

Scene on Radio: Capitalism
Season 6, Episode 3: BC: Ships, Swords, and Fences
Transcript

John Biewen (to self): OK, here I go.

Sound: Ellen's phone ringtone: Coltrane, "My Favorite Things" (song cuts off)

Ellen McGirt: Hello.

John Biewen: Uh, Ellen!

Ellen McGirt: John, is that you?

John Biewen: (Sound: ambient hubbub) It's me, calling from Barcelona. Now, I think you knew I was here recording for our project.

Ellen McGirt: I did, I did. I'm jealous I'm not there with you but I want to hear everything.

John Biewen: Well, you will. For the moment, though, and this is really not by any means the main reason I came to Barcelona, but I'm sitting here in a little outdoor café looking up at the monument to Christopher Columbus. Prominent landmark here in Barcelona, basically overlooking the port. It's one of these that's on a tall column, sixty meters high – that's almost two hundred feet. Columbus is standing atop this, a twenty-four-foot bronze statue of Columbus.

Ellen McGirt: Yeah.

John Biewen: And he is pointing – not pointing to the west, which, he is famous for having gone in that direction, but he's pointing I guess to the nearest body of water, which, he's pointing out at the Mediterranean, over the port.

Ellen McGirt: OK. You know, I've seen pictures. It's a pretty grand, elaborate thing and that is a real power pose he's taking up there.

John Biewen: Isn't it? This was erected in the 1880s. Barcelona was gonna be the site of the Expo, the World's Fair, and they built it for that occasion – which is a real flex, isn't it?

Ellen McGirt: Yeah. I find it so interesting that so many years later from his initial journey, that it was still so important for them to, like, highlight this – Barcelona, Catalonia. It's like, this was the New World, they were opening it up and they were still pretty proud of it. Still going strong as a colonial power, so that's – that's good to remember, I guess.

Music

John Biewen (studio): That's such a good point you made, Ellen. That at the time Spain put up the Columbus monument, in 1888, it was still a colonial power – though really kind of an empire on its last legs.

Ellen: It's interesting, right? Most of its colonies in what we now call Latin America had gained independence earlier in the 19th century – from Chile and Argentina to Mexico.

John: And the Spaniards were trying to hold on to what was left.

Ellen McGirt: Right. For example, Cuba, one of its remaining colonies, was giving Spain a lot of trouble. Coincidentally, Cuba was one of the places that Christopher Columbus “discovered” in 1492 – big air quotes there – and colonized for Spain.

John Biewen: Colonized for Spain, even though he was Italian – and by the way, his name in Italian would have been Colombo, which I kind of enjoy.

Ellen McGirt: (Laughs) Me, too. I can see why. But yes, he was on a mission for Ferdinand and Isabella, the King and Queen of Spain.

John Biewen: And he came back from the New World to report to them in Barcelona – that’s why the city put up the monument, to claim him. “Hey, that historic, world-changing voyage? That was us.” But Ellen, you were saying something about Cuba.

Ellen McGirt: Yeah, in the 1870s and 80s, the Cuban people were rebelling hard against Spanish rule. So were Filipinos, in another Spanish colony.

John Biewen: Spain would soon lose Cuba and the Philippines to – the United States, in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Along with Puerto Rico and Guam, which are still U.S. territories to this day. That was America’s major venture into the most literal, old-school kind of colonialism, when it seized those colonies from Spain.

Ellen McGirt: But I do wonder if the fact that Spain’s empire was crumbling in the late 19th century – was that one reason the Spanish wanted to put up a Columbus statue at that time. I mean, precisely *because* its old dominance was slipping away?

John Biewen: Yeah, maybe to make a statement, sort of like the southern states in the U.S. that built Confederate monuments – not right after the Civil War, but later, in the 20th century.

Ellen McGirt: In some cases, even *during* the Civil Rights Movement, when white supremacists felt very much under attack.

John Biewen: Hmm. We talked about that a little when I called you from Barcelona – the fact that, almost 400 years after Columbus’s first voyage, Spain was still embracing him so proudly, and what he represented.

Ellen McGirt: I imagine they weren’t saying much about the unspeakable violence and genocide that his voyages unleashed on Indigenous people in the Caribbean and the Americas.

John Biewen, over Barcelona ambi: And here we are now, a hundred and – almost a hundred and fifty years after the monument was built. And, as you can imagine, opinions have shifted and become a little more ambivalent here in Spain as well as in the U.S. about this man.

Ellen McGirt: Columbus has lost his Day in lots of communities around the U.S. Like, Columbus Day is now Indigenous People's Day in lots of places. That's a pretty dramatic reversal of the kind of regard we just gave him without really thinking it through.

John Biewen: Yes, and a number of Columbus statues in the U.S. have come down in recent years. But it's still here. There have been some protests for years in Barcelona. You know, and he's an interesting guy. Apparently he had a mixture of motivations. Apparently he really did want the victory for Christianity, which meant the conquest of the infidel, he wanted to really lead the way on that. And he also wanted to go get some gold and get rich, for his patrons.

Ellen McGirt: Yeah.

John Biewen: It's really a significant marker at the dawn of what would become capitalism.

Music

John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 7: *Capitalism*. Episode 3. I'm John Biewen.

Ellen McGirt: And I'm Ellen McGirt.

John Biewen: We're telling the story of the world's dominant economic system and how it took the forms that it did.

Ellen McGirt: And what to do about it now. In this moment when a lot of people believe capitalism is not the solution but a big part of the problem, what are some ways we might fix the system – or transform it? We'll tackle that question later in the series.

John Biewen: In this episode: the big shift, the gradual, painful, world-shaking birth of a capitalist world – as feudalism dissolved in Europe. Was it inevitable that the next stage after the fall of the medieval world ... would be capitalism?

Ellen McGirt: The transition from feudalism to capitalism is often described as a shift from bondage to freedom. And it was, in some ways, and for some people. But John, you spent a year studying the history, and you found the full picture is more complicated – and that Europeans fought hard over the post-medieval world and what it would look like.

John Biewen: Like most struggles, that fight was not waged on a level playing field. Some people had a lot more power than others to shape what we call the Modern world.

Ellen McGirt: All right. We left off in Episode 2 with feudalism on the ropes. John, take it away.

Music

John Biewen: We're focusing on Britain in these early episodes because capitalism would emerge most aggressively there. But it's worth repeating that, before its rise as a colonial empire, England was just another country. In the 14th century, the Mali Empire was piling up wealth through its control of gold and salt trades in West Africa. Some have claimed that its leader, Mansa Musa, was the richest man in history. In the following centuries, too, the richest kingdoms were in places other than Europe.

Jayati Ghosh: Well, definitely in the 15th and 16th centuries, China and India were the richest countries in the world. And there's a lot of historical research....

John Biewen: Jayati Ghosh is a leading Indian economist, now at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Jayati Ghosh: Joseph Needham had a remarkable set of volumes on history and civilization in China, which pointed to the massive technological advances that existed in China in the 15th and 16th centuries, way ahead of anything in Europe at the time. And in India, too, the Mughal Empire was an extremely wealthy empire. Of course, it subsisted within a population that was very poor. So it was a very exploitative empire. I think that is also true of the Chinese, possibly to a slightly lesser extent....

John Biewen: That last point is important: To say a society is one of the world's richest in the aggregate doesn't mean most of its people are living well – if just a few people hoard most of the wealth. As we heard last time, European peasants sometimes rose up against the aristocracy in the medieval period. But the powers that be always brutally suppressed those movements.

Jason Hickel: And it wasn't actually until about the middle of the 14th century, with the plague, that this story changed, that the fortunes of the peasant revolutionaries changed.

John Biewen: Jason Hickel is an economic anthropologist at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He's talking about the Black Death, which wiped out a third to a half of the European population in the late 1340s – creating a severe labor shortage.

Jason Hickel: And this effectively strengthened the bargaining power of peasants and workers and weakened the bargaining power of the feudal lords. And the peasant revolutionaries recognized that this was an extraordinary opportunity. And they took it, and they managed to successfully overthrow feudalism. Feudalism basically collapses during this period, right?

John Biewen: Historians say by about 1400, the most restrictive form of feudalism, serfdom, had all but died out in England. Most peasants were no longer bound to their lord. They now paid rent in money and could move on if they could find a better deal on another manor. The diminished population also freed up land that effectively belonged to no one – so people shared it among themselves for subsistence farming, grazing, and hunting.

Jason Hickel: In the place of feudalism, after its collapse, a more egalitarian, more democratic society emerged, where peasants and workers had more direct control over the means of production, along with basically collectively managed commons like the forests and the pastures and the rivers, etcetera.

And the key principle that was at play here was that everyone should have access to the resources that are necessary for survival. Right? This was considered kind of the right of habitation. And it was, it was a remarkable period in the sense that that during this era, more or less from 1350 to about 1500, living standards of commoners improved pretty dramatically. We see nutrition goes up, welfare ratios go up in terms of real wages, rents go down.

John Biewen: Some historians have talked about a “golden age” for the European peasantry in that century-and-a-half, as feudalist arrangements crumbled and capitalist systems had not yet risen on a large scale. Others say “golden age” is a wild exaggeration – after all, most late medieval peasants were extremely poor by today’s standards. But most experts do agree the 1400s were a better time for ordinary, working people in England, and some other European countries ... compared with their conditions before that period, or after. Jason Hickel says it’s crucial to understand that the vast majority of people in Europe did not choose capitalism ... and many fought bitterly against it.

Jason Hickel: So yeah, so this narrative that we have that there was some kind of smooth transition from feudalism to capitalism?... is just totally wrong, right? Like, the rise of capitalism, it is not, it did not “emerge” from somewhere. It was *imposed*, through a process of violence and, again, also colonization.

Music

Sound: harbor sounds: boat, gulls; Jessica Moody: So, we're in the City Center and the waterfront is in front of us here. At one point, this is how far the harbor would have come as well. So the ships would have come this far up... and they would have got -- (pauses, loud seagull calls)

John Biewen: I've come to Bristol, the historic port city in southwest England, where this historian is showing me around.

Jessica Moody: So, my name's Dr. Jessica Moody. I'm a senior lecturer in Public History at the University of Bristol. So my research is about how we engage with the past, how we remember the past. How the past is sometimes used and abused for various ends. And I have a particular interest in the public memory of difficult histories, especially transatlantic enslavement.

John Biewen: Bristol, by the way, is just across Bristol Channel from Cosmeston Medieval Village in Wales, the place we visited last episode. We've traveled only 25 miles as the crow flies, but in our story we're jumping ahead a few centuries.

Jessica Moody: And Bristol was a really important port from the medieval period up to the sort of 18th century, early 19th century, and particularly during the 17th century into the 18th century, when trade with the Americas opened up.

Music

John Biewen: The British were not pioneers of the Atlantic slave trade ... but once they got in, they went big. Portuguese and Spanish ships carried the first kidnapped Africans across the Atlantic in the 1520s – just a few decades after Columbus’s voyages. The Dutch followed a century later, in the 1630s. England founded its first slave trading corporation, the Royal Africa Company, in 1672. When that company’s monopoly was broken in 1698, that’s when Bristol’s merchants jumped in. Given the city’s location on the western edge of Europe....

Jessica Moody: it was really in a great position to trade with the Americas.

John Biewen: Ships from Bristol had previously sailed to ports in Ireland or elsewhere in Europe. Now some of them joined the Triangular Trade, sailing down to the coast of Africa, then West to the Caribbean and the Americas, and back. Those ships left Bristol loaded with goods from Britain and the continent.

Jessica Moody: So, some of the steel or ironworks from Sheffield and Birmingham, and materials from Holland – weaponry, alcohol, metals – that were taken and then traded for ... people. African people on the west coast of Africa, taken on the perilous Middle Passage, which could sometimes last about three months. Very high mortality rates on that journey, lots of people got sick and died. And then those people were then sold in the Caribbean or the southern states of America, and those ships then took slave-produced goods back on the return journey – so cotton, rum, sugar, mainly.

John Biewen: Researchers estimate that between 1698 and 1807, ships that sailed from Bristol, more than two thousand voyages, carried half a million kidnapped Africans into slavery in the New World to work until they died on those sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations.

Music

John Biewen: As we discussed in our Season 5 series, some historians make a powerful argument that large-scale projects of enslavement and colonization didn't just happen to get rolling around the time that capitalism was taking root in western Europe. The claim is, instead, that those industrial-scale money-making schemes, built on the subjugation and exploitation of people and resources in Africa, Asia, and the

New World, that those ventures *were* capitalism announcing its arrival. That might sound like a radical, lefty assertion – and sure enough, Karl Marx did make it. Here he is in *Capital*.

Voiceover, Karl Marx, *Capital*: The discovery of gold and silver in America, the obliteration, enslavement, the burial of the aboriginal population in mines, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signified the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.

John Biewen: In the 20th century, historians like Eric Williams, Cedric Robinson, and Walter Rodney documented how Europeans – and European-Americans – developed new notions of “race” during the 15th to the 18th centuries, eventually constructing a highly codified racial hierarchy ... with the people they labeled “white” at the top, African or “Black” people at the bottom, and other non-European so-called races in between. These white supremacist ideas were meant to justify the colonization of distant lands, and systems of slave-based production. This is Charisse Burden-Stelly, now a professor of African American Studies at Wayne State University, who explained in Season 5 how the term “racial capitalism” encapsulates these findings.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: Racial capitalism is the idea that you can't understand capitalist exploitation and the capitalist world economy without understanding the processes of racialization and the forms of racial hierarchy that constitute that system.

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John Biewen: It's no mystery why Indigenous Americans, for example, view Christopher Columbus not as a great explorer but as a symbol of conquest and genocide. Even while recognizing that he was just one man: if he hadn't been the first European to make those voyages, it would have been somebody else. Everyone knows that when Columbus landed in the Caribbean and South and Central America in the 1490s, he thought he'd reached India. But soon, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama did get there, by sailing the other way, around Africa's Cape of Good Hope – landing on the southwest coast of India on May 20th, 1498. If it seems like a radical, anti-capitalist argument to call those voyages an important starting gun for capitalism, it's striking, then, to see what Adam Smith, of all people, had to say.

Voiceover, Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*: The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind.

John Biewen: Adam Smith, the Scottish philosopher and the 18th century's greatest thinker on capitalism, in his landmark book, *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. In this remarkable passage, Smith reflects on the pros and cons of those world-altering "discoveries" and what they unleashed. For him, looking at it from the British Isles in the 1770s, the pros outweighed the cons.

Voiceover, Adam Smith: By uniting, in some measure, the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another's wants, to increase one another's enjoyments, and to encourage one another's industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial.

John Biewen: "One another's" is doing some serious work there, isn't it. These economic "relationships" across the world, by then two and a half centuries old, had created great material benefit – for some. But Smith did acknowledge the other side of the coin, what he called the "dreadful misfortunes" that befell people in the "East and West Indies" since Europeans had found their lands. And he saw, plainly, the reason

for the disparity – benefits on one side, misery on the other. The reason? The imbalance of power – the more advanced ships and weapons that one side possessed.

Voiceover, Adam Smith: At the particular time when these discoveries were made, the superiority of force happened to be so great on the side of the Europeans, that they were enabled to commit with impunity every sort of injustice in those remote countries.

Music

John Biewen: In the last episode, we made the point that, before capitalism, the people at the top of the social order mostly just sat on their wealth ... or spent it on cathedrals or castles or nice things for themselves. For the most part, they didn't leverage it to build new money-making capacity. Starting in the 16th century, this changed. By that time, elites had begun to see how they could amass bigger piles of wealth than ever before ... and use those piles to make even bigger piles. The western European aristocracies had strong motives for doing so: for one, they were constantly at war with one another. They needed gold and silver coin to build better armies and weapons. Enter mercantilism: a brand of capitalism designed not to lift the general welfare, but to fill the nation's coffers. Kingdoms sent ships across oceans to "trade," consistently using force to colonize other lands ... to take what they wanted for free or

at a low price. By the time Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, the British East India Company was already ruling part of India. It would take control of the rest over the following century.

John Biewen, in interview: And then the Brits show up with the East India Company...

John Biewen: This is an exchange I had with Jayati Ghosh, the Indian economist.

John Biewen, in interview: Sometimes Westerners will say, well, it's *lucky* for the likes of India that colonization happened because that's what developed – right? [Ghosh laughs] We, quote-unquote, the West, “developed” places like India by bringing our more advanced societies and systems to that part of the world. What do you say to that?

Jayati Ghosh: Well, there's a lot of recent economic history research that suggests that the causation was really the other way round, that Europe was able to develop and able to find the resources to invest and have rapid capital accumulation because of the plunder that was enabled by these colonial powers.

John Biewen: Ghosh cites a recent book by two other renowned Indian scholars, Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, called *Capital and Imperialism...*

Jayati Ghosh: ...which basically talks about the significant role played by the transfer, the drain, from countries like India – India was one of the countries, but there were many others – in enabling not just the industrial Revolution but even the Agrarian Revolution before that.

John Biewen: In the early years of their trade with India, the British were more-or-less normal customers: They bought things like rice, textiles, and spices, and paid with silver – just like French traders in India. But the East India Company gradually colonized the subcontinent – starting with the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The British defeated a stronger Indian force thanks to a betrayal: the head of the Bengali army switched sides to help the Brits – in return for being made Britain's puppet ruler of Bengal. The British then used that foothold to push out the leaders of other Indian principalities, or pressure them to support British interests. As Britain gained complete control, it forced Indians to sell their products for low prices and pay more for British goods. It also imposed taxes on Indian peasants and small businesspeople ... and used those tax receipts to buy Indian goods. Under that scheme, the British weren't paying for the stuff they loaded onto their ships ... Indians were. In their recent book, the Patnaiks analyzed historical records and came up with a stunning estimate: that

between 1765 and 1938, Britain extracted the equivalent of 45 *trillion* dollars, in today's money, from India alone.

Music

John Biewen: Not only did Britain not “develop” India ... British rule *de*-industrialized the country. In the 17th century under the Mughal Empire, India was a world leader in manufacturing – textiles, leather and metalwork – and claimed an estimated one fourth of global GDP. By 1840, at a time when people in London were calling India the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire, the Chairman of the Oriental and China Association, Sir [George Larpent](#), would [say in a speech](#) to the Parliament of Great Britain:

Voiceover, Sir George Larpent: We have succeeded in converting India from a manufacturing country into a country exporting raw produce.

John Biewen: Raw produce that Britain could then process and sell, adding still more to its wealth at India's expense. Economic historians have used data on wages and diets to [estimate](#) that the poverty level in India rose under British rule – that the average Indian was better off before the East India Company was formed in 1600.

Music

John Biewen: Every economist recognizes that a would-be capitalist needs ... capital ... to start a business of any real size. To buy materials, hire workers, and so on. Adam Smith called this “previous accumulation.”

Voiceover, Adam Smith: A weaver cannot apply himself entirely to his peculiar business, unless there is beforehand stored up somewhere, either in his own possession or in that of some other person, a stock sufficient to maintain him, and to supply him with the materials and tools of his work, till he has not only completed but sold his web.

John Biewen: Marx used a slightly different phrase: the *primitive* accumulation of capital. He wrote about primitive accumulation not just at the level of the individual businessperson, but on a bigger scale: How did some nations first acquire the wealth that they then used to get much, much richer? The answer, for Marx, was theft. The theft of people’s labor, through enslavement; the theft of raw and manufactured goods through one-sided trading relationships leveraged by military power ... and, back home in Europe, the forced separation of people from the means to sustain themselves ... through projects like enclosure – which we’re going to get to in this episode. Jayati Ghosh says Europeans have usually explained Britain’s rise as a capitalist power by

focusing on advances on the British Isles – an Agrarian Revolution starting in the 17th century, the Industrial Revolution a century later.

Jayati Ghosh: You know, you can say that, yes, there were all these incipient changes in production relations within England, but the rapid expansion and the ability to invest so much came from all of that external surplus. Colonial loot, very broadly defined, played a significant role in providing the resources for that.

[Break]

John Biewen: A lot of us non-historians, if we're asked to picture the early days of capitalism, will probably think of the Industrial Revolution – those Dickensian mills and factories. But we're not quite there yet. Before *that* revolution in Britain ... and paving the way for it: a revolution in the countryside. In Episode 2 we talked about peasants, under feudalism, and the typical division in their lives: They'd work roughly half the time on the lord's land, and the other half doing subsistence farming on their own smaller plots – assigned for their use under customary agreements – and on common lands that local peasant families shared.

Silvia Federici: And they'll be given areas to graze, for grazing animals. They'll be given certain rights – rights, for example, to take wood from the woods so that they could use it to, you know, for fuel.

John Biewen: That is Silvia Federici, the well-known feminist philosopher and social scientist, a professor emerita at Hofstra University.

Silvia Federici: By the 15th century, and then more later, you begin to have a process whereby these peasants who had been sitting and working and reproducing themselves on the lands of the nobility, of the aristocracy, you know, are increasingly expelled. And the process of expulsion, it's called the enclosure, because literally the lands that they used to have for grazing, for taking fuel, for agricultural products, they would be fenced off and they would be pushed off, and then forced to continue to work in the same villages but now for a pittance, for a wage.

John Biewen: Enclosure. I'll admit I never heard of it until a few years ago. But it looms large in European history, nowhere more than in Britain. It marked a deep shift in how Westerners think about land. These days, certainly here in the U.S., we're used to the idea that every inch of property is either privately owned – an individual, or, say, a

corporation, holds the deed – or it's public. And even with public land, we can point to the government entity that owns it: federal, state, county, city.

Breaking Bad, S1E4, Walter White: Get the hell off my property.

Jesse Pinkman: What, I'm just saying...

Walter White: Go! And don't come back.

John Biewen: That's from Breaking Bad. Throughout most of human history, people didn't treat land as personal property. In medieval times, in Europe and some other places, only kings and emperors owned land. Or think of Indigenous people in the Americas, Africa, Australia, right up to the recent past and even today in some places: tribes formed customary understandings about their territory, and would sometimes fight over incursions or invasions, but individuals didn't draw lines and say, this patch of the earth is officially and legally *mine*.

John Biewen, in interview, London: OK, but enclosure was a big deal.

Eleanor Janega: Oh, Enclosure was a huge, big deal, um, because fundamentally....

John Biewen: Historian Eleanor Janega of the London School of Economics. She says enclosure shoved millions of people, against their will, out of the only life they knew in the countryside.

Eleanor Janega: ...where you have a community, where you have obligations that go both ways. So, you have obligations to your landlord but your landlord has obligations to you as well. And then that turns into: land can be, land is *owned* owned, you need to get out of here, and, I don't know, good luck to you, you know.

Music

John Biewen: Over several centuries starting in the 1500s, the British Parliament passed thousands of acts, privatizing almost seven million acres of formerly common lands, and allowing landlords to send peasants away.

Eleanor Janega: It's a displacement. You know, like you had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was often towns and cities. So, it's a huge reimagining of what the workforce is.

John Biewen: Why does this happen? Janega says part of the answer is: technology.

In the same way that powerful machinery has whittled down the need for farm labor right up to the present – that happened hundreds of years ago, too. Improved crop rotation practices; better, heavier plows; the use of horses instead of cattle to pull the plow faster.... Many landowners stopped raising crops and got into the wool business, because grazing sheep took a lot less labor and they could make bigger profits. All of these shifts – which many academics call the Second Agricultural Revolution – made farming more ... “productive” ... and shrank the need for peasant workers. As hard as the life of a peasant could be, many peasants reacted to the enclosure movement with fury – and some elites sympathized with them. Thomas More, best known as a Catholic writer, judge, and government official under Henry VIII, was a critic of enclosure. He wrote in his book, *Utopia*, in 1516, that because landlords were enclosing land and driving off peasants to raise wool, the sheep of England, were, in effect, feasting on the people.

Voiceover, Thomas More: Forsooth, my lord ... your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame, and so small eaters, now, as I hear say, be become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves.

John Biewen: Thomas More also blamed enclosure, and the resulting waves of rural refugees turned loose across the land, for an alarming rise in vagrancy and theft.

Voiceover, Thomas More: Away they trudge, I say, out of their known and accustomed houses, finding no place to rest in. ... what can they then else do but steal, and then justly ... be hanged, or else go about a begging.

Silvia Federici: Yeah, many people became vagrants. You know, the 16th century is the century of the great vagrancy.

John Biewen: Silvia Federici.

Silvia Federici: All these people without nothing, who do not want to submit to the new forms of exploitation, who look at wage labor as a form of slavery. And they take the road, they become beggars, they become bandits, they become, you know, people, sometimes, migrants. So, vagrancy is considered one of the main social problems in Europe of the 16th century.

Music

John Biewen: Just as peasants had revolted against feudalism, now, a couple centuries later, people rose up against enclosure. The massive German Peasants' War, in the 1520's, came just a few years after Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation, and it was partly a religious war. But the revolt by German-speaking peasants was also a rejection of moves to privatize common lands and restrict access to forests and fishing and hunting grounds. It's been called the largest popular uprising in Europe before the French Revolution. To put down the revolt, the aristocracy slaughtered more than a hundred thousand peasants and farmers.

In the summer of 1549, English peasants in the county of Norfolk started tearing down fences, to protest the loss of their grazing lands and, for some, their homes. They confronted Robert Kett, a wealthy landowner who himself had enclosed common land. He was so moved by their complaints, the story goes, that he decided to join in and lead them. Eventually, thousands of rebels gathered and camped outside Norwich, England's second largest city at the time, and issued a list of grievances. King Edward VI was only eleven years old, so the rebels directed their demands to his Lord Protector.

Voiceover, Kett's grievances: We pray your grace that no lord of no manor shall come ... upon the commons" (p. 48) ...

John Biewen: And ..

Voiceover, Kett's grievances: ...from henceforth no man shall enclose any more.

John Biewen: The rebels overran Norwich and occupied the city for a month. Finally, the Earl of Warwick assembled an army, including mercenaries from Germany and elsewhere, that overwhelmed the rebels and killed three or four thousand of them. Dozens, maybe up to a few hundred, were hanged, including Robert Kett.

Music

John Biewen: The process of enclosure itself was often violent, too. It was still happening in the early 19th century – for example, with the “clearances,” as they were called, in parts of the Scottish Highlands. This was an account decades later by a woman named Betsy Mackay.

Voiceover, Betsy Mackay: Our family was very reluctant to leave this place, and stayed for some time after the summons for evicting was delivered. But [the landlord's] party came round and set fire to our house at both ends, reducing to ashes whatever remained within the walls. The occupants had, of course, to escape for their lives, some of them losing all their clothes except what they had

on their backs. ... The people were told they could go where they liked, provided they did not encumber [this] domain, the land that was by rights their own. The people were driven away like dogs.

Music

John Biewen: Here's a poem from 18th century England ... an outcry against enclosure:

Voiceover, Poem:

They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
Yet let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.

Music

Convo:

Ellen McGirt: OK, John, you have taken us on a journey. There is a lot to unpack here. You've laid out two huge historic developments, which happen in the same period, from the 1500s forward.

John Biewen: Yes. And, you know, just about everything in history is contested, including what capitalism is and when it started. But for our purposes, and this view is shared by many historians, these developments were pivotal in humanity's turn toward this capitalist world we live in now.

Ellen McGirt: One of those developments came in the form of ships and swords and guns. The launch of colonial conquest and mercantilism – a kind of military capitalism. “Let's go get what we can for our country by whatever means necessary” kind of vibe. That includes slavery on a massive, industrial scale.

John Biewen: And that question of scale is crucial. Lots of people today, and I'm thinking of white folks here in the U.S., like to say, well, all through history everybody did slavery. There was nothing new about the slave-based economy that Westerners built in the New World.

Ellen McGirt: Well, that's about half right, isn't it. Slavery was commonplace across the world up until a couple hundred years ago. But it was often based on systems of

caste, or people fighting wars would capture some individuals and haul them away as slaves.

John Biewen: Right. But, to get at the point that this was something different – this is Professor Charisse Burden-Stelly again, with a clip that some listeners will remember from Season 5.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: As many scholars have pointed out, slavery has been a feature of many societies. But slavery as an economic system and as the foundation of a particular mode of production is something that's unique to, let us say, the 15th century, 16th century onward.

John Biewen: I'm gonna repeat some of those key words: *slavery as an economic system and as the foundation of a particular mode of production.*

Ellen McGirt. Here's another way of saying it: the system of chattel slavery that Europeans built in the Caribbean and the Americas – this was *industry* for the first time. The trade in human beings was a lucrative business by itself. People got seriously rich trading in enslaved Africans. And the colossal supply of unpaid labor that was delivered through large-scale, racialized slavery? That labor was the engine of other enormous industries, like sugar, tobacco, and cotton.

John Biewen: This was not some sideshow to the “real” economy. It was the economy. Those crops made *nations* rich. They were the oil of the early modern period.

Ellen McGirt: This was capitalism now, dude. And I have to say it: When scholars talk about racial capitalism, the idea that that race-based exploitation was baked into capitalism from the beginning? Where’s the lie?

John Biewen: Some historians like to debate whether the construction of a racial hierarchy – which served to justify exploiting some groups of people more extremely and brutally than others – whether that was *necessary* to give capitalism a running start, whether you could have had capitalism without that. I ran that question past Jayati Ghosh, the Indian economist, and as you can hear, she got a little impatient and called it a non-question.

Jayati Ghosh: How do we ever know whether it was necessary or not? We know that both happened together. And therefore, you know (laughing), you can't really imagine one without the other, that we don't have the counterfactual.

Ellen McGirt: The other big development you told us about happened domestically, *within* Britain and other European countries: the move to privatize land. Common lands

that had been shared and available for ordinary people to use were now enclosed and fenced off – “*owned* owned,” as Eleanor Janega put it.

John Biewen: Yeah. This drove countless people off the land and, as you can imagine, most of them wound up in cities, looking for paid work. So this gives a big push to the transition, in Britain and other countries in Western Europe, from a rural population to an urban one. And, even more on point for our story about capitalism, it pushes most people into the new world of wage labor, where they have to go find an employer to sell their labor to.

Ellen McGirt: That might sound like liberation and opportunity – people were turned loose to go make a life for themselves. But judging from the evidence about mass vagrancy and desperation, it kinda makes you think of that line in the song [sings]: freedom’s just another word for, you know....

John Biewen: ...nothing left to lose.

Ellen McGirt: Boom.

John Biewen: Another takeaway, I think, is that these changes were still being driven by the few people at the top who owned everything – and for their benefit. We’re a long

way from anything resembling economic democracy. Regular working people had no say, and it sure doesn't seem like these world-changing developments improved the lives of most people.

Ellen McGirt: If you think about the European peasantry – and the many millions of people who would be enslaved or colonized, or killed – it seems like the total amount of misery in the world, if you could measure it, probably went way up in the 16th and 17th centuries.

John Biewen: Even as, no doubt about it, this revving up of capitalist activity did create new piles of wealth, through the exploitation of resources and labor. And that wealth was now starting to be reinvested in bigger and more lucrative forms of production. But of course this wealth was not widely shared – yet.

Ellen McGirt: Yet, you say. And we're getting ahead of ourselves again, but today, people do look around and say, wow, humanity on the whole is way better off, in material terms, than we were in 1500 or 1600.

John Biewen: Yes, with a rather large caveat. I can't help thinking about the climate emergency when you say that.

Ellen McGirt: Yes, the health of the natural world we all depend on is absolutely part of the picture when we talk about humanity being better off or not.

John Biewen: And that's something we'll come back to throughout this season. But yes, as far as people's standard of living, comfort, and health, I think, in the ways we typically think about those things, most of us would choose to be alive today.

Ellen McGirt: Inequality is still severe in much of the world, but now billions of people, a big share of the global population, have access not only to the basics of life – food, clothing, and shelter – but goods and conveniences that people couldn't dream of four or five centuries ago.

John Biewen: True. Then again, any economic historian would tell you that most of that dramatic improvement happened much later, over just the last hundred and fifty years, since about 1870. In a later episode we'll explore why that is, what changed in the 19th and 20th centuries, and I think we'll find that capitalism is certainly part of that story. But we'll also find that it's too simple to just say, well, capitalism did it. Because again, look at what we've just been saying about capitalism's early days.

Ellen McGirt: If we're placing the dawn of capitalism at the beginning of the 1500s, that means we had 350 years of capitalism before a large swath of humanity started to live with comfort and abundance. Hmm.

John Biewen: Maybe capitalism isn't the sure ticket to human well-being all by itself. Maybe some other things had to happen.

Music

Ellen McGirt: So, stay tuned. But it feels like we need to say a little more about these two big developments and what unites them – colonization and slavery on one hand, enclosure on the other. How are they related?

John Biewen: I think if we could put it into one word, it would be: commodification. In Season 5, our climate series, we talked about “thingification,” quoting Aimé Césaire and Dr. King.

Ellen McGirt: In other words, the fact that you're asserting ownership over aspects of the world that people previously didn't treat that way, or even think of in that way, and then *using* those newly objectified, or thingified, things, to produce profit. In this case, we're talking mainly about land and human beings.

John Biewen: Human beings you're claiming the right to enslave or colonize, so you can steal their labor or buy it at a very low price. And land that had been shared, and understood as a fundamental resource that provided a life *and a way of life* for everyone – however unequal and unjust those arrangements were. I'm gonna play one more clip from our interviews – this is Silvia Federici talking about enclosure in Britain.

Silvia Federici: Because once the land is enclosed, once the land is not used for subsistence, for reproduction, then the land becomes a commodity. Then the land is either sold directly to the market or the land is used for agriculture, you know, but agriculture to produce commodities for the market.

Music

John Biewen: So, parceling out patches of the earth for sale to the next owner, and the next one after that, and treating human beings as chattel on a mass scale, all to leverage the accumulation of wealth like the world had never seen. Seizing people and land and calling them capital. This was new in the world.

Music

Ellen McGirt: So, before we go, and as we look ahead to Episode 4, I think it's worth thinking about the ground we've covered here and where that leaves us, let's say, in 1700 – and in Britain, since that country is the focus of our story about early capitalism.

John Biewen: Right. At that time the British – well, the elites who are running things – are bringing in shiploads of goods and gold and silver from their far-flung and growing empire. That wealth is ready to be invested and employed as the scientific revolution progresses and people find new ways to use money to make more money.

Ellen McGirt: Like mining coal, building steam-powered factories. And because enclosure has pushed an army of English people – and Irish and Scottish and Welsh folks – out of their rural life and villages, there's a large and desperate workforce in the cities, ready to go to work in those factories and mills that are soon gonna be everywhere.

Theme music

John Biewen: We've described in this episode *what* happened – at least, some of the biggest and most important things that happened as part of capitalism's big bang. Next time, more on *why* it happened. The social and cultural shifts that paved the way for capitalism and provided fuel for its rise.

Ellen McGirt: Oh, and another important invention, without which most of this couldn't have happened: the corporation.

Credits:

This episode was made by me, with Ellen McGirt and our story editor this season, Loretta Williams. Music by Michelle Osis, Lili Haydn, and Alex Symcox. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Remote interview recordings by Ben James and Violet Lucca. Voiceovers of historical writings by Euan Kerr, Ian Bowater, Dirk Philipsen, and Katy Shields. Our website is sceneonradio.org. This season is produced in partnership with Imperative 21. The show is distributed by our friends at PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.