Ideas expressed in the on-line discussions, weekly meetings, and the pamphlets, contributed to the formulation of new thinking on my own cultural identity. I've been inspired to think about what it means to be an American, to think about what it means to be white, but, even more interesting, to think about what it means to have Croatian roots, to be a Croatian-American. It was from these new thoughts that I first began to recognize a commonalty between my peasant roots in Croatia and the peasant struggles in Chiapas.

Generally speaking, the term "American culture" has always seemed to be an oxymoron. If it can be described as the dominant media culture, it is one that I have long been at odds with. Understanding and honoring "white" culture is also problematic. It sounds too much like a neo-Nazi undertaking. Perhaps it is better to conceive of "white" as European. I feel more comfortable referring to myself as a European-American than simply as American or as white. The terms "American" and "white" are static and homogeneous, even ahistorical. European-American implies migration has taken place. Borders between nations have been transgressed. The connotation reflects more my true hybridity.

Deconstructing "Whiteness"

Popular myth and political culture tells us how we are supposed to view a "white" American (from the United States) who goes to Mexico. More often than not, the "white" American is referred to as the gringo.

In Mexico, and in Mexican-American, Chicano, political communities, I am viewed as "white." And as "white" I am aligned with the oppressor. Unlike differentiation that occurs within Latin American culture, largely based on national origin, those of European extraction are simply and conveniently lumped into the category of "white." Even Italians, Greeks, and Portuguese, many as dark as Latinos, are European and therefore "white."

When we do that, when we create these homogenous categories like "white" or "American" we reduce people, we take away their peculiarities, their ethnicity, their culture. "White" is not a people. My ancestors on my mother's side were Slavic tribes. They had a communal system of local autonomous governance.

Just as indigenous people in Mexico and elsewhere are struggling for identity and recognition, I think we need to deconstruct "whiteness" and give recognition to the plethora of identities that comprise European-Americans.

So, I am not the "white" "American" going to Mexico because I am in solidarity with indigenous peoples. But I am the Croatian-American, a second generation American conscious of deep historic roots in rural peasant Croatia, who understands his Slavic tribal past, who while seeing differences, sees a link and point of commonalty between his own peoples usurpation and the forced usurpation of people now in Mexico.

More than biological characteristics of race, the basis of common struggle ought to be a shared historical experience of oppression. This transcends race and ethnicity.

When we view things in this way we move to a different level that when we see things in traditional solidarity metaphors. This, I believe, is what the Zapatistas want.

The New Enclosures

The enclosure of cyberspace or even more so the enclosure of indigenous land in Chiapas are just a few examples of what can be called the New Enclosures. Other contemporary examples of which people in Austin have varying degrees of familiarity include the ongoing attempts to relocate Navajo elders from ancestral land in Big Mountain, Arizona, the land struggles waged by the Amungme in Irian Jaya (Indonesia), and the battle for tribal autonomy being fought by the Ogoni people in Nigeria.

The Midnight Notes collective identified five ways in which the process of the New Enclosures works. The first "operates exactly as the Old Enclosures did: by ending communal control of the means of subsistence." The second method is also similar to the old process: "seizing land for debt." The third way the New Enclosures work is by making "mobile and migrant labor the dominant form of labor." The fourth aspect of the New Enclosures is connected to the collapse of socialism in the former USSR and eastern Europe, which signifies new markets to seize. The last aspect, according to MN anyway, "is in its attacks on our reproduction: making us mutants as well as migrants!" Here they are referring to the "destruction of the earthly commons."

This last aspect is a process underway here in Austin. Rapid population influx brought on largely by economic growth in the computer industry have put high demands on housing. Suburban housing developments, along with new strip malls, and highway construction and expansion, are at odds with the "earthly commons." This form of the New Enclosures is forcibly usurping not peasants, but other creatures, from their commonly held ancestral land. The social terrain of endangered species of birds and reptiles is being taken over by the interests of capital.

It should be clear by now that this notion of the enclosure is one that has wide applicability in developing contemporary understandings of the workings of advanced capitalism. It also provides a means for recognizing commonalty in struggle.

Cultural Identity Formation

My own cultural identity, or cultural hybridity, has been formed by a mixture of cultural influences. Perhaps the most important of these are from my parents. My father comes from a working class family in Manchester, England and moved to the United States in the 1950s to go to graduate school in Pittsburgh. He became a scientist. My mother grew up in working class ethnic enclaves in industrial Pittsburgh and is the daughter of Croatian peasant immigrants. She earned a degree in Chemistry, but in the early 1960s became a mother and a housewife.

A strong culture shaping force were the Pittsburgh suburbs where I was raised, particularly the educational institutions I was required to attend. Of course the even larger culture shaping force of media, in the form of television, was critical to my upbringing and cultural identity formation. I remember as a child and a teenager watching enormous amounts of television. Occasionally advertising jingles still seep out of my unconscious to the surface. Since leaving home at the age of 17, in 1978, I've been influenced by the drop-out or counter culture of the 1970s, by radical political culture, by American work culture, by Latin American and European cultures when I've lived outside of the United States, and now again by academic culture.

I could identify numerous other cultural shaping forces that have effected my national, political, sexual, class and other identities. However, I believe that the most fundamental cultural forces shaping identity are those endowed at birth. Meaning that fundamentally I am half British and half Croatian, having been born in the United States. So, then, I am both British-American and Croatian-American.

Even though quantitatively I may be just as much British-American as I am Croatian-American, qualitatively I identify much more with my Croatian-American half. It is this aspect of my cultural identity that I have chosen to explore more deeply. From examining the roots of my Croatian-American identity, I arrive at some understandings of a common bond between my peasant family past and contemporary peasant situations in Chiapas and elsewhere.

Growing Up Croatian-American in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

I'm not absolutely certain, but I think hearing the Croatian language spoken by my mother, aunt, grandmother and grandfather must be among my first memories of growing up Croatian-American. My maternal grandparents, who migrated to the United States in the early part of this century, lived until 1971 and 1973. As a child in the 1960s I would often go to their house, as it was only minutes away by car from where I lived with my parents and younger brother. Visiting and spending time with my grandparents was a regular activity, not something only done at holidays. When I was a baby my mother would sometimes leave me with my grandparents.

In addition to the Croatian language, there were distinct aspects of food that I remember. Beans and cabbage cooked with pork lard and a roux of flour and butter being one. Fried corn meal mush being another. Almost every August we would go to a Croatian Day Picnic at an amusement park and invariably would consume roast lamb, raw white onions, and white bread.

I remember some customs, particularly at holidays, like putting wheat on the window sill for good luck in the New Year. And I remember stories. On occasion I was told stories about the old country, stories about wolves in the forest and stories about the Kupa River. These stories became reminiscences at holidays when my grandfather would drink whisky and cry about what he had lost by moving to this country.

But my memory of my grandfather, Franja, is dim. I was 10 when he died in 1971. I remember his image more from photographs I see when I visit my parents now. Though I do have a strong bright memory of sitting with him on the porch, playing cards. I remember more the family history I learned as I grew older. I've known for a long time that he was the first member of my family to migrate to the United States, to Pittsburgh, and that he did so some years before World War I and was not joined by his wife, Jana, until 10 years after. It wasn't until I visited the Croatian village they came from that I could finally see feel hear touch and smell the land of my origin.

Enclosures in Cyberspace

A process very similar to that of the enclosure of the commons in England or to the forced usurpation of peasants in Croatia is the present phase of capital colonizing cyberspace. If we think of cyberspace as a free social terrain or territory in which until recently there has been a considerable amount of unhindered self activity, we can draw a parallel to the way in which peasants and indigenous people are thrown from their commonly held land. Land, the commons, social terrain, and cyberspace are all locations in which people have cooperated together outside of capitalism. Just as land was taken over by the aristocracy, just as social territory is invaded and coopted by capital, now cyberspace is under assault by large media conglomerates, by Madison Avenue advertisers, and by government morality regulators. The tendency of capital is to move toward areas of greatest profit. The rapid expanding Internet is perceived as one such area.

It is insightful to look at the language used on the New York Times business pages to describe the activity of information capitalists on the Net. It often has an definite expansionist and colonizing sound to it. "Microsoft Is Set To Detail Plan For Foray Into The Internet" is a headline of one NYT article. This has obvious overtones of force, even militaristic. Foray means "a raid in order to seize things." Text within this same article states "it is apparent that Microsoft means to fight a multifront war on the Internet." Indeed, a multifront war! Here is another example. "Madison Avenue's march into cyberspace accelerated yesterday with a double download of digital news from True North Communications." A march into cyberspace sounds like a military operation.

The corporate takeover of the Net along side corporate concentration of other media forms does not bode well for the free flow of information that so many attribute as a basic foundation for any democracy. But democracy has never been a goal of capitalism, so why should we expect different behavior now. Colonization of cyberspace follows clear capitalist logic.

Work in the Information Age

Only eighty five years after my Croatian grandfather set foot on the shores of this country, stripped of his peasant past, to become an unskilled waged worker in industrial Pittsburgh, my family members have become waged workers in the information age.

My brother installs and troubleshoots software and hardware for a company called Tandem, situated north of Silicon Valley in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. About what he does with computers "all fucking day long" my brother says, "I fix them, I use the WWW to download software and do research on products and upgrade info. I keep track of my work hours in an Excel spreadsheet. I use extensive email in contact with clients." Regarding the extent of computer use unrelated to work he says, "I cruise the web at work a little. I commit frivolous email, but don't play too many games."

My sister lives with my parents in Pittsburgh and recently found a job as an administrative assistant at a small private liberal arts college for women. "Probably 90% of my jobtime is on the computer," she says, "I use the computer for light data entry, commands to run automated letters, labels. (This is on the VAX). I also use the laptop and Power Mac for MS Word docs, Excel spreadsheets, DTP, etc." She says, "for pleasure, I write letters, design business cards and other promotional materials, send email to friends and relatives, and occasionally surf."

My father is retired from U.S. Steel and Inland Steel, but still works part-time at the University of Pittsburgh in the Engineering department. For about 75% of his work time, he uses computers "for preparation of notes, memos, reports. Types of applications used are: Word Processing, Spreadsheet, Graphing." He says, "non-work computer used for a) tracking expenditures and budget (35%) b) messages to and from fellow environmentalists (65%) c) corresponding with sons (5%)."

However, the computer does not have total hegemony in my family. My mother, who teaches art classes, doesn't use computers. She prefers to grow a garden. Is it in her blood?

Visiting Kovacevac, Croatia in 1986 and 1989

My grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side, Franja Josip Jakin and Jana Bara Jakin, were born in the late 1800s in Kovacevac, a small village a few hours drive south of Zagreb, Croatia (formerly Yugoslavia). I visited this place first in the spring of 1986, with my parents, brother, and sister, and again in the winter of 1989 by myself. I remember being offered food and drink endlessly, visiting the more than 500-year- old church where my grandparents were married. While I was there the village experienced a death, a large man who was home for the holidays from a life of working in Germany. Tears flowed from old women wearing black babushkas (something like a palicate). It was cold but no snow on the ground. My Croatian was near nil, so I communicated with my poor German to those of my relatives who also spoke their poor German. We used many hand signals and fat grins. I plunged my hands into the soil in a field I knew my grandparents and their ancestors had crossed many a time to get to the Kupa River, where on hot summer days they would bathe and swim.

By the mid 1980s my paternal grandmother was my only grandparent still living. At that time my father wrote "The Abbreviated Life Stories of the Grandparents of Amanda, Evan and Stefan Wray" so that his children and presumed grandchildren would know something of our family history. Both my parents had visited Kovacevac in 1960 and had taken photographs and slides which they showed us when we were growing up. My father described the village:

Kovacevac is a small village close to a bend of the Sava river in a broad agricultural valley in Croatia, northern Jugoslavia. When Franja was born in this village on January 26, 1892, Croatia was a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The principal connection to the outside world was a dirt road to the parish village of Lasinja. There was also a ford across the Sava river which lead towards Sisljavic. From Sisljavic there was a good road to the region's main town of Karlovac.

The cluster of wooden houses was typical of the thousands of lowland peasant villages in the great region of the Slavic people that stretched from the Adriatic Sea to the Ural Mountains. Like most other villages, Kovacevac had changed little during the past two hundred years. The rhythm of life was set around the farming seasons and the holy days of the Church calendar.

Enclosures in Croatia in the Late 19th Century

In the late 19th century Croatia was still a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Croatia frequently had been contested terrain, set at a boundary between East and West and subjected to various foreign rulers, from the Turks to the French. In the mid 1800s, a shift from the feudal system to a new bureaucratic administration in Vienna – and in much of Europe – eliminated what was left of serfdom in Croatia, as historian Stephen Gazi writes in A History of Croatia:

The ancient feudal system of an autonomous and elective administration was replaced by a new administration which was bureaucratic and foreign in spirit, origin and language. The new Austrian legal system, civil code, criminal justice, and economic policy (as well as the consequential taxation system) were imposed on the country without due preparation. This new system wiped out all remnants of serfdom and imposed new regulations concerning landownership and the use of the so-called common lands and forests.

The end of serfdom in Croatia following the 1848-49 revolutionary period in Europe was an important turning point for the peasantry but by no means the end of misery. In 1853 the General Civil Code was introduced in Croatia which "created new problems for the peasantry such as the practice of individual partition of peasant family property." Much in the same way that the British had pushed peasants off the common lands hundreds of years earlier, Croatia too experienced what is known as the system of enclosures. And as British peasants lost their land and were forced to seek work to meet their human needs, so did the Croatian peasants. Whereas the British peasant moved to the new industrialized centers in England itself, Croatian peasants left for America, to places like Pittsburgh. Gazi continues:

Abolition of serfdom did not solve the peasant's economic problems. With almost no land to cultivate, he ceased to be a peasant and was compelled to search elsewhere for the work that would provide for his immediate needs. Continuous peasant conflicts and disturbances arose over the common use of pasture and forest. Although these problems had been apt to lead to disorders before, it was only at the turn of the century that they erupted in general unrest with national and political significance.

Industrial Age to Information Age

I wonder what this transition from industrial age to information age really means, both for Pittsburgh and in general. I live in Austin, Texas, which is another key location in the so-called information 'revolution'. Will the information age bring revolutionary change or simply a more advanced form of capitalism? Some would have us believe that the dawn of the information age is as significant as the transition from a feudal agrarian society to a capitalist industrial society, that it will bring with it new utopian forms of social organization.

A simple test reveals that this information revolution is merely a more advanced form of capitalism, perhaps even a more insidious form. As we saw by looking at the process of enclosures, the origins of capitalism lie in the forced separation from the land, from ones own self activity in commonly held terrain, and to being thrust into the labor market. Does the information revolution eliminate work? No. Does the information revolution challenge capitalist social relations that impose and force waged labor upon people? No.

To the contrary, parallel to the emergence of the information age, which some say began in the early 1980s, we have the global rise of neoliberalism, which has been characterized among other things by a decline in real wages, increased polarization between elites and the marginalized poor, cuts in all sorts of social programs, and ultimately, the necessity to work more, not less, to maintain the same standards of living.

Whether we are talking about the old Pittsburgh where my Croatian grandfather had to awake under smoke ridden skies and trudge to the factory gates along with rest of his immigrant brethren or whether we are talking about my brother who rides a BART train to a northern Silicon Valley computer job, we are in both cases talking about work under capitalism. Industrial age or information age, we are still in a world where a rich class of people extracts wealth from the labor-power of those who produce. Only when such a social system is eliminated can we properly use the term revolution.

Growing Up in Pittsburgh

I grew up in Pittsburgh, the City of Steel, where the favorite beer is Iron City and the football team named the Steelers. In the mid 1970s I was in high school. I remember looking at the sky toward the direction of the industrial Monogahela River valley and seeing a brownish haze in the air and smelling its sulfuric tinge. But, by this time, Pittsburgh stopped looking like hell with its lid off. The steel plants began to be closed in the late 1970s.

My father worked for US Steel throughout my childhood. He was part of the British brain drain in the 1950s and came over to Pittsburgh to do graduate work at what is now Carnegie Mellon University. He earned a degree in metallurgy and became a research scientist, determining how to make steel more efficiently. But in the early 1980s, along with the factory closures, US Steel's research facilities faced cutbacks and he was laid off. The family moved to the midwest.

I experienced Pittsburgh on a cusp, at a turning point, from the transition of Pittsburgh as an industrial giant to the beginnings of an information based economy. At the same time that plant closures and layoffs were occurring all up and down the industrial river valleys, new computer companies were sprouting up along the peripheries of suburban sprawl in industrial parks and Defense Department money was being pumped in to the universities to develop software for Reagan's Star War initiative.

In the 1980s, Carnegie Mellon University, the very same that my father had attended in the late 1950s, constructed a software engineering complex that was specifically geared toward Defense Department research. Today, this university is key to the federal government's Emergency Response Team that deals with computer hackers and firewall crackers. Now, where a former steel mill stood on the banks of the Monongahela, there stands a computer firm.

Contemporary Pittsburgh is a very different place from what it was 85 years ago when, in 1911, my grandfather arrived from a small peasant village in Croatia. Pittsburgh has emerged from its industrial roots and entered into the information age.

Enclosures in Croatia in the Late 19th Century (continued)

Under the feudal system peasants paid their dues in goods. "Under the yoke of the new aristocratic landlord" the peasants in post-serfdom Croatia paid their rent with money. "This introduced the problem of capital to the peasant since he was not able to raise the sums required for his taxes," writes Gazi. To pay the landlord, Croatian peasants in the late 1880s were forced to "negotiate short term loans at excessive interest rates which grew larger and larger until many peasants went bankrupt." Bankruptcy and overdue taxes forced peasants to abandon their property to public auction. To make matters worse, the government openly assisted banks and speculators to "strip the peasants of their last holdings" and as peasants were forced to leave their land immigrants from the more prosperous north moved to Croatia. Writes Gazi:

The peasant was left alone and helpless in his struggle against this exploitation. According to official records, between 1880 and 1913, 529,025 Croats left their country and only a quarter of these would come back. During the same period the Magyar (Hungarian) population increased in Croatia from 5,050 to 105,948, and the German from 13,226 to 136,221. With this expulsion of the Croatian peasant population from its ancestral lands by a policy of ruthless financial exploitation on the part of Vienna and Budapest, the country was rapidly losing its Croatian national character.

These were the conditions into which my Croatian peasant grandparents were born, my grandfather in 1892 and my grandmother in 1891, both in Kovacevac. Their emigration from Croatia is part of a historical movement of being pushed off the land, a process of enclosures that continues to this day. Immigration theory posits both pushes and pulls as reasons for people leaving one country for another. Gazi's history describes a push factor, peasants being forced from the land. My father, albeit in a romantic manner, describes a pull factor influencing my grandfather's decisive moment of coming to America:

There was little opportunity to improve their lot if they stayed in the village. For them, as for so many European people at that period, the brightest promise lay in America, where a growing industry had an insatiable appetite for young men with strong backs. Franja's father had himself spent a few years in America. No doubt he told many stories of his experiences there, and set Franja to dreaming of his own journey to the west.

Enclosure of the Commons

In Volume 1 of Capital, Marx describes how the process of the enclosure of the commons in England during the transition from feudalism to capitalism was critical to the origination of capitalism because it drove people off the land and forced them into a newly emerging labor market. During this period after the abolition of serfdom peasants went from enjoying "the right to exploit the common land" to a situation in which "the great feudal lords" were "forcibly driving the peasantry from the land." Between the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth "a mass of 'free' and unattached proletarians was hurled onto the labour-market by the dissolution of the bands of feudal retainers. . ." This process of "forced usurpation" is part of "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production."

This process of dispossession of land forcibly created a new class of workers dependent upon selling its labor-power to capital in order to obtain its means of subsistence. This dispossession and forced entry into the labor market is the same phenomena that occurred in Croatia, as just described, and one that continues to this day.

The process of enclosures in England was accomplished by "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force" and later by Parliamentary decrees. In has been a similar process in other contexts. "The history of this expropriation assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs."

A logical consequence of enclosure and forced usurpation is migration. In England peasants flocked to the cities. In the British colonies in North America native peoples removed from their lands moved west. Today, indigenous peoples in the Americas continue to be uprooted from their land-based communities and migrate to the overflowing cities.

My grandparent's migration to the United States in the early part of this century is therefore part of an historical process that dates to the origins of capitalism and continues to this day.

Grandparent's Immigration to Pittsburgh

Croatian migration to the United States began in the mid 1800s. Between 1850 and 1865, Croatians began working in Pennsylvania's coal mines. The peak of Croatian migration was from 1900 to 1914 when "hundreds of thousands of Croatians" went to the United States, the majority unskilled and farm laborers (Kraljic, 1978). During this period my grandfather came. My father writes:

On February 22, 1911, at the age of 19 years, Franja married Jana Jakin of his own village, in the little parish church at Lasinja. Their plan was to emigrate to America, but with Franja going ahead and quickly earning enough money to pay for his wife's passage. He left that summer for Pennsylvania, where there were already friends and relatives. Franja arrived in Turtle Creek, near Pittsburgh, and stayed in a boarding house. At this point he changed his name to Yakin so that Americans would pronounce the first syllable correctly.

My grandfather's move was part of a mass exodus of Slavic peoples from Eastern and Southern Europe. The circumstances of his life were in no way unique. Like the many of the 'migrant hordes', he sought work in an industrial America. Pittsburgh, the city of iron and steel, was a magnet for these largely unskilled workers. At the end of the nineteenth century, the steel making process was transformed, through "technological innovations and cost-conscious capitalists," from a highly skilled unionized craft to an unskilled industrial process.

Southern and Eastern European immigrants poured into the United States at this time; many of them sought employment in the mills and mines of the Keystone State, in the anthracite region of Eastern Pennsylvania and the bituminous fields at the western end of the state. The expanding steel mills of Pittsburgh, Homestead, and numerous towns up and down the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers attracted a new work force searching for greater economic rewards than their home fields could offer. For many, money compensated for the dreary brownish-red pall hanging over the mills and the fire shooting from the furnaces that disturbed the night sky and blotted out the stars. The new immigrants took their places at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. Relatives and former neighbors from the old country used their toeholds in the mills and construction gangs to get work for their landsmen. (Kleinburg, 1989)

My grandfather first stayed with friends and relatives and then, writes my father, "he found work in the steel mills along the Monongahela river, as well as the copper foundry in Linhart." The transition from peasant life in a rural village in Croatia to urban industrial life in turn of the century Pittsburgh was severe.