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**Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism**

**Marxist Interpretations vis-à-vis Marx’s Analyses in *Capital***

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**I. Introduction**

From his youth, Marx was familiar with the statements of ethnographers on the subject of fetishism and used the term in his own writings.\(^1\) Equally important was in this context the influence of Hegel.\(^2\)

In this paper we are not going to deal with the different meanings that the notion of fetishism acquires at different points of Marx’s work, an issue which is related to the various concepts of fetishism in political economy, political philosophy and the social sciences.\(^3\) We will focus on the analysis of commodity fetishism, in an effort to contribute to the comprehension of the different dimensions of this concept, especially in Marx’s *Capital*. For this purpose, we will pursue the following course: initially, we will present various Marxist approaches to the subject. Subsequently, we will read these approaches in the light of Marx’s analysis. In this way, we will attempt

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\(^1\) Marx 1976, pp. 89–90; Marx 1968, pp. 532–3, 552.

\(^2\) Pietz 1993, pp. 137–43.

\(^3\) Spyer (ed.) 1998; Apter and Pietz (eds.) 1993.
to investigate whether, and to what extent, the notion of fetishism has itself attained a fetishist function within Marxism, creating inversions, transpositions and misinterpretations, and discover what actually is its significance in the framework of the Marxist approach to ideology.

Marx introduced the notion of commodity fetishism in Section 4 of Chapter 1, Volume I of *Capital*, to describe the ‘mysterious character of the commodity-form’, which consists in the fact that ‘the definite social relation between men themselves . . . assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’.4

Commodity fetishism has become, ever since, one of the classic themes in the Marxist bibliography.5 But what is interesting about these studies is primarily attributable to the fact that the analyses of fetishism are linked to issues which are controversial among Marxists, that is that they function as a point of departure for certain political strategies and as a symbol for them. All of which helps to explain the variety of viewpoints propounded, and the ardour of those who propound them, in the discussion on what Marx said in the section of fetishism in the first chapter of Volume I of *Capital*, which is usually considered to exhaust his theoretical deliberations on the subject.

If the philosophers and ethnographers of colonialism found themselves confronted with the methodological question of how it is possible to achieve an external description of fetishism corresponding to the internal reality of the ‘primitive’ community, Marx’s *Capital* is of particular interest for the way it inverts this outlook. Marx aspires to an analysis of fetishism in his own culture, that is, a fetishism in which himself is involved as an inward-looking observer. Marx portrays internal observation as externally valid, that is as an objective description of the phenomenon of misapprehension, in which he himself is implicated.6

This approach is particularly fruitful, but faces the Epimenides paradox: Should we believe someone who says he is a liar? Who is on ‘the neutral ground of the internal observer’?7 Marxism gives a variety of answers: through the dialectic of Being and Consciousness, through epistemological studies of bias and through analyses of the functioning of ideology and its transcendence.

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5 See for example the bibliography in Iacono 1992, pp. 82–3; Pietz 1993.
6 Iacono 1992, pp. 75, 78.
7 Iacono 1992, p. 82.
In relation to fetishism, a dual answer may be given. On the one hand, because of its origins, the concept of fetishism has the advantage of retaining its outward connotations, notwithstanding its being employed by Marx with inward reference. Being transferred by analogy from the observation of an indigenous community to the community of the observer, it retains an external reference, which enables the internal observer to carry out a distanced analysis of the elements of illusion which the members of her own community experience in their social relations.

The second element in the answer is that Marx avoids a purely internal observation by employing the comparative method. He counterposes capitalism to other communities, both real and imaginary, finding points of support in the comparative material so derived that enable him to come to an understanding of fetishism by using external points of reference. Through the parallels Marx draws with various other societies, he situates himself simultaneously inside society and outside it. He shows the reader what fetishism is, without ‘transcending’ it himself, but comprehending it as a necessary manifestation of concrete social relationships.

It is from analogy and metaphor that the descriptive power and the critical function of Marxian fetishism concept are derived. It thus emerges that Marx’s internal analysis is external in two senses. Firstly, he employs a concept imbued with the remoteness of the external observer of ‘primitives’, and, secondly, the concept of fetishism is not used only metaphorically but also comparatively.

II. Fetishism of Marxists

The concept of commodity fetishism is not hard to understand and there are no serious disagreements between Marxists as to its content. If this concept functions as a kind of touchstone of Marxism, this is attributable to disagreements about its implications, that is with regard to its association with philosophical constructions and political strategies. In this section, we will reconstruct and critically evaluate the basic arguments of the Marxist controversies over the concept of fetishism.

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II.i. Fetishism as alienation (Lukács)

II.i.a. Subject-object dialectic and consciousness

In this subsection, we will take as our point of departure Lukács’s work *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), where commodity fetishism serves as the central theoretical concept. In highly repetitive fashion, the following theses are propounded.

a) *The theoretical position of fetishism.* The key to the understanding of all aspects of capitalist society must be ‘sought for in the solution to the enigma of the commodity *structure*’.9 This structure constitutes an ‘archetype’ for every form of existence of objects and every form of subjectivity. The essence of the commodity structure is defined as ‘a relation between persons acquiring a reified character . . ., which through its strict – and to all appearance completely closed and rational – autonomy, conceals every trace of its fundamental essence, i.e. as a relation between human beings’.10

Comprehension of the ideology of capitalism and of the prerequisites for its elimination presupposes comprehension of the fetishistic character of the commodity as a ‘form of objectivity’ but also as a basis ‘for subjective behaviour’.11 In this way, commodity fetishism is treated as the quintessence of Marxism and as the basis for the theory and politics of the transition to socialism:

The chapter on the fetishistic character of the commodity contains all of historical materialism, all of the self-knowledge of the proletariat as the consciousness of capitalist society.12

b) *Structure of fetishism.* Wherever the ‘rule of the commodity’,13 that is wherever the commodity-form is imposed as the ‘universal form’,14 social development and consciousness are subjected to the basic element in the rule of the commodity, ‘reification’.15 Lukács describes the ‘primary phenomenon of reification’,16 quoting the best-known extracts of Marx’s analysis of fetishism

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10 Ibid.
11 Lukács 1988, p. 171.
16 Ibid.
in the first chapter of Volume I of *Capital*. Human labour is ‘counterposed’ to the human being as ‘something objective, independent of him, which rules over the human being with an autonomy that is alien to him’.

From an objective viewpoint, commodities are counterposed to the human being as ‘a world of ready-made things and relations between things’, as ‘powers which act autonomously’. From a subjective viewpoint, human activity takes the form of the commodity and is ‘reified’, that is it moves on the basis of the laws of ‘an objectivity alien to the human being’. When the commodity-form is universalised (capitalism), human labour is rendered an ‘abstraction’ which is objectified in commodities, becoming a ‘thing’ which is sold. This leads to a ‘perpetually increasing rationalisation, to an ever intensifying exclusion of the qualitative, individual-human characteristics of the worker’. In economics, in science, in politics and philosophy, what prevails is measurability and rational calculability, in the sense that the human element is excluded.

c) Consequences of fetishism. The human being is rendered ‘a mechanised component of a mechanical system’ to which she is helplessly subordinated. Everything subjective has the appearance of an ‘element of error’. A new ‘structure of consciousness’ is imposed on all groups in society. The activity of the worker loses its ‘character of activity’ and becomes a ‘contemplative stance’ in relation to the closed system of machines which is levelling all before it. The person incorporated into this system becomes a ‘helpless spectator’, ‘a cog in the wheel of economic development’. The further the extension of capitalism, the deeper the penetration of the ‘structure of reification’ into human consciousness. It is engraved on all interpersonal

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17 Lukács 1988, p. 175.
18 Ibid.
20 Lukács 1988, p. 175.
23 Lukács 1988, p. 179.
26 Lukács 1988, p. 179.
28 Lukács 1988, pp. 296 and 313.
29 Lukács 1988, p. 185.
relations without exception, which become commodified and determine the way in which the individual regards her own qualities and abilities: the elements of personality become objects which the individual ‘possesses’ and can ‘alienate’.30 “The human being is objectified as a commodity’ and her consciousness becomes ‘the self-consciousness of the commodity’.31

At the same time, fetishism ‘misshapes’32 the reified character of the object, quantifies objects into ‘fetishized exchange prices’.33 The totality of social phenomena undergoes a ‘process of transformation’34 in the direction of reification. Under conditions of fetishism, people become things and things lose their material character, being transformed into anonymous quantities.

d) Political prospects. The point of departure is the position that reification is synonymous with dehumanisation and debasement. Even though the ‘reification of every life-manifestation’35 strikes at all social classes in capitalism, the proletariat experiences it in its most extreme form, being subjected to the ‘most profound dehumanization’.36 The proletarians find themselves ‘directly and wholly on the side of the object’ and are ‘an object and not an active factor in the work process’.37

The proletariat comes to an understanding of history as it acquires ‘self-knowledge of its social position’,38 that is that ‘inhuman objectivity’39 which is necessary to capitalism. This is of particular political importance: while the slave who becomes aware that she is a slave changes nothing in her situation – that is, in the object of knowledge – the proletarian who comprehends that her fate is to be dehumanised acquires knowledge with direct practical consequences: the knowledge changes the object of knowledge. The proletarian discovers the ‘vital core’40 behind the reification, that is she understands that, in reality, what exists is not things or relations between things but relations between people. This is how the fetishistic character of commodities is exposed and their real character as a relation between humans is brought to light.

30 Lukács 1988, p. 194.
33 Lukács 1988, pp. 187 and 299.
34 Lukács 1988, p. 268.
36 Lukács 1988, pp. 9 and 294–5.
Thus, the proletariat is able to make an empirical break with the bourgeois quantitative manner of thinking and to regard society ‘as a dialectical unity’.\(^{41}\) When the consciousness of the proletariat becomes ‘the self-consciousness of the whole community’,\(^{42}\) checks will be imposed on the ‘full capitalistic rationalization of the entire social Being’;\(^{43}\) The ‘reified structure of Being’\(^{44}\) is dissolved into shifting processes and relationships. The proletariat thus becomes the ‘simultaneous subject-object of history’\(^{45}\) and the practice which changes reality.

II.i.b. Idealism

The centrality which Lukács ascribes to the problematic of fetishism presents a number of questionable aspects. For a start, it is ahistorically idealistic, presupposing that human beings are born in possession of a kind of essence, that is that they have a preformed consciousness, type of behaviour and thought, which, confronted by objective factors, is alienated under capitalism and becomes a thing, imitating the structure of commodity exchange.

In parallel with this *essentialism*, the formula of fetishism as the matrix of alienation is patently reductionist. Social life is reduced to a principle, which is not the material base as supposed by mechanistic Marxism, but the way in which the bearers of productive relations conceive of this base. It is his tendency to ignore the multiplicity of social practices (history, class struggle, the activity of state ideological apparatuses) that is responsible for the oversimplifications of Lukács, such as the position that labour is characterised by the contemplative stance of the observer of machines and that every form of thought is associated with the quantification of commercial calculation.

Equally reductionist is the view of ideology as a false consciousness (concealment of the true character of the relations of production), as something which emerges automatically from the form of exchange.\(^{46}\) In creating fetishism, capitalism safeguards the absence of transparency of exploitative relations. This simplification elevates fetishism to a primary and, indeed, unique ideological dynamic. It is counterbalanced by the hope that the Messiah-proletariat will recognise the ‘truth’ and, constituting itself as a subject,

\(^{41}\) Lukács 1988, pp. 291, 301 and 338.

\(^{42}\) Lukács 1988, p. 313.

\(^{43}\) Lukács 1988, p. 299.

\(^{44}\) Lukács 1988, p. 321.

\(^{45}\) Lukács 1988, p. 339.

overturn all existing reality. For those who do not believe in the wondrous dialectical leaps anticipated by Lukács, following the young Marx,\textsuperscript{47} it remains inexplicable how this absolute being is to be divested of the huge weight of ideology and succeed in overthrowing capitalism on the strength of its consciousness.

There is no room, in this ideological framework, either for questions such as how the erroneous conception of the relations of production has the power to shape every aspect of the existent, or for refutations of the schema by existing reality which indicate that the course of science and politics is not interpretable through schematic models of decline. Also unexplained is the passage from commodity fetishism to transformation of everything under the sun into alienated and reified objects.\textsuperscript{48}

Lukács attributes to Marxism a specific core, which, for him, is the analysis of fetishism. When the products of human labour come to dominate human beings, irrespective of class position, and when every person becomes a thing, Marxism is reduced to a theory of the interpretation and exposure of this automated false consciousness. The theory of ideology is then restricted to the discovery of a simple secret: the subject becomes a thing, but it can return to itself, linking up again with the true human ‘core’ of history, thanks to a revolution in apprehension.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} 'Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation? Answer: In the formulation of a class with radical chains . . . which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat'. (Marx 2000.)

\textsuperscript{48} There is an obvious affinity between Lukács’s outlook and that of the theorists who attribute to capitalism an exclusively symbolic and spectacular function: labour and politics are no more. War is waged on television. The economy is determined by the VDU monitors in the stock exchange, and so forth.

\textsuperscript{49} The universalising outlook is conspicuous in the analysis of Goux, who maintains that: ‘Speech-centeredness is the linguistic term for the universal and dominant principle of marketability, based on abstract labor’ (Goux 1975, p. 140). At another point, he considers that ‘the enslavement of the worker by capital, which is perpetuated by the institution of money, is also implemented through the repression of the operative form of writing, which is debased along with the element of meaning, and repressed through subordination to speech-centeredness’ (pp. 147, 182–4, 190–1).

A highly elaborated version of the alienation-problematic was formulated by Sohn-Rethel (1990, pp. 53–4, 68–9, 91–2, 96). The author stresses the fact of the dissociation of intellectual from manual labour, and considers the concepts formulated by the bourgeois philosophy as ‘the alienation of an alienation’. 
II.ii. Legal fetishism (Pashukanis)

II.ii.b. Fetishism, the bourgeois state and law

The Soviet jurist Evgeny Pashukanis developed his conception of the forms of the bourgeois legal system on the basis of a particular finding. If we define law as a system of social relationships corresponding to the interests of the ruling class and safeguarded by institutionalised violence, we certainly capture the class content of legal forms — that is, the correspondence with the interests of the ruling class, and not with the general interest, peace, justice, and so on — but we provide no answer to the decisive question: ‘Why does this content take this form?’.

Perceiving the blind alley entailed in the definition of law as coercion, Pashukanis develops a theory of law as consent, which utilises an analysis of commodity fetishism incorporating the following positions:

a) The matrix of the legal system. A specific element of the legal system is that it concerns ‘isolated, separate subjects’, the individuals who have rights.

b) The legal system as private and capitalist law. The legal form of the subject vested with rights arises in a society comprised of selfish, isolated bearers of individual interests, that is a society based ‘on an agreement between free individual wills’. Public law imitates the structure of private law, though it organises the interests of the society’s dominant class, and its role is not to guarantee the rights of the individual. The legal form cannot exist in a guise other than that of individual interest and will. Public law becomes a ‘reflection’ of private law. The bourgeois state (an ‘impersonal abstraction’ which is ‘merged entirely into the abstract objective rule’) is a ‘reflection’ of the ‘private’ structure of law.

The result of this is that Pashukanis perceives as law only the law of capitalist society, which is based on the individuals as commodity owners. It thus excludes from the realm of law systems of social regulation from other modes of production which were ignorant of the concept of the subject as a status common to all people.

50 Pashukanis 1929, p. 59.
51 Müller-Tuckfeld 1994.
52 Pashukanis 1929, p. 77.
53 Pashukanis 1929, p. 80.
54 Pashukanis 1929, pp. 80–4.
55 Pashukanis 1929, pp. 188 and 123–4.
c) Legal fetishes. The question arises as to how certain sentient beings are transformed into abstract and equal subjects of law. Following the ‘private approach’, Pashukanis notes that the analysis of the form of the subject must take as its point of departure an analysis of the commodity-form, which demonstrates that social relations take on the characteristics of relations between things. The legal subject arises from the act of exchange, in which the human being realises her absolute and abstract freedom of will. As a subject, she is the owner of the commodity-object and she exchanges it. It is in this way that there arises the legal fetishism which complements commodity fetishism. In commodity fetishism, things are the bearers of value in a natural way. In legal fetishism, the subjects which move the things are natural vehicles for domination.

In this way, social relations take on a form which is doubly mysterious. They appear as relations between things and, at the same time, relations between subjects. Abstract labour, the abstract subject, abstract legal rules, impersonal state power. This is the specifically bourgeois mechanism of assimilation, creator of capitalist law by inducing social entities whose material foundations are to be found in the act of exchange.

d) The withering away of law. For as long as market- or value-determined relations are preserved, the legal system will also be preserved. In countries where proletarian power has prevailed, the withering away of law will become possible only with the abolition of economic relations based on contract and the resolution of conflicts in courts. And, here, there is an obvious parallel between law and economics. Just as commodity fetishism will be abolished only when capitalism too is abolished, so the fate of bourgeois law and its subjects are likewise indissolubly linked to capitalism.

II.ii.b. Economism or structural interpretation?

The analogy between the commodity as a natural bearer of value, the subject as a natural vehicle of human will and the state as abstract macro-subject is based on the hypothesis that there exists a structural similarity of a causal

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56 Pashukanis 1929, pp. 89–90.
57 ‘The legal form... also finds its material foundation in the act of exchange... the act of exchange brings together... the essential elements both of political economy and of law’ (Pashukanis 1929, p. 100).
58 For the state as macro-subject linked with legal subjects and the contradictions of dual sovereignty of individual and state, see Dimoulis 1996, p. 582 ff.
type, and, through this, an attempt is made to interpret the legal system. Pashukanis thus adopts the classical-Marxist schema of base-superstructure, searching in the former for the secret of the latter.

Pashukanis is commonly charged with economism, that is with ignoring the relative autonomy of the legal system.59 But the charge is not well-founded. Pashukanis does not assert that the legal system lacks autonomy, nor that the base determines what is to become law (statutes, court decisions, doctrines). His analysis aims at demonstrating in what way the structure of a society (the operating principles which comprise the semantic core of a mode of production) makes it necessary for there to be a system of rules for social regulation adopting certain assumptions and forcibly imposing them as generally applicable (free and equal subjects, contract, structuring of public law on the basis of private, free will).

This system of rules functions on the basis of free negotiations between sovereign individuals.60 Pashukanis gives the name of law to this system of rules. To explain the necessity for it under capitalism, he demonstrates the similarity of its principles to the structure of generalised commodity circulation. Establishing this causal linkage (the principles of law reflect the structure of production), Pashukanis transcends the theory of coercion (law as the product of a dominant political will). He gives an interpretation of the structural reasons for consent to it (correspondence with the structure of production, that is with the fetishistic representations which are imposed on individuals by the laws of the economy) and succeeds in explaining why law has specific contents and codes in bourgeois societies.

It is certainly possible for law to be defined more broadly so that it includes the legal systems of other modes of production. Pashukanis’s absolute stance (capitalism = bourgeois law = private law = law) aims at showing that a legal system with the structural characteristics of bourgeois private law did not exist prior to capitalism and will not exist subsequent to capitalism because it is derived from a historically specific regulation of sociability through the circulation of commodities. This kind of law is of a historically unique character because of its form and – we might add – because of the universal character of its implementation, in contrast with previous social norms.61

60 See also Engelskirchen 2001.
61 Legal historians speak of an ‘extensive-mass’ implementation of legal rules under
Through this absolute stance, Pashukanis avoids the idealistic trap of giving the usual formalistic definition of law. Such a formalistic definition has two consequences. On the one hand bourgeois private law appears as the concrete historical expression of the legal regulation necessary in every human community \([ubi\ societas\ ibi\ ius]\)\(^{62}\). On the other, law is linked to the idea of justice so that, in order for one to be able to speak of justice in general, despite the huge differences between the various systems of social regulation and coercion, there must be a common element between them. This leads to the appearance of bourgeois private law as the best and ‘most human’ form of law (freedom, equality, separation of powers, contractuality, moderate punishments, and so on)\(^{63}\).

Neither the other viewpoints positing a purpose or origin of law (the spirit of a nation, expression of the collective will of a community, observance of the prescriptions of the legislator, will of the authorities charged with implementation of the law, and so forth), nor the critical assumption that violence is the essence of law escape from this idealistic trap. The latter view has the advantage of realism. It establishes the ‘law = power’ paradigm and provides a satisfactory explanation of the origins of a rule which is represented as just or necessary. Nevertheless, above and beyond its genealogical accuracy, it is incapable of explaining the specialised character and the specific mode of operation of the bourgeois legal system, as Pashukanis perceived them.

The position opted for by Pashukanis cannot, therefore, be described as economistic, unless we regard as economistic any analysis which considers that legal and ideological phenomena are linked to the structure of production. His approach reflects the well-known observation of Marx, in the *Grundrisse*:

Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all equality and freedom. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations they are merely this basis to a higher power.\(^{64}\)
This view is repeatedly expressed by Marx in *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, regarding the legal concepts of equality and freedom as reflection of commodity production and circulation. These positions are susceptible to an economistic reading, if we suppose that Divine Providence produces a superstructure perfectly suited to a certain base, that is if the process of production of the superstructure is treated ahistorically as automatic adjustment to the base, which would entail the process of formation of the base taking place in an ideological and political void, or in connection with an hostile superstructure.

If, on the other hand, we perceive the formation of bourgeois societies as a derivative of ideology and law in parallel with the violent imposition of capitalist economic relations, the position of Marx and Pashukanis is entirely sound. It shows why the creation of a legal system of universal application, based on free contractual relations between legal subjects of equal status is, from a theoretical viewpoint, inseparable from capitalism as an economic system. Other interpretations of the character of bourgeois private law (progress of humanity, civilisation, rationalisation of the state apparatus as an expression of the general interest, and so on) are not able to demonstrate this. The Marx/Pashukanis analysis is based on a semantic abstraction, because it does not invoke a historically existent point of departure for everything. The deduction is not chronological or developmental but attributes to the ‘material basis’ a logical and/or functional priority.

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65 Balibar 1997, p. 194. Marx observes: ‘All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed present to the eye the precise opposite of that relation’ (Marx 1990, p. 680). Marx puts forward the same idea more clearly in a letter to Engels, dated 2 April 1858: ‘This simple circulation, considered as such – and it constitutes the surface of bourgeois society in which the underlying operations which gave rise to it are obliterated – evinces no distinction between the objects of exchange, save formal and evanescent ones. Here we have *the realm of liberty, equality and of property based on “labour”*’ (Marx, 2000a). As a site for (and process of) exchange of equivalents, the market, even when it is the labour market, embodies the realm of equality and freedom, which is a prerequisite for the implementation of equal exchange.

66 This is criticised by Althusser when he writes: ‘Marx did of course attempt in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* to “deduce” a commodity law from . . . commodity relations, but – unless we believe in a providential self-regulation of the commodity relations in question – we do not see how they could function without there being a state-issued currency, without transactions registered by state apparatuses and without courts of law for resolving disagreements’ (Althusser 1994, p. 493).

67 Norrie argues correctly that a historical synchrony exists between law and
Inspired by economic fetishism, Pashukanis designates as legal fetishism the view that there exist sovereign (free and equal) subjects which rule over objects and enjoy freedom in their social relations. This particular element of correspondence is overlooked by those who regard as legal fetishism the belief that law has a power in itself to impose its prescriptions, regardless of any particular balance in class forces. The belief that the rule of law applies because it applies is nevertheless an ideological consequence of its everyday application and to characterise it as fetishism is a choice which is linked to the pre-Marxian usage of the term fetishism (law has the supernatural power to move the world, like an inanimate idol).

In contrast, Pashukanis’s interpretation of fetishism aims at demonstrating the transformational effects of legal fetishism: imposition of a model of interpersonal relations corresponding to the structure of exchange but which cannot prevail socially in the absence of legal regulation. With this enriched concept of fetishism, Pashukanis offers an interpretation of the structural specificity of bourgeois law.

The common element in the above approaches is that they accept the Marxist analysis of fetishism in the first chapter of Volume I of Capital, elaborating it in different directions. The Lukácsian outlook is extensive-universalising. Commodity fetishism is seen as a process of alienation, which is not confined to production of a false image of acts of exchange but extends to all social activities (reification of subjectivity, quantification of thought on the model of economic calculation). Fetishism is thus treated as the matrix of a structure of alienation which destroys the authentic structure of social relations. The

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68 Also see Balibar 1993, p. 67 ff.
hope is that this descent into total ignominy will implant in the proletariat the consciousness and the spirit of revolt that will put an end to the alienation.

Pashukanis’ approach is extensive-comparative. It links the codes of exchange (value, equivalence) with those of the legal system (subject, will), exposing the structure of the legal system and its inextricable connection with commodity exchange. Legal fetishism may be compared with economic fetishism, being a consequence of it. Here, too, the view is clear that capitalism has a ‘flattening’ function (homogenising things into exchangeable commodities and people into equalised vehicles of free will).

Nevertheless, it is not Pashukanis’s purpose to deplore alienation. He analyses the effects of the functioning of a symbolic (but also profoundly political) order which shapes the relations of production in accordance with certain codes. He solves the riddle of the legal framework, stressing that, without the fetishistic structuring of capitalistic exchange, concrete law would not be conceivable. This, fundamentally, is where he differs from Lukács. Pashukanis notes the need for simultaneity in the abolition of the state, its law and the market by means of class struggle and he perceives that the ‘flattening’ operation of fetishism does not, in itself, have political implications for the process of transition.

II.iii. Commodity fetishism as idealism (Althusserian school)

At the opposite extreme to this approach is the philosophical-theoretical interrogation of the fetishism analysis by the Althusserian school.

II.iii.a. Balibar

Embarking on a critique of the definition of fetishism and its place in the work of Marx, Balibar maintains that:

a) Fetishism is a bourgeois-idealist theory. Marx carries out his analysis of fetishism before introducing the concept of capital, of the capitalist mode of production or its overall process of reproduction. Without these notions, it does not clearly emerge in what context fetishism can be seen operating: bourgeois ideology, a legal system based on contracts and other elements with a bearing on the circulation of commodities. The analysis of fetishism in the first chapter of Capital is based on the bourgeois ideological concepts of law and political economy (person/thing, freedom/coercion, natural/social, plan/market). The consequence of this is that ideological misinterpretation is seen as an automatic consequence of the circulation
of commodities, with the commodity represented as the subject or the ‘reason’ for the ideological misinterpretation.

b) *Theoretical significance of fetishism.* Marxists who have based their analyses on fetishism have elaborated idealistic anthropologies (Lukács), while materialists (Lenin) have ignored it. There are two reasons for this. From a philosophical viewpoint, the theory of fetishism is an impediment to materialist study of ideology, being based on a problematic concerning the origins of the subject. It does not treat the subject as an ideological category but as a scientific concept which provides an interpretation of ideological findings. Fetishism is therefore ‘enthusiastically elaborated’ by the ‘alienation’ approach (what is decisive is the consciousness of the subject) but also by the formalistic-structuralist tendency, which is likewise founded on the problematic of the subject (its position in the process of production leads to the formation of certain representations and illusions).69

From a methodological viewpoint, those who insist on the theory of fetishism assume that *Capital* is imbued with an attitude of continuity: from the simple initial abstraction of the commodity, everything is deduced from elaboration of its concrete determinants. But, in fact, Marx shifts the object of his enquiry in the course of the exposition of *Capital*. The references are not to the commodity and to the value-form in general but to the dual character of labour and the process of exchange.

The fetishism discussion, therefore, has to do with a ‘pre-Marxist philosophical problematic’.70 At most, it represents a ‘preparatory dialectic’,71 that is a critical deflection of the economic categories against themselves, against their utilisation for apologetic purposes, given that Marx attempts to criticise economists without having previously developed a theory of ideology.

c) *Fetishism against ideology.* The materialistic theory of ideology is obliged to take into account the existence and the operation of ‘actual ideological social relations’72 which are established in the class struggle, expressed through ideological apparatuses and differentiated from the relations of production, which determine ideological relations only in the final analysis.

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70 See Balibar 1993, pp. 223–4.
71 See Balibar 1993, p. 220.
72 See Balibar 1993, p. 225.
d) **Political consequences.** The theory of fetishism, despite the fact that it avoids economism, is an impediment to proper understanding of the revolutionary transition because it presents social transparency and the end of illusion as an automatic consequence of the proletarian revolution leading to the abolition of the market. Communism is thus presented as the overcoming of alienation and its opposite (the end of history) emerges immediately from the transformation of the economic base.

II.iii.b. **Althusser**

In the context of an analysis of Marxist readings of the state and their impasses, Althusser referred in 1978 to the question of fetishism. Although in dialogue with Marx, in fact, Althusser undertook no systematic reading or critique of his positions. He intervened in fully-formed ideological fronts which made use of commodity fetishism as raw material for elaborating their positions. This emerges from a comparison of Althusser’s views with other currents in the Marxist debate but also from the fact that he did not take into account the analyses of his own close collaborators concerning Marx’s conception of fetishism.

Succinctly rephrased, his theses were as follows:

a) **Fetishism as a legal ideology.** Marx’s fetishism is founded on the idea that human labour relations in commodified societies appear as relations between things. This presupposes that the relations of people between themselves and/or the things they produce are transparent (when the ideology of fetishism does not act) because they are immediate. But this presupposition finds its grounds only in legal ideology, which projects onto legal relations the transparency of relations of ownership (the object belongs absolutely and directly to the owner-subject). In legal ideology, the relations between individuals are equated with the relations between things: two quantities of commodities are brought into correlation in the exchange of equivalents, because two people decided to exchange them and vice versa. Whether we claim that there is an exchange of things or that there is an exchange between subjects, we are, in effect, saying the same thing.

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73 The reference here is principally to the detailed study by Rancière (1996), published in *Reading Capital*, edited by Althusser (first edition 1965), but also to the analyses of Balibar (1976).
b) Fetishism against ideology. Marxian fetishism is a logical (and ideological) game whose terms are fluid. We cannot distinguish the real from the apparent, the immediate from the mediated. To escape from this ideological circuit, we must abandon the legal categories of antithesis between person and thing on which Marx bases his conception of fetishism in Chapter 1. His analysis does not identify the productive mechanisms of fetishism, which is interpreted in terms of the state apparatuses generating mystifications much more complex and effective than the reduction of human relations to relations between things. To put it somewhat differently, the ideological operation – which also effects the naturalisation of what is essentially historical – has to do chiefly with the state and not with commodity exchange.

c) The reasons for Marx’s idealism. The question arises of why Marx plays this game, defining the concepts of subject and thing in accordance with whatever he has to demonstrate. Althusser suggests three possible interpretations:

(i) One political explanation is that, according to Marx, every type of community appears to its own members to be something self-evident and necessary but, in fact, is neither natural nor eternal. Everything changes, so that, one day, capitalism too will cease to be. This corresponds to the definition Althusser gives to the concept of fetishism (the tendency for that which exists to be considered ‘natural’). But this provides no satisfactory explanation of Marx’s digression into fetishism. Marx has expressed this view much more persuasively, so that there is no need for this game of the obvious/non-obvious and truth/appearance in order to demonstrate the historical mutability of social representations.

(ii) A more plausible explanation is that Marx wanted to criticise economists who regard social relationships as relationships between things, but also to justify them, attributing their misconception to the fetishism generated by the commodity exchange mechanism. The price for this is that Marx elevates labour into an essence which takes ‘predicates’ (actual and imaginary, material and social) and that he considers the material elements in production the merely apparent aspect of the labour essence (coal becomes a ‘material appearance’). Thus, Marx bases the theory of fetishism

74 Althusser 1994, p. 495.
75 Ibid.
on the postulate that social relations possess a material appearance, a profoundly idealist view.

(iii) The most comprehensive explanation is that Marx wanted to find easy arguments at the beginning of *Capital*, speaking only about the concept of value. This is attributable to his ‘weakness’ in commencing with the ‘simplest abstraction’.\(^{76}\) The analysis of fetishism is thoroughly makeshift and fanciful because it is in the wrong place. In the chapter on value, Marx is unable to speak about capitalism, about the state and the social classes, that is about the notions which help to account for the illusions and the fetishisms of the economists and of the dominant ideology. At the beginning of *Capital*, the philosopher ‘by the name of Marx’ became a prisoner of the legal categories on which the concept of the commodity depends. He became entangled in the bourgeois way of treating value, linking fetishism to the commodity-form as such.

(iv) **Political consequences.** The analyses of fetishism are of political significance within Marxism, because they make possible a dissociation from economism. They are, however, the basis both for humanistic interpretations and for workerist positions supporting proletarian subjectivity and insurrection. In either case, the theory of fetishism boils down to a particular form of the humanistic theory of alienation, that is it belongs to a philosophical approach which Althusser fiercely criticises.

II.iv. The ‘other’ fetishism: Gramsci

Before we move on to an examination of the question in the work of Marx, it may be of interest to quote two references to fetishism by Gramsci.

The first quotation concerns the relationship between the individual and the collectivities in which she is integrated. When the individuals who constitute a ‘collective organisation’ perceive it as something external to themselves, functioning without their participation, then that organisation essentially ceases to exist. ‘It becomes a mental apparition, a fetish’.\(^{77}\) What is paradoxical is that this fetishistic (critical or simply passive) relationship of individuals to organisations is not to be found only in coercive organisations, such as the church, but also in non-public, voluntary organisations such as parties and trade unions. A deterministic-mechanistic viewpoint thus arises which

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\(^{76}\) Althusser 1994, p. 491.

portrays these organisations as a phantasmagorical amalgam. By contrast, for revolutionary organisations, the need for direct participation by individuals, that is the overcoming of fetishism, even if this creates a situation of apparent chaos, is absolutely vital.

In the second quotation, Gramsci describes as ‘fetishistic history’\(^78\) the dominant interpretation of Italian history. Those represented as protagonists are various mythological figures such as the Revolution, the Union, the Nation and Italy. The historical horizon ends at the national borders and the past is interpreted in the light of the present on the basis of a deterministic linearity. The historical problem of the reason for the establishment of the Italian state and the manner in which it was established is transformed into the problem of discovering that state as a Union or as a People or, more generally, as Italy in all preceding history in exactly the way that the bird must exist inside the fertilised egg.

The former reference has to do with the pre-Marxist meaning of fetishism. An inanimate entity acquires substance as a vehicle for will and action, concealing the real agents. In the latter reference, Gramsci subjects the nationalist mode of thought (the nation is perceived as the perennially existent subject, which is the motive power of history) to a timely critique, but also criticises the nationally constituted social sciences which provide theoretical support for this construction.

What is interesting about the quotations, from the viewpoint of our problematic, is that Gramsci completely ignores the economic dimension of fetishism, although, obviously, he would have been familiar with Marx’s analysis. Gramsci analyses fetishistic phenomena in the ideological apparatuses of the state (church, parties, trade unions, nationally-oriented scholarship). The functioning of certain institutions generates illusions of historical evolution, depicting it as product of the actions of non-existent entities, so that not only is there a misapprehension of reality (classes, individuals, and so on) but also the creation of a distorted image of it conveying an impression of the omnipotence of bourgeois institutions.

Even though it does not take into account the complex meaning that Marx attributes to the term fetishism, the quotation from Gramsci is a positive foreshadowing of Althusser’s critical remarks to the effect that fetishism is associated with the different stages of ideological production.

III. Fetishism in Marx’s *Capital*

III.i. *The manner of presentation of the theory of value in ‘Capital’*

Althusser’s and Balibar’s critical outlook refocuses attention on a methodological problem in *Capital*: the fact that Marx examines the question of *the nature of value* and subsequently *the nature of money* in the first three chapters of Volume I of *Capital* before offering a definition of the capitalist mode of production (CMP). This method of exposition has led certain Marxists to the view that value is not a constituent category of the concept of the CMP but that it gives a preliminary description of generalised *simple* commodity production, which preceded capitalism.79

However, Marx introduces the concept of generalised commodity production only as an intellectual construct that will help him to establish the concept of capitalist production. From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*, Marx insisted that value is an expression of relations exclusively characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.80

Apart from the detachment of the concept of value from the CMP and its examination in correlation with a plethora of ‘commodity’ forms and modes of production, the introductory reference to value ‘in itself’ creates again the illusion that the first three chapters of the Volume I of *Capital* offer a comprehensive theoretical investigation of the Marxian concept of fetishism.

According to this position, the concept of fetishism is adequately formulated in the first chapter of Volume I, the fourth section of which is entitled ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret’. Here, Marx’s initial reflections, which flow from a first presentation of generalised commodity circulation, are treated as if they represent developed Marxist theory, with the result that the concept of the CMP and the ideological forms produced within that framework are not taken into account. This is especially true of the analyses in Volume III of the *fetishism of capital* (for example, of interest and interest-bearing capital), which can be decoded in the light of what is written in the first three chapters of Volume I about commodity fetishism.

79 Maniatis and O’Hara 1999.
80 ‘The concept of value is entirely peculiar to the most modern economy, since it is the most abstract expression of capital itself and of the production resting on it. In the concept of value, its secret is betrayed… The economic concept of value does not occur in antiquity’ (Marx 1993, pp. 776–7). ‘*The value form of the product of labour* is the most abstract, but also the most general form of the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character’ (Marx 1990, p. 174). For a detailed analysis see Milios et al. 2002, pp. 13–57.
It is not only Lukács and those who saw in commodity fetishism the whole essence of a theory of alienation of mankind who have fallen victim to these illusions, but also Althusser and those who believed that one could speak seriously of the theory of Marx taking into account only the analyses of the first part of Volume I of Capital.

The paradox is that Althusser had already noted that to introduce the concept of value independently of the concept of capital in the first section of Capital was to put the cart before the horse, and his colleague Rancière had extensively treated the modification and enrichment of meaning of the concepts introduced by Marx in the first section of Volume I of Capital, in the subsequent sections of the same volume as well as in Volumes II and III.\textsuperscript{81} On the basis of this consideration, we argued above that Althusser’s text refers more to humanistic interpretations of fetishism than to the overall analysis of Marx. In that sense, there is some justification for Althusser’s position on the makeshift and fanciful theory of fetishism, deduced from the passages in the first section of Volume I on commodity fetishism and subsequently projected onto the entirety of capitalist society, with the analysis grounded in the ideological categories of law and bourgeois economics and not on Marxist concepts or research findings. This criticism was directed at those who ‘are more interested in the form and less in the content of Marx’s theoretical work’.\textsuperscript{82} Nevertheless, it did not provide a comprehensive solution to the problem, as was the intention of Althusser, who was similarly misled by appearances and overstated the case for the significance of Marx’s method of exposition, turning it into something absolute and overlooking the subsequent analyses in Capital.

In any case, the commodity is truly the simplest economic form in capitalism, albeit that, in the first section of Volume I, it is presented without reference to the most characteristic commodity of the CMP, labour-power. Consequently, from the simplest form of the CMP, one may be misled into constructing a model of an economy of independent self-employed commodity producers, something which does not encapsulate the differentia specifica of the CMP,\textsuperscript{83} and which did not reflect Marx’s method or intentions.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{81} Rancière 1996.
\textsuperscript{82} Godelier 1977, p. 201.
\textsuperscript{83} See also Reuten 1993.
\textsuperscript{84} See Arthur 2002, pp. 33 ff.
Even if we accept that the ‘model’ of independent commodity producers is legitimate as a *first approximation to a capitalist economy* (one feature of which is the institutional independence of the producer-capitalists\(^8^5\)), because – for example – to establish the concept of money as general equivalent it is not necessary to refer to capitalist exploitation relations, we nevertheless believe that Marx’s analysis would be more successful if he had made it clear from the outset what was involved.

The distinguishing feature of the capitalist economy is that all active agents of production are *commodity owners*, because even if they are not commodity producers (capitalists), they possess the commodity of labour-power. The preliminary formulation of this position was not to constitute the slightest obstacle to the evolution of Marx’s theoretical views in the first section of Volume I (for example, the development of the concept of the general equivalent) while, at the same time, it would make it clear that the only economy of generalised commodity exchange is capitalism. On this basis, the ensuing analysis of the movement of capital (M-C-M’), the production of surplus-value, and so on would emerge as a logical consequence.

III.ii. *The concept of fetishism and its place in ‘Capital’*

When he introduces the concept of the CMP in Chapters 4–6 of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx makes it clear that that the basic structural relation of the CMP is the capital/wage-labour relation, whose foundation is the separation of workers from the means of production and the transformation of labour-power into a commodity.\(^8^6\) This relation is not just economic. It constitutes, at the same time, an historically specific political and ideological structure.

Domination by the CMP has, as one of its necessary concomitants, the establishment of the worker (on the legal-political level and on the level of ideology) as a free and equal subject of law, with all that entails for the structural features of the state and the dominant ideology: hierarchical-bureaucratic configuration of the state apparatus, classless functioning of the

\(^8^5\) In the CMP, the capitalist is the producer of commodities (she who decides what is to be produced and how, and who owns the resulting product). Commodity production is carried out by means of the labour-power of others (and not that of the capitalist herself), which the producer-capitalist has also purchased as a *commodity*.

\(^8^6\) ‘Capitalism is not a society of independent producers who exchange their products in accordance with the social-average labor time incorporated in them: it is a surplus-value producing economy engaged in the competitive pursuit of capital. Labor-power is a commodity’ (Mattick 1969, p. 38).
state on the basis of the rule of law and formal legitimacy. Correspondingly, the dominant bourgeois ideology prescribes the materiality of the civilisation of the free human being, natural rights and equality before the law, the common/national interest with arises from the harmonisation of individual interests, and so forth.

The dominant ideology, therefore, represents a procedure for consolidating capitalist class interests, through its materiality as an element in the institutional state functioning but also as a life-practice, not only of the ruling classes, but also, in modified form, of the subordinate classes.⁸⁷ In this sense, the dominant ideology is a component element of the CMP, that is of the structural core of capitalist relations of domination and exploitation. The dominant ideology conceals the class relations of domination and exploitation, not so much by denying them as by imposing them through many different practices as relations of equality, freedom and common interest. Their hard core – as pointed out by Althusser/Balibar – is the juridical ideology that is inextricably linked to the functioning of the legal system. As Marx puts it:

The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage.⁸⁸

This function of concealment of the exploitative and coercive character of social relations is called ‘fetishism’ by Marx in all cases where the relations of class domination and exploitation appear, in the framework of the dominant ideology, in a material form. Social relations such as money and capital, or the functions which derive from social relations (profits, interest), appear as objects (gold, means of production) or as qualities of objects (the means of production

⁸⁷ See also Milios et al. 2002, pp. 6–8.
⁸⁸ Marx 1990, p. 280.
produce profit; money generates interest), and so ‘the forms which stamp products as commodities’ appear as ‘natural forms’ of ‘fixed quality’.89

The concept of fetishism was simply introduced by Marx in the first section of Volume I in regard to the commodity in order to show that ‘the value of the commodity no longer appears as that which it is, i.e. a social relation between producers, but as a quality of the thing, no less natural than its colour or its weight’.90

In the course of his further investigations, Marx made it clear that the concept of fetishism does not refer only to the commodity but to all forms of capital (money, means of production). In reality, Marx does not expound a theory of commodity fetishism but a theory of the fetishism of capital, of capitalist relations. He introduces the commodity as a form of capital and as a result of capitalist production. In this context, he also introduces commodity fetishism as a form or a result of capital fetishism.

We perceive, then, that contrary to what many Marxists seem to believe,91 Marx makes comprehensive reference to fetishism in the subsequent sections of his work and above all in sections of Volume III of Capital.92 The reason for this is that the forms of appearance of capitalist relations are analysed chiefly in the third volume.

The subordination of labour to capital imposes the capitalist as the producer of commodities and regulates exchange ratios between commodities in accordance with production costs (and not values). Profit is presented as proportion of the advanced capital, so that ‘surplus-value itself appears as having arisen from the total capital, and uniformly from all parts of it’.93 This

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89 Marx 1990, p. 168. See also Rubin 1972, Chapter 1.
90 Labica 1985, p. 465. Marx detected the more general ideological consequences of the depoliticisation of political economy which develops also as a result of fetishism: the class-conditioned character of social relations under capitalism is thus rendered opaque (Renault 1995, p. 98). The activities of the structurally different productive practices are reduced to human activity in general and political economy degenerates into a narrative account of the behaviour of individuals reacting in a rational manner in predetermined situations. Apart from his critique of the view of social relations as relations between things, Marx rejects political economy’s portrayal of the value-form and commodity exchange as natural laws, similarly criticising its refusal to study other modes of production which illustrate the emergence of fetishism in bourgeois society (Tuckfeld 1997, pp. 42–3).
91 Apart from the cases of Lukács and Althusser, also see, from the camp of Soviet Marxism, Klein et. al. 1988, p. 108 ff.; from Western Marxism, Iacono 1992, p. 82 ff.
92 For two examples of comprehensive analysis, see Godelier 1977 and Rancière 1996.
completely conceals the true nature and origin of profit, not only for the capitalist, who has here a particular interest in deceiving himself, but also for the worker. With the transformation of values into prices of production, the very basis for determining value is now removed from view.94

The development of credit and the split of profit into business profit (which accrues to the capitalist entrepreneur) and interest (which accrues to the lender, the money capitalist) has the following consequence:

One portion of profit, in contrast to the other, separates itself completely from the capital-relation as such and presents itself as deriving not from the function of exploiting wage-labour but rather from the wage-labour of the capitalist himself. As against this, interest then seems independent both of the wage-labour of the worker and of the capitalist’s own labour; it seems to derive from capital as its own independent source. If capital originally appeared on the surface of circulation as the capital fetish, value-creating value, so it now presents itself once again in the figure of interest-bearing capital as its most estranged and peculiar form.95

Interest-bearing capital displays the conception of the capital fetish in its consummate form, the idea that ascribes to the accumulated product of labour, in the fixed form of money at that, the power of producing surplus-value in geometric progression by way of an inherent secret quality, as a pure automaton, so that this accumulated product of labour . . . has long since discounted the whole world’s wealth for all time, as belonging to it by right and rightfully coming its way.96

The same applies with incomes, which, in fact, reflect nothing other than the relations of distribution of the value produced and appear in the framework of capitalist property relations and the ideological forms associated with them as sources of value. Labour produces the wage, the means of production the profit and natural resources the rent:

Firstly, because the commodity’s value components confront one another as independent revenues, which are related as such to three completely separate agents of production, labour, capital and the earth, and appear therefore to arise from these. Property in labour-power, capital and the earth

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95 Marx 1991, p. 968, emphasis added
is the reason why these different value components of the commodity fall to their respective proprietors, transforming them therefore into their revenues. But value does not arise from a transformation into revenue, it must rather be already in existence before it can be transformed into revenue and assume this form.97

It becomes apparent that Marx’s ideas on the fetishistic form of appearance of capitalist relations at the surface level of circulation (or in the context of the bourgeois ideology) cannot be conveyed adequately if the capital relation itself is not analysed, that is if we do not extract ourselves from the introductory framework of the first section of Volume I where, as Balibar points out, the critical view of fetishism represents a ‘preparatory dialectic’, as an ironic comment on the intellectual limitations of bourgeois thought. Through this comment, Marx dissipates the false assumptions in the spontaneous views of economists, which correspond to ‘collective self-deception’.98

Bearing in mind that Marx wrote the first section of Volume I of Capital only to arrive at the concept of capital, and so of the capital fetish which we have just outlined, we can appreciate that the reference to commodity fetishism does not constitute a theory of alienation presupposing an essence in the human subject and assessing social relations as in contradiction with that essence.99 Moreover, fetishism does not possess, as is often believed, an ideological strength: it is not the cause behind the concealment of social relations of exploitation, it does not alienate anything.100 The analysis of commodity fetishism is the examination of a symptom, not an ideological causality or force.

In reference to capital fetishism, Marx does not play out a simple game of subject and object. He demonstrates the various ways in which capitalist relations are imprinted on things, leaving the traces of their movement during the process of accumulation. These traces subsequently appear – in a spontaneous co-optation – as qualities of the things. It is wrong, therefore, to conclude that fetishism transforms matter into ideas, things into masters of human beings, subjects into objects and relations between humans into relations between things. However, it is an excessively hasty reaction to reject for that reason the problematic of fetishism as idealistic, a view put forward by Balibar,
who regards as authentic the extensive-universalising interpretation of fetishism by Lukács.

In fact, even if we adopt philosophical terminology, saying that fetishism constitutes an inversion of the qualities of subject and object, it cannot be a question of a simple inversion. The social features of labour do not appear, as in a mirror image, as natural qualities of things. The image of fetishism is not the exact opposite of reality (such that an enlightened critique would be enough to put things right). The fetishistic image is modified in relation to the reality it reflects.

Representing the social as natural, its effect is to cause misrecognition of the social character of human relations, which are naturalised, whereas, in reality, they constitute the ‘hypostatized consequence of effaced beginnings’. The relation of things does not constitute the mere symbolism of active individuals (as with a board game when a piece of wood symbolises a certain player, such that one can always at any moment bring about a conversion of that which is symbolised), but a permanent alteration in perceived reality (what is social becomes natural).

Here, we are dealing not with equivalence, whose terms can be inverted at will. What is involved is a fetishistic configuration as part of the structure of capitalist reality which conceals ‘the relationship between the social character of the commodity and the social relations mobilised in its production’ and it does not entail a mere inversion but is the product of a process of repression of certain elements of reality and their replacement with others.

But what is decisive is that, as indicated by Rancière, the question of fetishism cannot be posed in terms of an inversion:

The relevant terms are not subject, predicate and thing but relation and form. The process of estrangement . . . does not signify the externalization of the predicates of a subject into something foreign but shows what happens to capitalist relations when they assume the most highly mediated form of the process . . . . The social determinants of the relations of production are thus reduced to the material determinants of the thing. Which explains the confusion between what Marx calls material foundations (things which exercise the function of a bearer) and the social determinants. The latter become

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102 For the ‘two inversions’ see Iacono 1992, pp. 83–7.
103 Iacono 1992, p. 87.
104 Goux 1975, p. 189.
natural qualities of the material elements of production. In this way the capital relation is constituted as a thing. . . . The relations which determine the capitalist system can only exist under conditions of concealment. The form of their reality is the form in which their real movement disappears. . . .

[In Capital Marx formulates] the theory of the process and the theory of the reasons for its misrecognition."}

We can now return to the weaknesses in Marx’s analysis in the first chapter of Volume I, where mention is made of fetishism without the capital relation itself yet having been defined. Because of this restriction, Marx is obliged to refer to social relations in general or to relations between humans. (What social relations? What kind of human relations? Simply relations between autonomous commodity producers?) He does, indeed, record the reified forms in which these relations appear, assuming ‘the fantastic form of a relation between things’.

However, neither the social relations (capitalism) nor the things have been defined. We can now return to the weaknesses in Marx’s analysis in the first chapter of Volume I, where mention is made of fetishism without the capital relation itself yet having been defined. Because of this restriction, Marx is obliged to refer to social relations in general or to relations between humans. (What social relations? What kind of human relations? Simply relations between autonomous commodity producers?) He does, indeed, record the reified forms in which these relations appear, assuming ‘the fantastic form of a relation between things’. However, neither the social relations (capitalism) nor the things have been defined.

The further we progress in this preliminary analysis by Marx of commodity fetishism, the more we come up against this absence of the concept of capitalist relations. Let us reflect further on the material element in commodity exchange. The producer creates something which she herself does not need (which does not possess use-value for her personally). She subsequently takes what she needs, exchanging with others the thing which for her is useless. For the individual producer to be socialised, what is needed is a thing which, at the individual level, is useless, and the mediation of the thing as such is demonstrated to be its (indirect) use-value for production (its social use-value). By means of this thing, the individual producer is made part of the social mechanism of production. This analysis illustrates the relations of capitalists among themselves, but it could be generalised as a description of the forms of appearance of social relations in capitalism only if one regarded

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107 What things? Commodities and money? The concept of money has not been introduced. Nor has the concept of the means of production which function as fixed capital. And what does labour-power consist in? Is not the ‘reification’ of social relations associated with the appearance of the exploitative capitalist community – the capital/wage-labour relation – as a community of equality? After Marx had spoken about the capital relation and its forms of appearance, he could explain: ‘Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent . . . ’ (Marx 1990, p. 280, emphasis added).
labour-power also as a thing. Moreover, the market is not a prime mover of, or the reason for, this socialisation. It is itself a manifestation of the CMP.\footnote{In Marx’s view, it is not the price system which “regulates” the capitalist economy but, rather, unknown yet capitalistically-determined necessities of production acting through the price mechanism. . . . The market is the stage on which all competitive activities are played out. But this stage itself is set up and bound by the class nature of the social structure’ (Mattick 1969, pp. 53–4).}

In a pertinent extract Marx makes the point that:

the capitalist mode of production, like every other, constantly reproduces not only the material product but also the socio-economic relations, the formal economic determinants of its formation. Its result thus constantly appears as its premise, and its premises as its results.\footnote{Marx 1991, p. 1011.}

It thus emerges that, seen as a whole, Marxist analysis is very far from being an ideological game of deriving everything from the simple commodity. The fetishism of capitalist relations does not consist in the mistaken view that the fate of human beings is regulated by the products of their labour, but in a necessary form of engagement with reality in a capitalist society, which will only disappear with the disappearance of capitalism itself.\footnote{Godelier 1977, pp. 213–14; Balibar 1993, p. 60.}

If, however, fetishism consists in an objective-internal illusion, analysing it would require us to transfer ourselves mentally to other forms of production. This is facilitated by the comparative framework of Marx’s authentic and imaginary examples.\footnote{Balibar 1976, p. 216; Iacono 1992, p. 90 ff.} But, owing to its objective nature, the fetishism of capital cannot be dissipated, as may happen with other illusions that are structurally inessential for capitalism (such as the belief the existence of God). The external/internal viewpoint of Marx (see Section I) makes it possible for the mechanisms of its creation to be demonstrated, but not for the phenomenon to be eliminated.

III.iii. A comment in relation to constructivism

Fetishism, like other social constructs (gender, national identity, stigmatisation of certain individuals as criminals) is a phenomenon which can be deconstructed. The deconstruction of phenomena means comprehending, on the one hand, their own historicity (the way in which they were constructed) and, on the other, the reasons for their construction, that is the interests to which they correspond. Nevertheless, capital will go on making profits and
earning interest, just as individuals cannot cease having a certain sex, national identity, criminal record, and so forth, even if, through reading and political experiences, it is established that what are represented as natural elements are the distorted forms of appearance of a social structure and so are susceptible to transformation.

Constructivism poses the question of how our representations of reality are created, that is what the foundations are of our relevant knowledge. This prospect transcends the traditional dilemma of the objectivity or subjectivity of knowledge. It does not consider either that the subject creates the ‘real’ object or that the object-reality is imposed on the subject of knowledge. Constructivism thus refuses to speak of reality as a pre-existent datum but also of the subject which creates knowledge. It examines only the procedures for shaping different kinds of knowledge, through which reality is created in the form of valid assertions as to what it ‘is’.

We do not propose to examine here either the different varieties of constructivism or the elements deriving from it which can be summarised as falling into the dual trap of the idealism or realism from which they are seeking to escape. What is interesting is that, even though Marx’s method can be differentiated in general terms from constructivism, Marx adopts the constructivist viewpoint on the question of fetishism. He refuses to distinguish between truth and falsehood, ideology and truth, and asserts that, on the bases of certain facts concerning the structure of social production, individuals construct a conception of reality which – without being true – corresponds to that certain structure, that is it is the only possible way of conceiving reality.

In the constructivist view, individuals’ representation of reality is a construct but not something false or artificial. It is also asserted that it can be replaced in a different historical context by a representation which will be subject to different criteria of truth and may be politically desirable but, in any case, will be equally artificial as that of the present day (for example, the transparency prevailing in human labour relations in a communist society will not constitute the ‘truth’ of those relations deriving from the division of labour or a conception of ‘actual reality’ freed from ideology, but a different way for human subjects to conceive social data).

The weak element in constructivism from a practical viewpoint (the theoretical awareness that x is a construct does nothing to change x) is dealt

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with in Marx’s analysis of fetishism. It shows fetishism’s – from the cognitive viewpoint – particularly modern character, but also its limited ideological-political significance. No ideological struggle is possible here and no transcendence conceivable within the framework of capitalism. The advantages of the analysis are to be found in its reliable knowledge of the mechanisms of the conception of reality in a particular society and thus of the constitution of subjects in that society.

It thus becomes possible to deduce conclusions concerning the character of ideology and politics in societies where identities and differences are kept constant and the volatile data of history are naturalised for purposes of legitimation. What has been said of constructivism in general may be asserted also of Marx’s approach: it is nothing less, but also nothing more, than a precondition for ontologised discourse to be exposed to fundamental criticism.

III.iv. Fetishism and ideological state apparatuses

It is a central premise of Althusser’s/Balibar’s critique that Marx constructs his analysis of fetishism without reference to the legal system and the ideological activity of the state. The criticism is justified given that, as previously indicated, commodity fetishism can emerge only in an already functioning capitalist society and not quasi-spontaneously from the simple act of the exchange of two commodities in non-capitalist conditions.

Here emerges a major problem, given that Marx speaks of fetishism without having defined the concept of ideology and the ideological state apparatuses, so that there is no explanation of the status of fetishism (Illusion? Symbol? Truth?) and, as we shall see, the consequence could be a tacit insertion of fetishism in the place of ideology, thus constituting a kind of ideology without the ‘material action’ of state apparatuses.

Nevertheless, Althusser and Balibar overlook a distinctive feature of fetishism. Fetishism is the self-generating consequence of the concealment of social relations through the operations of the economy as such, and so is not directly linked to the ideological state apparatuses. It is, therefore, proper that, when speaking of fetishism, Marx should ‘forget the state’ – and so provide no interpretation for the framework of the creation of fetishism – but this does not amount to an argument against the analysis as such.

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114 ‘The analysis of fetishism confirms that the mystification consists in mystification of the structure, that it is itself the existence of the structure’ (Rancière 1996, p. 191).
In two quotations from *Capital*, Marx comments that

When the political economists treat surplus-value and the value of labour-power as fractions of the value-product... they conceal the specific character of the capital relation, namely the fact that variable capital is exchanged for living labour-power, and the worker is accordingly excluded from the product. Instead of revealing the capital-relation, they show us the false semblance of a relation of association, in which worker and capitalist divide the product in proportion to the different elements which they respectively contribute towards its formation.... All the slave’s labour appears as unpaid labour. In wage labour, on the contrary, even surplus-labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid. In the one case, the property-relation conceals the slave’s labour for himself; in the other case the money-relation conceals the unrequited labour of the wage labourer.... All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalistic mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economists, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation.\(^{116}\)

In both cases (slave ownership, capitalism), there exist in the mode of production self-generating consequences of concealment, but their tendencies are in opposite directions. This is of particular importance for the political relations of domination and the formation of ideological constructs in each mode of production. However, it is not the specific result of ideological activity, but a necessity in the mode of production (which, as previously mentioned, is effectively unattainable in the absence of a functioning superstructure, although it is not created by it).

This is the time to mention an unexpected consequence of Althusser’s/Balibar’s critique. Although they explicitly seek to take issue with the universalising outlook of Lukács, their criticism strikes just as forcefully at the comparative viewpoint of Pashukanis. If economic fetishism presupposes the state-legal framework, the derivation of legal fetishism from economic fetishism (Pashukanis) seems to be founded on a circular argumentation, that is on the presupposition of the very thing that has to be derived. Pashukanis represents legal fetishism as a further consequence of Marx’s critique, despite

the fact that the self-same implication is already contained in economic fetishism and provides it with its grounding.

In our opinion, this is not altogether damning for Pashukanis’s viewpoint. If we take into account our methodological reference to simultaneous exteriority/interiority, to which any analysis of fetishism is ‘condemned’, it becomes clear that there cannot be any absolute principle, that is an external point of reference which can exist prior to the appearance (on the historical and semantic plane) of all the determinants of capitalism. As a result, neither can the analysis of commodity fetishism and capital fetishism be deduced from a pre-existent legal ideology, nor can ‘pure’ commodity exchange depict the structure of the legal system.

If it seems impossible to disentangle the threads of interior vs. exterior, there is a way out: simultaneous analysis of the various phenomena through the concepts which emerge enriched from the dialectical method of Marx. On this point, the analysis of Pashukanis retains its full force as a negative conclusion, notwithstanding his mistake of designating the economic as the source of the legal structure. The negative conclusion is that, in the absence of the CMP, it is impossible for there to be a private law based on specific legal codes. The inverse formulation (without private law there can be no capitalism) is logically possible but meaningless from the materialist viewpoint. It presupposes a power or will which lays down a certain law thus making feasible a mode of production! This is what proves the correctness of the priority of the economic postulated by Pashukanis, though it must become comprehensible only as a process of simultaneous formation of the interacting elements of the CMP, comprising, among other things, the formation of the (bourgeois) law and the ideology/philosophy which accompanies it.

III.v. Transparency of other modes of production?

On the basis of Marx’s reference to the transparency of other modes of production, the impression has been created that capitalism is characterised by a unique ideological load which prevents individuals from realising what they are doing. But it is facile to surmise that the transparency that Marx attributes to other modes of production concerns only the social relations of the division of labour and not the absence of illusions in general. In the Asiatic community, for example, the division of labour is conscious and

\[117\] Balibar 1976, p. 217.
immediate because it precedes production and decides what each individual will produce and how the product will be distributed. In the CMP, by contrast, this occurs through the market-price mechanism, that is behind the back of the active agents of production, even the most powerful of them.

However, every mode of production ends up developing self-generating forms of concealment. The difference is that, in capitalism, class domination is linked ideologically to individual freedom and not to other legitimations (the will of God, the superiority of certain social groups). This does not occur by choice of certain ideological centres but is the consequence of forms of appearance of its structural characteristics. If we consider that a class rule legitimated by the will of the subject herself is less transparent ideologically than rule legitimated by external commands, the superior ideological effectiveness and stability of capitalism, when it functions through a powerful market (and so in ‘freedom’), is implied.

IV. Fetishism and politics

The point is often made that, in Capital, Marx does not employ the concept of ideology, which was very present in his early works and returns as a powerful theoretical element in the later works of Engels.118 In this sense, the analysis of fetishism in Capital replaces the concept of ideology. As we have pointed out, this leads to the view that ideology is produced by the structure of commodity exchange independently of ideological instances.

The antagonism between the problematic of ideology and that of fetishism resulted in the formation of two different orientations in Marxism.119 Certain theoreticians concentrate their attention on the state, analysing the processes by means of which ideologies are developed and imposed (the political approach). Other theoreticians attach decisive importance to the structure of commodity exchange, linking the misapprehensions and illusions of bourgeois societies to fetishism (the economic approach). The former emphasise the general-universal element (the state), the latter the concrete-subjective (individuals, actions, exchange), developing a theory of the symbolic in everyday life.

118 Balibar 1997, pp. 174–6; Tuckfeld 1997, p. 42. Our search has shown that the word ideology appears only once in Capital, in a context which is inconsequential with respect to the main analysis (Marx 1990, p. 931).
119 Balibar 1993, p. 77.
The exponents of the political approach either ignore the analysis of commodity fetishism (Gramsci) or directly express opposition to it (Althusser/Balibar). The theoreticians of the economic approach, starting from Lukács, depoliticise the question of ideology, detaching it from specific bourgeois strategies and ending up in a phenomenology of alienation (consumerism, cultural decline, politics as spectacle, and so on) which are essentially outside the boundaries of Marxism, regarding ideological formations as a kind of cultural datum which imposes on man an inhuman life model.

There is no doubt that the fetishism of capitalist relations is not either a synonym for ideology nor a more comprehensive definition of it: the approach which should be followed is the political one. But this raises the question of the influence of analyses of fetishism on the definition of ideology. There are at least three ways of defining ideology.120

Firstly, it may be seen as an illusion which is cultivated by those in possession of power or knowledge so as to conceal actual processes of exploitation and domination. The model is that of religious ideology (respect must be shown for the dominant order of things because this is commanded by God, who is not only omniscient but also omnipotent and so will punish you if you disobey his commands). The propagation of conceptions of this kind is of much greater benefit to society’s masters than the appearance of social order as a product of violence exercised by the powerful.

Secondly, ideology can be defined more comprehensively and dialectically as an illusion (also) of the producers of ideology themselves. It is much more reasonable for us to consider that the representatives of God themselves believe what they proclaim and do not pursue their activities in a spirit of cynical deceit. This postulate provides an explanation for the organic character of ideology, in contrast to the former, which postulates a kind of conspiracy of the powerful, who resolve to elaborate and disseminate a lie to a huge crowd of dilettantes.

Thirdly, ideology can be defined organically, unrelated to false consciousness, that is unrelated to the contrast between truth and falsehood or freedom and unfreedom. If ideology expressed only violence concealed behind falsehood (or ideas corresponding to particular vested interests) it would be neither persuasive nor stable. The only way its persistence can become comprehensible

120 Dimoulis 2001.
Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism • 39

121 Althusser 1977, p. 108 ff. What we are undertaking here is a general characterisation of ideology. Its content is a different question. From this viewpoint, ideology constitutes a heterogeneous totality of practices. In capitalism, its basic principles correspond to the universal-emancipatory ideals (freedom, equality, democracy, solidarity, welfare) which ideological institutions subject to appropriate processing so as to neutralise their rebellious content, without depriving them of their capacity to promote social cohesion and legitimation. In the second place, ideological practices express ruling-class ideals which provide direct legitimation for class differentiation (meritocracy, individuality, law and order) and other discriminatory elements (nationalism, racism, sexism). At a more specialised level, there are ideological practices limited to particular groups and conjunctures (irrationalism, fascism, technocracy).

to that of traditional philosophy. As has been shown,\textsuperscript{123} it emerges from Marx’s analysis that ‘reality’ is not only the thing, the entity, the real ‘sensible thing’ but also the illusions, the ‘supersensible thing’.\textsuperscript{124} These constitute necessary components of reality, even though they amount to a misapprehension of it and a naturalised projection of historical constructs. Just as real are the non-transparent and ideologically coerced forms of behaviour which emerge from this reality.

In this way, Marx transcends the classical distinction between the society and the individual-subject, showing that \textit{there are no subjects outside of society but only practices which constitute subjective identities on the basis of historical elements}. The subject does not constitute the world, as asserted by idealism, but the world gives birth to the subjectivity of the individual in bourgeois society as possessor of herself and her commodities in coexistence with the world of things.\textsuperscript{125} This entails an inversion of the philosophy of consciousness and the subject.

Fetishism consists in the process of \textit{subordination} of subjects by means of the market, which in capitalism is a site for the constitution of objects and subjects.\textsuperscript{126} Fetishism does not, therefore, make available interpretative schemes for politics and the exercise of power, that is for the production of \textit{ideology}, but is one element in a theory of ideology, showing up the mechanisms for conceiving reality, which are linked not with subjective wills but with the overall conditions of a mode of production that are transmitted to subjects.

In the context of ideological production, fetishism provides significant raw material: it explains the \textit{primacy} of the individual. Depending on the balance of forces at any given time, this viewpoint is either activated (neoliberalism) or recedes into the background (dictatorial régimes of the inter-war period which projected the ‘historical community’ or the ‘duty of sacrifice in the name of the fatherland’).

It thus emerges that ideological apparatuses can make political use of the mechanism of fetishism. However, in no case does fetishism ever appear ‘in the raw’, nor can it be present if a fully integrated ideological-political social formation does not exist. There is neither a fetishist destiny in capitalism, nor

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{123} Balibar 1993, p. 64 ff.
\item \textsuperscript{124} ‘Sensible supersensible thing’ (Marx 1990, p. 163).
\item \textsuperscript{125} Amariglio and Callari 1993.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Balibar 1993, pp. 75–6.
\end{itemize}
an unavoidable economic necessity which forces all individuals to act in a specific way. This is the basis of the relative autonomy of the political level, which provides the point of departure for revolutionary transformations.

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Guido Starosta

Editorial Introduction:
Rethinking Marx’s Mature Social Theory

The transformations undergone by capitalist society in the last thirty years or so, coupled with the defeat of the working-class movement that accompanied them, provoked two main responses among radical intellectuals. For some, it was time to wish farewell to the working class and, with it, to the theory that had elevated it to the status of revolutionary subject – Marxism. They thereby embraced the so-called ‘new social movements’ as the subjects of social transformation, and adopted some variant of ‘post-Marxism’ as the form of social theory capable of capturing the new realities of ‘(post)modern society’.¹ For others, this situation represented an opportunity to engage in a fundamental critical reconstruction of Marx’s works; one which would go beyond the weaknesses of what had been the interpretations prevailing during most of the twentieth century. Such a profound rethinking of Marx’s critique of political economy would show that it still provides us with

¹ One could take Laclau and Mouffe 1985, as the locus classicus of this first kind of response. See Goldner 2001, for an excellent Marxist discussion of the emergence of ‘postmodernism’ as the mainstream form of ‘radical thought’ in relation to the recent transformations of capital accumulation.
the most potent comprehension of the nature and movement of capitalist society and, therefore, with the necessary theoretical elements for its practical critique.

Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination* is an outstanding expression of this latter alternative. In the words of its author, the book attempts ‘a fundamental reinterpretation of Marx’s mature critical theory in order to reconceptualize the nature of capitalist society’ in terms of its ‘historically specific form of social interdependence with an impersonal and seemingly objective character’.2 This reconstruction involves an in-depth radical reconsideration of the fundamental categories of Marx’s critique of political economy – commodity, money, capital – with a view to providing an understanding of the ‘essential character and historical development of modern society’ and, additionally, to ‘overcome the familiar theoretical dichotomies of structure and action, meaning and material life’.3

In what is an undoubtedly ambitious project of detailed reconstruction of the whole of Marx’s mature critique of political economy, Postone addresses, in a thought-provoking fashion, a wide-ranging variety of theoretical questions including: issues on value theory (the nature of the value-form and abstract labour), on method (the dialectical structure of Marx’s argument, the ‘Hegel-Marx connection’ and the status of transhistorical abstractions), the developmental dynamic of modern society (the specificity of the concepts of time and history, the relationship between logic and history), the periodisation of capitalist development (the transition from liberal to postliberal capitalism) and, crucially, the social constitution of emancipatory political subjectivities.

In these brief introductory remarks to the symposium, I would just like to highlight two main aspects of *Time, Labor and Social Domination* which, I think, constitute its crucial contributions to contemporary Marxian social theory: the reconceptualisation of the Marxian notion of alienation and the recovery of the centrality of Marx’s analysis of the real subsumption for both the understanding of capital’s domination and the possibilities of its overcoming. On these two issues, Postone’s work poses fundamental questions and controversial answers which should enter the research agenda of any attempt at a critical reconstruction of the critique of political economy for our times.

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2 Postone 1996, p. 3.
3 Ibid.
Alienation and the concrete historical subject of modern society

Writing in 2004, it is more than fair to say that the debate over the existence of continuity between Marx’s early critique of alienated labour in the *Paris Manuscripts* and his mature writings such as *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* has been settled both from a theoretical and textual point of view. The existence of an inner unity underlying the different phases of Marx’s intellectual project seems to be now part of the ‘ABC of Marxism’. Yet, this consensus still begs the question of the precise meaning of ‘alienated labour’ in Marx’s thought and, in particular, in his mature critique of political economy. As Postone shows, in the mature writings, the notion of alienation refers to the way in which the social relations of capitalist production give rise to the constitution of objectified forms of social mediation (the commodity, capital), which lead to the emergence of abstract social structures of impersonal domination.4

According to Postone, the fundamental core of social domination in capitalism does not lie in the direct relation of domination of people by other people (such as class relations) but in the all-too-real inversion between the objectified forms of social mediation and the human subjects whose activity that alienated social objectivity mediates.

As such, this does not represent anything particularly original or novel and has been grasped by most authors writing from a broadly understood ‘form-analytical’ perspective referred to above, who have always emphasised the centrality of commodity fetishism in the Marxian critique of political economy. However, I think that where Postone’s book does go beyond existing critical readings of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* is in the insight that, when concretely and consistently developed, *the mature Marxian notion of alienation amounts to the social constitution of capital as the (alienated) concrete subject of the historical movement of modern society*.5 The essential determination of social reproduction in its capitalist form is to become totally subsumed under – an inner moment of – the autonomised movement of self-valorising value, thereby determining human beings as ‘personifications of economic categories’, that is, of objectified social relations. This determination does not derive from an uncritical relapse into the abstract principles of structural-functionalist

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5 That is, not the individual capital or the capitalist class, but what Marx called the *total social capital* of society, that is, the alienated product of *total social labour in its unity*. 
methodology. Rather, it necessarily follows from a consistently materialist understanding of the specifically capitalist inverted constitution of human practice underlying both the forms of objectivity and subjectivity of present-day social life. Clearly, as Postone points out, this ‘determination of capital as the historical Subject may seem to deny the history-making practices of humans’. However, this is far from being the case. What this does imply is that whatever transformative powers the political action of workers might have – both capital-reproducing and capital-transcending political action –, they must be an immanent determination begotten by the alienated movement of capital as subject and not external to it.

This, I think, is what a great number of Marxists seem unable to grasp. Thus, one might be tempted to say that even when they do come very close to the recognition of this determination, they eventually retreat before such a discovery and hasten to add that the alienated constitution of the materialised social relation into the social subject of modern society cannot be total; that there must be a moment of human existence that escapes it. That is, they end up postulating that there is an irreducible element of (abstractly free?) human subjectivity which remains external to the alienated forms of social mediation through which human beings reproduce social life, and that it is there that the ground for revolutionary practice is to be found. Emancipatory political subjectivity is thus conceived as ontologically or transcendentally rooted. Conversely, Postone rightly argues that the question that critical theory faces is to discover emancipatory consciousness as socially constituted by the historical dynamic of capital itself. One could claim, however, that Postone’s idiosyncratic account of the social determinations of emancipatory subjectivity is highly problematical; in particular, the contentious logical grounds of his rejection of the determination of the working class as revolutionary subject – a point forcefully made by Arthur and Hudis in their respective contributions. Yet, it is to be noted that Postone’s argument about the socially and historically determined character of emancipatory subjectivity is completely independent from the other, unconvincing, one about the

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6 Postone 1996, p. 80, my emphasis.
7 Postone himself seems to be hesitant about his own insight by always adding the prefix ‘quasi’ when referring to capital as subject. As Albritton notes in his paper, this only adds vagueness to the problem of ‘structure and agency’ that the notion of capital as alienated historical subject is meant to solve.
8 In their contribution to the symposium, Stoeltzer and Neary make a similar point.
10 Ibid.
non-revolutionary character of the proletariat. It only demands that the revolutionary subjectivity of the workers be grounded in their determination as ‘appendages of social capital’ and not in determinations which are ontologically or transcendentally external to their subsumption under the alienated form of their social being. Unfortunately, one could argue that this is not the path that most critiques of Postone follow. In sum, I think that the need to develop a historical theory of revolutionary subjectivity, based on the specific forms of social mediation characteristic of modern society and their immanent dynamic throughout the course of capitalist development, still has to be taken very seriously by contemporary Marxism.

Real subsumption of labour to capital and the emancipatory potentialities of modern society

The other aspect of Postone’s challenge to ‘traditional Marxism’ which, I think, must be taken up by any fruitful contemporary reconstruction of Marx’s critique of political economy, lies in the centrality he assigns to the determinations and historical movement of the real subsumption of labour to capital, both as the basis for the latter’s alienated social domination and for its overcoming. Postone correctly highlights, against the ‘traditional-Marxist’ uncritical glorification of the capital-determined ‘industrial mode of production’, the historical specificity of the very materiality of the production process sustaining capital’s valorisation process. What follows from this is that the abolition of capital must not only involve the transformation of the mode of distribution (private property and the market) and the objectified forms of social mediation (value-form of social wealth), but, crucially, a radical revolution in the material forms of the process of production of human life themselves.

Again, there seems to be nothing too novel about this. It has been a long time now since Marxists from diverse traditions started to grasp the material

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11 So much so, that, in an earlier presentation of this question, Postone developed his argument as an investigation of the qualitative determinations of the revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat (Postone 1978). In that early work, he did not deny the condition of the working class as revolutionary subject. His argument only pointed to the rejection of the unmediated nature of revolutionary class consciousness. The latter, he argued, entailed the mediation of qualitative transformations in the material forms of productive subjectivity brought about by the real subsumption of labour to capital.
forms of the labour process as specifically capitalist. Postone’s original contribution in this respect is, in the first place, methodological. It consists in a necessary reminder that a rigorous treatment of the qualitatively different concrete forms of the real subsumption should be an essential moment of the systematic-dialectical presentation of the determinations of capital. The chapters of Marx’s Capital dealing with the forms of production of relative surplus-value are not there simply for the sake of historical illustration. Rather, they are part and parcel of the dialectical unfolding of the immanent dynamic of self-valorising value. Their exclusion from the presentation can only result in a formalistic comprehension of the nature of capital, which posits as contingent the relation between the latter and historical transformations of the materiality of the production process of human life. As various contributions to the forthcoming symposium on Chris Arthur’s book in the pages of this journal note, recent attempts at a dialectical reconstruction of Marx’s critique of political economy associated with the so-called ‘new dialectics’ run the risk of lapsing into precisely this kind of formalism.

Secondly, and more importantly, Postone’s analysis of real subsumption provides some insightful elements for the development of a historical-materialist theory of emancipatory subjectivity. As he pointed out in his earlier paper referred to above, the development of revolutionary consciousness is not a potentiality carried by the mere existence of labour-power as a commodity, that is, by the formal subsumption of labour to capital. These determinations can, at worst, lead to the development of ‘trade-union consciousness’. At best, they can develop into the self-recognition of workers as the producers of surplus-value and, hence, into a ‘communism of distribution’. But they cannot lead to a self-transcending alienated consciousness that discovers the essential nature of its alienated social existence.

Now, the grounding of revolutionary consciousness in formal subsumption is, one could say, the implicit underlying assumption of ‘traditional Marxism’.  

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12 Just to name a few from very different traditions: Braverman 1974, Dunayevskaya 1988, Panzieri 1980. Actually, the importance of the real subsumption (in particular, Marx’s discussion in the so-called ‘Fragment on Machines’ in the Grundrisse) has always been a central preoccupation of autonomist Marxism. Negri 1996, provides a sketch of the history of the interpretation of the ‘Fragment on Machines’ within that Marxist tradition. On the other hand, it is pertinent to mention the French ‘neo-Bordigists’ as neglected pioneers in the recovery of the importance of the distinction between formal subsumption and real subsumption. See, for instance, Camatte undated.

13 See Kincaid 2005.

The problem with this line of argument is the complete independence it posits between political emancipatory consciousness and the development of the materiality of the social production process. Because, even when the need for material conditions is emphasised, the problem is that the particular condition or set of conditions generally posited as objectively grounding the necessity for the abolition of capital (be it a fatal economic crisis or the monopolisation of the property of capital simply as such) has no intrinsic connection whatsoever with the political subjectivity of the revolutionary subject. The latter is seen as developing according to its own different ‘logic’, generally deriving from the determinations of the formal subsumption of labour to capital (the resistance to capitalist exploitation as such) and, hence, as irrespective of the material transformations of social life. To put it differently, the traditional approach does not actually pose an inner material determination or necessity for the development of the revolutionary political consciousness of the working class. It just provides an objective context which is seen as spurring, accelerating or facilitating the self-determining movement of the subjective factor. But there is no real mediation between the materiality of the production process of human life and the political consciousness of the emancipatory subject. It is this mediation that Postone’s account of the historically-produced potentialities carried by the determinations of the real subsumption of labour attempts to provide. Again, his account is far from being flawless.¹⁵ But, at least he seems to be getting at an important aspect of a properly historical and materialist theory of emancipatory subjectivity: namely, that any politically revolutionary subjectivity must be an expression of the qualitatively determinate material forms of productive subjectivity developed in the course of history by the movement of the real subsumption of labour to capital. This, in short, is the second fundamental message that contemporary Marxism should get from Postone’s work.

¹⁵ A remarkable weakness of Postone’s analysis of the real subsumption lies in his implicit reduction of the working class of large-scale industry to direct manual labourers. Clearly, the formal subject of the development of science and technology is capital, as happens with all the productive powers of social labour springing from the direct cooperation of workers. However, the development of those productive powers has no material subject in Postone’s account. As I have argued elsewhere (Starosta 2003), the development of the productive powers of science and technology can only be the material product of an intellectual partial organ of the collective labourer which capital needs to call into life in its boundless drive to produce relative surplus-value. Unlike the tendential absolute degradation suffered by the productive subjectivity of manual labourers, the productive subjectivity of this other partial organ of the collective labourer of large-scale industry is expanded. See also Íñigo Carrera 2003.
The symposium

In Postone’s own contribution to the symposium, he offers a concise rendition of the main themes and ideas developed in *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. In a future issue of *Historical Materialism*, a second article by Postone will address the comments and critiques made by the other authors in their papers.

All authors agree that *Time, Labor and Social Domination* develops suggestive arguments. However, they also make clear that they are not completely unproblematic. Thus, Albritton and Arthur welcome Postone’s emphasis on the similarities between Hegel’s *Logic* and Marx’s *Capital*, especially in the parallels that can be drawn between Hegel’s Absolute Idea and capital as alienated historical Subject. However, they part company with the implications that Postone draws from his conception of capital as Subject whether for the resolution of the antinomy of ‘structure and agency’ (Albritton) or for the revolutionary subjectivity of workers (Arthur).

Hudis also critically engages with the question of the relationship between Hegel and Marx regarding the notion of the historical subject, but from a completely different perspective. He actually develops a sophisticated defence of what Postone sees as the ‘traditional-Marxist’ view on the proletariat as subject of history. Bonefeld, for his part, also takes issue with Postone’s notion of capital as Subject, claiming that such an argument can only come at the price of banishing class antagonism from the critique of political economy. Furthermore, he argues that such a conception can only result in an affirmative ‘theory of capital’, depriving Marxian social theory of its essential negative character as a critique of the inverted world of capitalism.

In all these contributions, then, Postone’s analysis of capital as historical subject is eventually rejected, especially for its alleged negative consequences for the understanding of the constitution of emancipatory political subjectivities. Conversely, Stoetzler’s paper positively builds on Postone’s insights to show that they actually constitute a powerful way of conceptualising the different forms of oppositional social movements in modern society and their respective transformative potentialities.

Kay’s and Mott’s intervention takes issue with another central aspect of Postone’s book: namely, his treatment of the concept of abstract labour. They note the tensions in Postone’s argument, derived from his inability consistently to see abstract labour as a category of exchange instead of as pertaining to

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16 The Editors would like to take this opportunity to thank Gregory Schwartz for his help in organising this symposium.
production. They also discuss the shortcomings of Postone’s characterisation of labour in capitalism as self-mediating, a point made by McNally as well. In addition, McNally highlights the insufficiencies of Postone’s alleged solution of the theoretical antinomy between meaning and material life.

In their respective articles, both Miller and Neary develop a critical exploration of Postone’s notion of time. While agreeing with Postone’s insights into the historicity of the concept of time, Neary suggests that the full implications of those ideas should extend them into an analysis of the historicity of the dimension of space. Miller, however, argues that Postone goes too far in his rejection of a transhistorical element in the concept of time, pointing out that even the notion of abstract time has a transhistorical moment. This need for transhistorical reflection and abstractions in the development of Marxist theory also constitutes the main thrust of Fracchia’s contribution.

What all these articles make clear is that, in all its merits and shortcomings, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* is an important book which deserves close scrutiny and debate. Despite the innovative ideas of the book and the strong and challenging claims about traditional interpretations of Marx put forward, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* has – no doubt, unfairly – not received the same attention as other books proposing such a substantial rethinking of Marxism – for example, Negri and Hardt’s *Empire*.17 Certainly, Postone’s book has been reviewed by other well-known Marxists scholars.18 But, in the first place, they have tended to be short pieces which, for obvious restrictions of space, did not develop an in-depth critical assessment of the book. Secondly, particularly noticeable is the absence of a more detailed discussion of such an ambitious rethinking of Marx’s critique of political economy in Marxist journals. This situation of inadequate reception within a broader Marxist readership led the editors of *Historical Materialism* to consider it necessary to revisit *Time, Labor and Social Domination* eleven years after its publication. Thus, as with previous symposia, *Historical Materialism* offers in its pages a space for a rigorous and pluralist discussion, only on the basis of which can critical-Marxist theory develop.

References


Moishe Postone

Critique and Historical Transformation

In *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, I attempt to fundamentally rethink the core categories of Marx’s critique of political economy as the basis for a critical reconceptualisation of the nature of modern capitalist society. The critical theory of capitalism that I present differs in important and basic ways from traditional Marxism – that is, from the critique of forms of distribution (such as the market and private ownership of the means of production) from the standpoint of labour and production. The history of the past century strongly suggests that the latter is not fully adequate as a critique of capitalism, and that an adequate critique must be more fundamental than one focused primarily on forms of exploitation within modern society.

Marx’s mature critical theory of capitalism, according to my interpretation, provides the basis for such a fundamental critique, for a rigorous and non-romantic critical analysis of modern society itself. Within the framework of this reading, the basic categories of Marx’s critique not only delineate a mode of exploitation. They also are temporally dynamic categories that seek to grasp modern capitalist society as a mode of social life characterised...
by quasi-objective forms of domination (commodity, capital) that underlie an intrinsic historical dynamic. This dialectical dynamic is a socially-constituted historically-specific core feature of capitalism, one that gives rise to and, at the same time, constrains the possibility of a postcapitalist, emancipated form of life. It is grounded, ultimately, in a form of wealth specific to capitalism, namely value, that is, at the same time, a form of social mediation, which Marx distinguishes sharply from what he terms material wealth.

This attempt to rethink Marx’s analysis of the fundamental nature of capitalism was impelled, in part, by the far-reaching transformations of capitalism in the last third of the twentieth century. This period has been characterised by the unravelling of the post-World-War-II state-centric Fordist synthesis in the West, the collapse or fundamental metamorphosis of party-states and their command economies in the East, and the emergence of a neoliberal capitalist global order (which might, in turn, be undermined by the development of huge regional competing blocs). Because these changes have included the dramatic demise of the Soviet Union and of European Communism, they have been interpreted as marking the end of Marxism and of Marx’s theoretical relevance. Nevertheless, these recent historical transformations have also reasserted the central importance of historical dynamics and large-scale structural changes. And precisely this problematic is at the heart of Marx’s critical analysis.

The central importance of this problematic is reinforced when one considers the overarching trajectory of state-centric capitalism in the twentieth century from its beginnings, which can be located in World War I and the Russian Revolution, through its apogee in the decades following World War II, and its decline after the early 1970s. What is significant about this trajectory is its global character. It encompasses Western capitalist countries and the Soviet Union, as well as colonised lands and decolonised countries. Differences in historical development have, of course, occurred. But, viewed with reference to the trajectory as a whole, they are more a matter of different inflections of a common pattern, and different positions within a complex whole, than of fundamentally different developments. For example, the welfare state was expanded in all Western industrial countries in the twenty-five years after the end of World War II and then limited or partially dismantled beginning in the early 1970s. These developments occurred regardless of whether conservative or social-democratic (‘liberal’) parties were in power.

Inasmuch as this trajectory of state-centric capitalism encompasses both
Western capitalist countries and the Soviet Union, it very strongly suggests that Soviet ‘socialism’ should be regarded as a (failed) variant régime of capital accumulation, rather than as an organisation of society that represented the overcoming of capitalism, however flawed that organisation may have been. This, arguably, is the case not only because, as some have noted, the Soviet Union also rested on the exploitation of the working class, but also because the rise and fall of the Soviet Union can be seen, retrospectively, as having been very much part of the temporal structuring and restructuring of capitalism in the twentieth century.

The very processes underlying the collapse of régimes of accumulation that had been declared ‘Marxist’, then, have reasserted the central importance of the problematic of historical dynamics and large-scale structural changes. Such overarching developments imply the existence of general structural constraints on political, social, and economic decisions. They indicate that capitalist history cannot be adequately grasped as ‘diachronic’, that is, in terms of contingencies alone, and that attempts to deal with history in those terms are empirically inadequate to the history of capitalist society. Nevertheless, such considerations do not necessarily dispense with what might be regarded as the critical insight driving attempts to deal with history contingently – namely, that history grasped as the unfolding of an immanent necessity is an expression of unfreedom.

The categories of Marx’s critical theory, I suggest, allow for a position that can get beyond the classical antinomy of necessity and freedom, recapitulated as one between a conception of history as necessity, and its poststructuralist rejection in the name of contingency (and, presumably, agency). As I shall elaborate, Marx’s categories characterise modern capitalist society on a fundamental level with reference to an immanent dynamic, which they grasp in terms of historically determinate forms of social mediation. Within this framework, history, understood as an immanently driven directional dynamic, does exist, but not as a universal characteristic of human social life. Rather, it is a historically specific characteristic of capitalist society that can be, and has been, projected onto all human histories.

The structural constraints and imperatives implied by the large-scale global patterns that characterise capitalist history should be understood as expressions of a peculiar form of domination. A position that grounds such historical
patterns in the categories of Marx’s critique (commodity, capital) does not, then, regard such patterns affirmatively, but takes their existence as a manifestation of heteronomy. Heteronomous history, within such a framework, is not a narrative, which can simply be dispelled discursively, but a structure of domination that both is self-perpetuating and, yet, also gives rise to the conditions of possibility of its own overcoming. From this point of view, attempts to rescue human agency that posit historical contingency abstractly and transhistorically, bracket and veil the existence of historically specific structures of domination. They are thereby, ironically, profoundly disempowering.

My attempt to reinterpret Marx’s critical theory of capitalism focuses on the most basic level of analysis of that mode of social life. It has become evident, considered retrospectively from the beginning of the twenty-first century, that the social, political, economic and cultural configuration of capital’s hegemony has varied historically – from mercantilism through nineteenth-century liberal capitalism and twentieth-century state-centric Fordist capitalism to contemporary neoliberal global capitalism. Each configuration has elicited a number of penetrating critiques – of exploitation and uneven, inequitable growth, for example, or of technocratic, bureaucratic modes of domination. Each of these critiques, however, is incomplete; as we now see, capitalism cannot be identified fully with any of its historical configurations. This raises the question of the core nature of that social formation.

Traditional Marxist and poststructuralist approaches have in common that they take a historically specific configuration of capitalism to be the essence of the social formation (the free market, the bureaucratic disciplinary state). The traditional Marxist critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour is most plausible when its object is nineteenth-century liberal capitalism. It is fundamentally inadequate as a critical theory of the state-centric Fordist configuration of capitalism that marked much of the twentieth century and that included the Soviet organisation of society. Indeed, some variants of traditional Marxism served as ideologies of legitimation for precisely this epochal configuration of capitalism. Similarly, late twentieth-century critiques that responded critically to the Fordist régime, such as those of the bureaucratic disciplinary state, frequently did so by hypostatising and dehistoricising that configuration of capitalism. With their critical gaze fixed upon what proved to be another passing configuration of capitalism, poststructuralist approaches backed into a still newer configuration, a neoliberal social universe with which they were ill-prepared to deal.
The reconceptualisation undertaken in my work understands itself as contributing to the formulation of a critical understanding of capitalism that is not limited to any of that social formation’s epochs. I argue that, at the heart of capitalism, is a historically dynamic process that is associated with multiple historical configurations. This dynamic process is what Marx sought to grasp with the category of capital. It is a core feature of the modern world, which must be grasped if a critical theory of capitalism is to be adequate to its object. Such an understanding of capitalism can only be achieved on a very high level of abstraction. It could then serve as a point of departure for an analysis of epochal changes in capitalism as well as for the historically changing subjectivities expressed in historically determinate social movements.

II

My work, however, remains focused on working out the core of capitalism as a uniquely dynamic social formation by rethinking Marx’s analysis of capitalism’s most basic relations and, hence, the nature of its determinate negation, in ways very different from traditional Marxist interpretations. It does so on the basis of a close reading of the basic categories of Marx’s critique of political economy. Rather than relying on statements made by Marx, without reference to their locus in the unfolding of his mode of presentation, I attempt to reconstruct the systematic character of Marx’s categorial analysis. In particular, my analysis investigates in depth Marx’s point of departure – the category of the commodity – as the most fundamental form of social relations in capitalism, and as the basis for his analysis of the category of capital.

I argue that, in his mature works, Marx rigorously treats the categories of capitalist society as historically specific. In working out the non-ontological, historically specific character of the core relations grasped by Marx’s basic categories, I also draw attention to their transhistorical, reified modes of appearance. Such a non-reified conception of capitalism’s core relations allows for the systematic differentiation, necessary for an adequate critical theory of the present, between that core and capitalism’s various historical configurations.

Inasmuch as Marx analyses social objectivity and subjectivity as related intrinsically, this focus on the historical specificity of his categories reflexively implies the historical specificity of his theory. No theory, within this conceptual framework, has transhistorical validity. Rather, the standpoint of critical theory must be intrinsic to its object. Relatedly, this means that transhistorical notions, such as that of a dialectical logic intrinsic to human history, or the notion that
labour is the most central constituting element of social life, become historically relativised. Marx does not claim that such notions were never valid but, instead, restricts their validity to the capitalist social formation, while showing how that which is historically specific in capitalism could be taken to be transhistorical.

At the heart of Marx’s analysis of the commodity is his argument that labour in capitalism has a ‘double character’: it is both ‘concrete labour’ and ‘abstract labour’.2 ‘Concrete labour’ refers to the fact that some form of what we consider labouring activity mediates the interactions of humans with nature in all societies. ‘Abstract labour’ does not simply refer to concrete labour in the abstract, to ‘labour’ in general, but is a very different sort of category. It signifies that labour in capitalism also has a unique social dimension that is not intrinsic to labouring activity as such: it mediates a new, quasi-objective form of social interdependence. ‘Abstract labour’, as a historically specific mediating function of labour, is the content or, better, ‘substance’ of value.3

Labour in capitalism, then, according to Marx, is not only labour, as we understand it transhistorically and commonsensically, but is also a historically-specific socially-mediating activity. Hence its objectifications – commodity, capital – are both concrete labour products and objectified forms of social mediation. According to this analysis, the social relations that most basically characterise capitalist society are very different from the qualitatively specific, overt social relations – such as kinship relations or relations of personal or direct domination – which characterise non-capitalist societies. Although the latter kind of social relations continue to exist in capitalism, what ultimately structures that society is a new, underlying level of social relations that is constituted by labour. Those relations have a peculiar quasi-objective, formal character and are dualistic – they are characterised by the opposition of an abstract, general, homogeneous dimension and a concrete, particular, material dimension, both of which appear to be ‘natural’, rather than social, and condition social conceptions of natural reality.

The abstract character of the social mediation underlying capitalism is also expressed in the form of wealth dominant in that society. Marx’s ‘labour theory of value’ is not a labour theory of wealth, that is, a theory that seeks

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3 Marx 1976, p. 228.
to explain the workings of the market and prove the existence of exploitation by arguing that labour, at all times and in all places, is the only social source of wealth. Marx analysed value as a historically specific form of wealth, which is bound to the historically unique role of labour in capitalism; as a form of wealth, it is also a form of social mediation.

Marx explicitly distinguished value from material wealth. This distinction is crucially important for his analysis. Material wealth is measured by the quantity of products produced and is a function of a number of factors such as knowledge, social organisation, and natural conditions, in addition to labour. Value is constituted by human labour-time expenditure alone, according to Marx, and is the dominant form of wealth in capitalism. Whereas material wealth, when it is the dominant form of wealth, is mediated by overt social relations, value is a self-mediating form of wealth. As I shall elaborate, Marx’s analysis is of a system based on value that both generates and constrains the historical possibility of its own overcoming by one based on material wealth.

Within the framework of this interpretation, then, what fundamentally characterises capitalism is a historically specific abstract form of social mediation – a form of social relations that is unique inasmuch as it is mediated by labour. This historically specific form of mediation is constituted by determinate forms of social practice and, yet, becomes quasi-independent of the people engaged in those practices. The result is a historically new form of social domination – one that subjects people to impersonal, increasingly rationalised, structural imperatives and constraints that cannot adequately be grasped in terms of class domination, or, more generally, in terms of the concrete domination of social groupings or of institutional agencies of the state and/or the economy. It has no determinate locus and, although constituted by determinate forms of social practice, appears not to be social at all.

Significant in this regard is Marx’s temporal determination of the magnitude of value. In his discussion of the magnitude of value in terms of socially necessary labour time, Marx alludes to a peculiarity of value as a social form of wealth whose measure is temporal: increasing productivity increases the amount of use-values produced per unit of time, but results only in short-term increases in the magnitude of value created per unit of time. Once that productive increase becomes general, the magnitude of value falls to its base level. The result is a sort of treadmill dynamic.

Early on in his exposition, then, Marx begins to characterise capitalism as a society driven by a peculiar dynamic that leads to ever-increasing levels of
productivity, resulting in great increases in use-value output. These increasing levels of productivity do not, however, signify proportional increases in value, the social form of wealth in capitalism. This peculiar treadmill dynamic is driven by value’s temporal dimension. The historically specific and abstract form of social domination intrinsic to capitalism’s fundamental forms of social mediation is the domination of people by time. This form of domination is bound to a historically specific and abstract form of temporality – abstract Newtonian time – which is constituted historically with the commodity-form.

This dynamic is at the core of the category of capital. Marx first determines capital as self-valorising value. That is, capital, for Marx, is a category of movement, of expansion; it is value in motion. Capital, for Marx, has no fixed form, but appears at different moments of its spiralling path in the form of money and commodities. Capital, according to Marx, then, entails a ceaseless process of value’s self-expansion, a directional movement with no external telos that generates large-scale cycles of production and consumption, creation and destruction.

Significantly, in introducing the category of capital, Marx describes it with the same language that Hegel used in the Phenomenology with reference to Geist – the self-moving substance that is the subject of its own process. In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism. Yet – and this is crucially important – he does not identify that Subject with the proletariat (as does Lukács), or even with humanity. Instead, he does so with reference to capital.

This identification of Hegel’s Geist with capital represents the full working out of the theory of alienation Marx first articulated in his early works. Marx treats the unfolding of the dialectical logic of capital as a real social expression of alienated social relations that, although constituted by practice, exist quasi-independently. These social relations cannot fully be grasped as class relations but as forms of social mediation expressed by the categories of commodity, value and capital that structure and are restructured by class relations. The logic of capital, then, is not an illusory manifestation of underlying class relations but is a social form of domination inseparable from the fundamental

5 Marx’s unfolding of the category of capital in Chapter 4 of Capital retrospectively illuminates his analysis in the first two chapters of the twofold character of the commodity and its externalisation as money and commodities.
social forms/relations characteristic of capitalism. A logic of history and alienated forms of social relations are intrinsically related. By referring to Hegel’s initial conceptual determination of Geist when introducing the concept of capital, Marx suggests, in other words, that Hegel’s notion of history as a directional dialectical unfolding is valid, but only for the capitalist era.

The capitalist social formation is unique, according to Marx’s analysis in Capital, inasmuch as it is characterised by a qualitatively homogenous social ‘substance’ (abstract labour). Hence, it exists as a social totality. The fundamental social relations of other societies are not qualitatively homogenous. Hence, they are not totalised – they cannot be grasped by the concept of ‘substance’, cannot be unfolded from a single, structuring principle, and do not display an immanent, necessary historical logic.

Marx’s critique of Hegel in Capital suggests, then, that capitalist relations are not extrinsic to the Subject, as that which hinders it full realisation. Rather, he analyses those very relations as constituting the Subject. In his mature theory, then, Marx does not posit a historical meta-subject, such as the proletariat, which will realise itself in a future society, but provides the basis for a critique of such a notion. This implies a position very different from that of theorists such as Lukács, for whom the social totality constituted by labour constituted the standpoint of the critique of capitalism, and is to be realised in socialism. In Capital, the totality and the labour constituting it have become the objects of critique.

The idea that capital is the total Subject, and not the proletariat or humanity, indicates that the historical negation of capitalism involves the abolition of the Subject and of totality, not their realisation. The contradictions of capital, therefore, must point beyond the Subject, beyond totality.

Marx’s mature critique of Hegel, therefore, no longer entails a ‘materialist’ anthropological inversion of the latter’s idealistic dialectic (as undertaken by Lukács, for example). Rather, it is that dialectic’s materialist ‘justification’. Marx implicitly argues that the ‘rational core’ of Hegel’s dialectic is precisely its idealist character. It is an expression of a mode of domination constituted by relations that acquire a quasi-independent existence vis-à-vis the individuals and that, because of their peculiar dualistic nature, are dialectical in character. The historical Subject is the alienated structure of social mediation that is constitutive of the capitalist formation.

The historical logic Marx unfolds in Capital is rooted ultimately in the double character of the commodity and, hence, capital-form. As noted above,
value, as a temporally determined form of wealth, underlies an ongoing drive for increased productivity that is a hallmark of capitalist production. Because value is a function of socially necessary labour time alone, however, higher socially general levels of productivity result in greater amounts of material wealth, but not in higher levels of value per unit of time. The use-value dimension of labour, which underlies increasing productivity, does not change the amount of value produced per unit of time, but changes the determination of what counts as a determinate unit of time – for example, a social labour hour – which now serves as a new base level. With general increases in productivity, the unit of (abstract) time has been pushed forward, as it were, in (historical) time.

This dialectical dynamic of value and use-value is logically implied by Marx’s treatment of socially necessary labour time in his preliminary analysis of the commodity-form. It emerges overtly when he begins elaborating the concept of capital with respect to that of surplus-value. The latter category has generally been understood as one of exploitation, as indicating that, in spite of appearances, the surplus product in capitalism is not constituted by a number of factors of production, such as labour, land, and machinery, but by labour alone. Surplus-value, generally, has been taken as a category of class-based exploitation.

While not disagreeing with this analysis of surplus-value, I regard it as partial. The conventional understanding of surplus-value focuses exclusively on the creation of the surplus, but does not sufficiently consider the significance in Marx’s analysis of the form of wealth involved, namely value, and its associated treadmill dynamic.

Marx analytically distinguishes two aspects of the capitalist mode of production: it is a process for the production of use-values (labour process) and a process of generating (surplus-) value (valorisation process). Analysing the latter, Marx distinguishes between the production of absolute surplus-value, where increases in the surplus-value are generated by increasing total labour time, and relative surplus-value, where increases in the surplus-value are effected by increasing general productivity, which lowers the value of workers’ means of reproduction.

With the introduction of the category of relative surplus-value, the logic of Marx’s exposition becomes a historical logic, one that is characterised by temporal acceleration. What characterises relative surplus-value in Marx’s account is that, the higher the socially general level of productivity, the more
productivity must be still further increased in order to generate a determinate increase in surplus-value. Yet the ever-increasing amounts of material wealth produced do not represent correspondingly high levels of social wealth in the form of value. In capitalism, according to this analysis, higher socially general levels of productivity do not proportionately diminish the socially general necessity for labour-time expenditure (which would be the case if material wealth were the dominant form of wealth). Instead, that necessity is constantly reconstituted. Consequently, labour remains the necessary means of individual reproduction and labour-time expenditure remains fundamental to the process of production (on the level of society as a whole), regardless of the level of productivity.

The result is a very complex historical dynamic of transformation and reconstitution that is directional, but not linear. History in capitalism is not a simple story of progress – technical or otherwise. Rather, it is bifurcated: on the one hand, the dialectic of value and use-value generates a dynamic that is characterised by ongoing and even accelerating transformations of technical processes, of the social and detail division of labour and, more generally, of social life – of the nature, structure and interrelations of social classes and other groupings, the nature of production, transportation, circulation, patterns of living, the form of the family, and so on. On the other hand, the historical dynamic of capitalism entails the ongoing reconstitution of its own fundamental condition as an unchanging feature of social life – namely, that social mediation ultimately is effected by labour and, hence, that living labour remains integral to the process of production of society as a whole, regardless of the level of productivity. It increasingly points beyond the necessity of value, and, hence, proletarian labour, while reconstituting that very necessity as a condition of life of capitalism. The accelerating rate of change and the reconstitution of the underlying structural core of the social formation are interrelated. The historical dynamic of capitalism ceaselessly generates what is ‘new’, while regenerating what is the ‘same’. This dynamic both generates the possibility of another organisation of social life and, yet, hinders that possibility from being realised.

The dynamic implied by the category of surplus-value indicates that the temporal form of domination that Marx places at the heart of capitalism is not simply that of the present; it cannot be understood adequately with reference to the abstract value dimension of the commodity alone. Rather, the unstable duality of the forms commodity and capital entails a dialectical
interaction of value and use-value that underlies a complex historical dynamic that is at the heart of the modern world.

This approach grounds the dynamic of capitalism in historically specific social forms; it abandons the transhistorical assumption that human history in general has a dynamic, by showing that a historical dynamic is a historically specific characteristic of capitalism. This dialectical dynamic can be grasped neither in terms of the state nor in terms of civil society. Rather, it exists ‘behind’ them, moulding each as well as their relation. Within the framework of this approach, then, the dichotomy of state and civil society is a surface phenomenon of a more fundamental historical process. This historical dynamic is at the core of a historically specific form of heteronomy that severely constrains democratic processes and meaningful self-determination. This suggests that the question of the conditions of democratic self-determination as promulgated by theories of civil society and the public sphere has to be rethought.

The historical dynamic of the modern capitalist world, within this framework, then, is not simply a linear succession of presents but entails a complex dialectic of two forms of constituted time. This dialectic involves the accumulation of the past, Marx’s ‘dead labour’, that undermines the necessity of the present, of value. It does so, however, in a form that entails the ongoing reconstruction of the fundamental features of capitalism as an apparently necessary present – even as it is hurtled forward by another form of time, which is concrete, heterogeneous, and directional. This latter movement of time is ‘historical time’. Historical time and abstract time are interrelated; both are forms of domination.

Within this framework, people constitute historical time; they do not, however, dispose of it. Rather, historical time in capitalism is constituted in an alienated form that reinforces the necessity of the present. The existence of a historical dynamic, then, is not viewed affirmatively within the framework of such an understanding, as the positive motor of human social life, but is grasped critically, as a form of heteronomy related to the domination of abstract time, to the accumulation of the past in a form that reinforces the present. On the other hand, according to this reading, it is precisely the same

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7 It is in this sense that Marx’s well-known statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* should be understood – that the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. See Marx 1979, p. 103.
accumulation of the past that comes into increasing tension with the necessity of the present and makes possible a future time. Hence, the future is made possible by the *appropriation* of the past.

This understanding of capitalism’s complex dynamic is, of course, only a very abstract initial determination. Capital’s drive for expansion, for example, need not always entail increasing productivity. It can also be effected by lowering wages, for example, or lengthening the working day. Nevertheless, it delineates an overarching logic of capital. Within this framework, the non-linear historical dynamic elucidated by Marx’s categorial analysis and his distinction between ‘value’ and ‘material wealth’ provide the basis for a critical social understanding of both the form of economic growth characteristic of capitalism as well as the proletarian-based form of industrial production as moulded by capital (rather than as technical processes manipulated by capitalists for their own ends).

On the one hand, the temporal dimension of value underlies a determinate pattern of ‘growth’ – one in which increased human productive abilities exist in a limitless runaway form over which people have little control. This pattern, which gives rise to increases in material wealth greater than those in surplus-value (which remains the relevant form of the surplus in capitalism), leads to the accelerating destruction of the natural environment. Within this framework, then, the problem with economic growth in capitalism is not only that it is crisis-ridden, but also that the form of growth itself is problematic. The trajectory of growth would be different if the ultimate goal of production were increased quantities of goods, rather than surplus-value.

The distinction between material wealth and value, then, allows for a critique of the negative ecological consequences of modern capitalist production within the framework of a critical theory of capitalism. As such, it points beyond the opposition between runaway, ecologically destructive growth as a condition of social wealth, and austerity as a condition of an ecologically sound organisation of social life.

This approach also provides the basis for an analysis of the structure of social labour and the nature of production in capitalism that is social rather than technological. This approach does not treat the capitalist process of production as a technical process that, although increasingly socialised, is used by private capitalists for their own individual ends. Instead, it begins with Marx’s analysis of the two dimensions of the capitalist process of production – the labour process and the valorisation process. At first, according
to Marx, the valorisation process remains extrinsic to the labour process (what he calls the ‘formal subsumption of labour under capital’).\textsuperscript{8} At this point, production is not yet intrinsically capitalist. The valorisation process, however, comes to mould the nature of the labour process itself (the ‘real subsumption of labour under capital’).\textsuperscript{9} The notion of the real subsumption of labour under capital means that production has become intrinsically capitalist, which, in turn, implies that production in a postcapitalist social order entails a transformation of the structures and organisation of production under capitalism; it should not be conceived of as the same mode of producing under public rather than private ownership.

On a very logically abstract level, the real subsumption of labour under capital can be understood as a process ultimately grounded in the dual imperatives of capital – the drive for ongoing increases in productivity and the structural reconstitution of the necessity of direct human labour-power expenditure on a total social level. The material form of fully developed capitalist production can be grasped, according to such an approach, with reference to contradictory pressures generated by these two increasingly opposed imperatives. This allows for the beginnings of a structural explanation for a central paradox of production in capitalism. On the one hand, capital’s drive for ongoing increases in productivity gives rise to a technologically sophisticated productive apparatus that renders the production of material wealth essentially independent of direct human labour-time expenditure. This opens the possibility of large-scale socially generated reductions in labour time and fundamental changes in the nature and social organisation of labour. Yet these possibilities are not realised in capitalism. The development of technologically sophisticated production does not liberate most people from one-sided and fragmented labour. Similarly, labour time is not reduced on a socially total level, but is distributed unequally, even increasing for many. The actual structure and organisation of production cannot, then, be adequately understood in technological terms alone, but must also be understood socially, with reference to the social mediations expressed by the categories of commodity and capital. Marx’s critical theory, then, is not one that posits the primacy of production, of materiality, but of a form of social mediation that moulds production, distribution, and consumption. Class struggle is an integral part of capitalism’s dynamic. It does not, however, ultimately ground that

\textsuperscript{8} Marx 1976, p. 645.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
dynamic, which is rooted in the dualistic character of social mediation in
capitalism.

At this point, we can return to the issue of capital and labour. Labour in
capitalism, as we have seen, has two analytically separable social dimensions,
a use-value dimension (‘concrete labour’) and a value dimension (‘abstract’).
The use-value dimension of labour refers to labour as a social activity that
mediates humans and nature by producing goods that are consumed socially.
Marx treats productivity as the productivity of useful, concrete labour. It is
determined by the social organisation of production, the level of the
development and application of science, and the acquired skills of the working
population.\(^{10}\) That is, the social character of the use-value dimension of labour
encompasses social organisation and social knowledge and is not restricted
to the expenditure of direct labour. Productivity, in Marx’s analysis, is an
expression of the social character of concrete labour, of the acquired productive
abilities of humanity. The value dimension of labour (‘abstract labour’) however,
is quite different. It refers to labour’s historically unique function in capitalism
as a socially mediating activity. The production of value, unlike that of material
wealth, necessarily is bound to the expenditure of direct human labour.

As we have seen, Marx first introduces the category of capital in terms of
the latter social dimension of labour alone, as self-valorising value. In the
course of his presentation of the development of production in \textit{Capital}, however,
Marx argues that the use-value dimension of labour historically becomes an
attribute of capital.

Initially, in Marx’s treatment of co-operation and manufacture, this
appropriation of concrete labour’s productive powers by capital seems to be
simply a matter of private ownership, inasmuch as these productive powers
are still constituted by direct human labour in production. Once large-scale
industry has developed, however, the social productive powers of concrete
labour appropriated by capital no longer are those of the immediate producers.
They do not exist first as powers of the workers that are then taken from
them. Rather, they are socially general productive powers. The condition for
their coming into being historically is precisely that they are constituted in
an alienated form, separate from and opposed to, the immediate producers.

This form is what Marx seeks to grasp with his category of capital. Capital,
as it develops, is not the mystified form of powers that ‘actually’ are those

\(^{10}\) Marx 1976, pp. 130–7.
of the workers. Rather, it is the real form of existence of ‘species capacities’ that are constituted historically in alienated form. Capital, then, is the alienated form of both dimensions of social labour in capitalism. On the one hand, it confronts the individuals as an alien, totalistic Other. On the other hand, the species capacities constituted historically in the form of capital open up the historical possibility of a form of social production that no longer is based on a surplus produced by the expenditure of direct human labour in production, that is, on the labour of a surplus-producing class.

One implication of this analysis of capital is that capital does not exist as a unitary totality, and that the Marxian notion of the dialectical contradiction between the ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production does not refer to a contradiction between ‘relations’ that are intrinsically capitalist (such as the market and private property) and ‘forces’ that purportedly are extrinsic to capital. Rather, that dialectical contradiction is one between the two dimensions of capital. As a contradictory totality, capital is generative of the complex historical dynamic I began to outline, a dynamic that points to the possibility of its own overcoming.

The approach to capitalism’s dynamic that I have outlined, neither posits a linear developmental schema that points beyond the existing structure and organisation of labour (as do theories of postindustrial society), nor does it treat industrial production and the proletariat as the bases for a future society (as do many traditional-Marxist approaches). Rather, it indicates that capitalism gives rise to the historical possibility of a different form of growth and of production; at the same time, however, capitalism structurally undermines the realisation of those possibilities. The structural contradiction of capitalism, according to this interpretation, is not one between distribution (the market, private property) and production, between existing property relations and industrial production. Rather, it emerges as a contradiction between existing forms of growth and production, and what could be the case if social relations no longer were mediated in a quasi-objective fashion by labour.

By grounding the contradictory character of the social formation in the dualistic forms expressed by the categories of the commodity and capital, Marx implies that structurally based social contradiction is specific to capitalism. In light of this analysis, the notion that reality or social relations in general are essentially contradictory and dialectical can only be assumed metaphysically, not explained. Marx’s analysis, within this framework, suggests that any theory that posits an intrinsic developmental logic to history as such, whether
dialectical or evolutionary, projects what is the case for capitalism onto history in general.

As noted above, whereas, in traditional Marxism, labour is treated transhistorically, as constituting the quasi-ontological standpoint of the critique of capitalism, within this framework, labour constitutes the object of the critique. In the former, the categorical forms of capital veil the ‘real’ social relations of capitalism, in the latter they are those social relations. In other words, the quasi-objective structures of mediation grasped by the categories of Marx’s critique of political economy do not veil the ‘real’ social relations of capitalism, that is, class relations, just as they do not hide the ‘real’ historical Subject, that is, the proletariat. Rather, those historically dynamic mediating structures are the fundamental relations of capitalist society and constitute the Subject.

This emphasis on social mediation has implications for the question of the relation of social labour and social meaning in Marx’s theory. Most discussions of this issue conceptualise the problem as one of the relation between labour, understood transhistorically, and forms of thought. This is the assumption underlying the common idea that, for Marx, material production constitutes the fundamental ‘base’ of society, whereas ideas are part of the more epiphenomenal ‘superstructure’, or, relatedly, that beliefs, for Marx, are determined by material interests. However, as I have been arguing, Marx’s mature theory of social constitution is not one of labour per se, but of labour acting as a socially mediating activity in capitalism. This interpretation transforms the terms of the problem of the relationship between labour and thought. The relationship he delineates is not one between concrete labour and thought, but one between mediated social relations and thought. The specificity of the forms of thought (or, more broadly, of subjectivity) characteristic of modern society can be understood with reference to those forms of mediation. The categories of the mature critique of political economy, in other words, purport to be determinations of social subjectivity and objectivity at once. They represent an attempt to get beyond a subject-object dualism, an attempt to grasp socially aspects of modern views of nature, society, and history, with reference to historically specific forms of social mediation constituted by determinate forms of social practice. This approach entails a very different theory of knowledge than that implied by the well-known base-superstructure model, where thought is a mere reflection of a material base. It also is not a functionalist approach – either in the sense of
explaining ideas because they are functional for capitalist society or for the capitalist class.

III

The reinterpretation of Marx’s theory I have outlined constitutes a basic break with, and critique of, more traditional interpretations. As we have seen, such interpretations understand capitalism in terms of class relations structured by the market and private property, grasp its form of domination primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation, and formulate a normative and historical critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour and production (understood transhistorically in terms of the interactions of humans with material nature). I have argued that Marx’s analysis of labour in capitalism as historically specific seeks to elucidate a peculiar quasi-objective form of social mediation and wealth (value) that constitutes a form of domination which structures the process of production in capitalism and generates a historically unique dynamic. Hence, labour and the process of production are not separable from, and opposed to, the social relations of capitalism, but constitute their very core. Marx’s theory, then, extends far beyond the traditional critique of the bourgeois relations of distribution (the market and private property); it grasps modern industrial society itself as capitalist. It treats the working class as the basic element of capitalism rather than as the embodiment of its negation, and does not conceptualise socialism in terms of the realisation of labour and of industrial production, but in terms of the possible abolition of the proletariat and of the organisation of production based on proletarian labour, as well as of the dynamic system of abstract compulsions constituted by labour as a socially mediating activity.

This approach, then, reconceptualises postcapitalist society in terms of a transformation of the general structure of labour and of time. In this sense, it differs both from the traditional Marxist notions of the realisation of the proletariat, and from the capitalist mode of ‘abolishing’ national working classes by creating an underclass within the framework of the unequal distribution of labour and time, nationally and globally. The approach I have outlined seeks to grasp capital as the dynamic core of the social formation, which underlies the more historically determinate configurations of capitalism. At the same time, this approach could help illuminate some dimensions of capitalism today. By relating the overcoming of capital to the overcoming of
proletarian labour, this approach could begin to approach the historical emergence of post-proletarian self-understandings and subjectivities. It opens the possibility for a theory that can reflect historically on the new social movements of the last decades of the twentieth century, whose demands and expressed needs have had very little to do with capitalism as traditionally understood. An adequate theory of capitalism – one that is not bound to any epochal configuration of capitalism and is able to grasp capitalism’s epochal changes – should be able to address such movements, explain historically their emergence and the nature of the subjectivities expressed.

By shifting the focus of the critique away from an exclusive concern with the market and private property, this approach seeks to provide the basis for a critical theory of postliberal society as capitalist and also of the so-called ‘actually-existing socialist’ countries as alternative (and failed) forms of capital accumulation, rather than as social modes that represented the historical negation of capital, in however imperfect a form. It also allows for an analysis of the newest configuration of capitalism – of neoliberal global capitalism – in ways that avoid returning to a traditionalist Marxist framework.

This reinterpretation thus implies a fundamental rethinking of the nature of capitalism and of its possible historical transformation. It implicitly suggests that an adequate theory of modernity should be a self-reflexive theory capable of overcoming the theoretical dichotomies of culture and material life, structure and action, while grounding socially the overarching non-linear directional dynamic of the modern world, its form of economic growth, and the nature and trajectory of its production process. That is, such a theory must be capable of providing a social account of the paradoxical features of modernity outlined above.

In general, the approach I have outlined seeks to contribute to the discourse of contemporary social theory and, relatedly, to our understanding of the far-reaching transformations of our social universe in ways that could contribute to its fundamental transformation.

References


Robert Albritton

Theorising Capital’s Deep Structure and the Transformation of Capitalism

When I first read Time, Labor, and Social Domination two years ago, I was struck by the dramatic similarities between Postone’s approach and the Unoist approach that I had been developing for many years. We both place emphasis on the need to carefully rethink the theory of capital’s inner logic or deep structure put forth by Marx in the Grundrisse and in Capital, and we both see striking parallels between Marx’s Capital and Hegel’s Logic. Yet, as one might expect, given the very different traditions of discourse that we come from, there are important points of divergence in how we theorise capital’s deep structure, how we relate this theory to historical analysis, and how we think about the transition to socialism.1 It is on these three points that I will focus my attention in an effort to improve upon Postone’s positions or to advance somewhat different positions that I feel are stronger theoretically. After all, despite the ambitious scope and depth of the book, Postone claims that it should only be viewed as a preliminary effort in rethinking the core categories of capitalism at the most abstract logical level of analysis.2 This

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1 See Albritton 1999, pp. 90–5 for a previous briefer discussion of Postone’s book.
suggests that Postone himself is quite open to alterations in his theory, though perhaps not all the alterations that I will propose.

Postone sees himself charting a new path between ‘traditional Marxism’ and the critical theory of the Frankfurt school by rethinking the core categories of capital. By placing too much emphasis on the market, class, and private property, traditional Marxism is seen by Postone as failing to come to grips with the historically specific social ontology of capitalism, and, as an important consequence of this, failing to theorise the qualitative break between capitalism and socialism. Socialism, then, becomes something like capitalism plus planning. On the other hand, critical theory is problematic because it arrives at a reified totality of instrumental reason that lacks internal contradictions, making it almost impossible to use reason to develop a practice of radical change that could challenge the totality from within. In contrast to both of the above, Postone theorises ‘the historically specific form of social interdependence’ that develops a ‘quasi-independent’ objective dynamic that drives history towards deepening contradictions between wealth and the value-form through which it must be produced, between the actuality of capitalistically organised labour and the potentiality for a much freer labour, and between socially produced knowledge and productivity and their alienated forms. According to Postone, these contradictions do not produce a strict teleology, but, instead, are seen to have a ‘shearing effect’ as the pressure builds to overcome the growing gap between the actual and the possible. In other words, the contradictions produce a pressure towards, and a possibility for, emancipatory change but do not guarantee it.

Postone’s new route passes over extremely rough terrain, and though his theory, in my view, cannot deliver on all that it promises, this is not too surprising, given Postone’s desire to overcome such long standing and intractable dichotomies as those between structure and action, the objective and the subjective, the logical and the historical, meaning and material life, theory and practice, the abstract and the concrete. In what follows, I shall argue that Postone’s reconceptualisation of the core categories of capitalism, though important and promising, is in some ways inaccurate, and in others vague and incomplete. I shall argue that his theorisation of the relation between the logical and historical is unclear and essentialist. Finally, I shall argue that

3 For an extended discussion of the unique social ontology of capital, see Albritton 1998 and Albritton 1999.
4 I note, in passing, that these are logically very different kinds of contradictions.
his theory of emancipation is teleological, depending as it does on contradictions in capital’s inner logic that deepen with the passing of historical time; in opposition, I shall argue that the contradictions are more between capital’s inner logic and its ‘outer’ logic, or, in other words, between capital’s logic and our logic as we struggle to both understand and transform capitalism while to some extent being its creatures. In short, capitalistic rationality is our rationality in alienated form.

The core categories of capital

I believe that the strongest rendering of the core categories of capital to date is Sekine’s An Outline of the Dialectic of Capital.5 Because this work significantly improves on Marx’s Capital, it shall serve as a reference point for interpreting the core categories of capital. If we accept Postone’s claim that ‘What is at issue is the question of the nature of capitalism’,6 then how we theorise the core categories of capital and how we use them once theorised to understand history becomes the key theoretical issue. According to Postone, his theoretical efforts represent ‘an initial stage’,7 ‘on a very abstract logical level’,8 to reinterpret the core categories of capital. The ways in which he conceptualises his primary object of knowledge, how he decides what to include and exclude from the core, what he chooses to emphasise within the core, the precise interrelation of core categories with each other and with non-core categories, and precisely how the ‘very abstract logical level’ relates to more concrete levels, all of this becomes absolutely crucial to the argument. And, as I shall argue, much of Postone’s reconceptualisation of core categories is either rife with contradictions or lacks the precision necessary to sustain his position.

Let me start with the category ‘capital’. Postone claims that capital has an essence that can be theorised because capital is ‘self-valorising value’,9 or, in more Hegelian terms, is ‘self-moving substance which is Subject’.10 Moreover, in suggesting that capital is ‘the unfolded commodity form’11 based on the ‘dialectic of the value and use value dimensions of capital’,12 Postone seems

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5 Sekine 1997.
10 Postone 1996, p. 75.
to think that the core categories constitute some kind of dialectic involving a necessary unfolding. But, if this is the case, then we need to know precisely how the inner logic of core categories relates to non-core categories and what criteria differentiate the core from the non-core. If capital is indeed a ‘self-moving’ and ‘self-valorising’ subject, then it must contain its principles of motion and of valorisation within itself. If we successfully theorise these principles, they must be conceived as totally self-dependent, or, in other words, able to move and valorise without dependence on any outside other. And the theory of these principles is the theory of capital’s essence, necessary inner connections, or inner logic as a dialectical totality governed by an absolute subject that, by unfolding the commodity-form, objectifies social life. As a result, social life would consist of reified social relations that would constitute an historically specific social ontology characterised by the domination of objectified and alienated social forms.

I am in complete agreement so far, and this agreement is of fundamental importance. The problems start because Postone is unclear about how to relate the abstract to the concrete or the logical to the historical. From the point of view of history, the above description of the dialectic of capital seems to completely subsume agency to structure and the historical to the logical, thus contradicting the nice dialectical resolutions between dichotomies that Postone would like to achieve. Instead of taking on this problem directly, Postone covers it over by falling back on the vague prefix ‘quasi’, but this simply muddies the waters. Capital is no longer ‘absolute subject’ that is ‘self-moving’ and ‘self-valorising’, instead it is ‘quasi-independent’,13 ‘quasi-objective’,14 ‘quasi-autonomous’,15 and ‘quasi-organic’.16 If capital is truly ‘self-valorising value’, then it must be independent and not quasi-independent. This seemingly innocent word ‘quasi’ throws Postone’s whole argument into confusion. He seems to need it because he fudges over the all-important relation between the logical and the historical. If capital really is an ‘absolute subject’ with a directly historical logic, then his theory would appear to be radically essentialist. To temper this, capital becomes, for Postone, a ‘quasi-subject’. The problem here, as I shall argue in more detail later, is that he grossly overstates the grip that capital’s inner logic has on history, and he moves back and forth between

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13 Postone 1996, p. 3.
14 Postone 1996, p. 5.
the seemingly contradictory positions that there are distinct levels of analysis and that the logical and the historical are directly fused. 17 As a result, capital seems to both have a dialectical inner logic and not have such a logic.

For Postone, the ‘core categories’ are contained in Capital, Volume I, and Volume III contains the ‘categories of immediate everyday experience’.18 Thus, Volume I deals with essences and Volume III deals with appearances. A careful reading of Sekine’s An Outline of the Dialectic of Capital should convince most readers that all three volumes contain a theory of a purely capitalist society or a theory of capital’s inner logic. Volume III is dialectically more concrete because the previous assumption that capital is homogeneous is dropped. ‘Absolute rent’, or even ‘production price’, are not categories of everyday experience. Further, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall has to do with the mortality of capitalism, for surely if the rate of profit did continually fall, capitalism would be doomed long before it approached zero. Volume I theorises the commodity economic management of homogeneous labour-power by homogeneous capital. Volume III theorises the commodity economic management of heterogeneous capital, land, commerce, and finance. Why should the theory of labour-power be of the essence while the theory of land has to do with appearances? The movement within the dialectic of capital is not one from core categories to categories of everyday life, instead it is from less specified to more specified categories in the context of pure capitalism. Finally, if we wanted to be really rigorously Hegelian, the essence/appearance opposition pertains primarily to Volume II, where certain circulation forms are shown to be the necessary appearances of underlying production relations (essence).19 Postone’s misunderstanding of the relationship between Volumes I and III fits in perfectly with his failure to adequately problematise the relation between the logical and historical, since, according to his interpretation, Marx slides easily from core categories to the categories of ‘everyday experience’.

While I agree with Postone that Marx’s theory of capital is primarily a theory of the ‘determinate forms of social mediation’,20 it does not follow that private property, class, and the market are not essential or central parts of Marx’s theory. It appears that Postone’s move here is aimed at being able to unambiguously label the former Soviet Union as ‘state-capitalist’. For him,

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17 See Albritton 1991 for a theory of levels of analysis.
18 Postone 1996, p. 70.
20 Postone 1996, p. 79.
state administration or planning of the economy are perfectly consistent with
capitalism. Another part of his move is to repudiate theories of organised
capitalism (such as Pollock’s) that end up rejecting any kind of logic with
internal contradictions in an age where capitalism has presumably become
too political to have such contradictions. Neither of these moves is really
necessary. If we are really clear about what capitalism is, it helps to decide
to what extent and in what ways the Soviet Union was or was not capitalist,
but the clarity about capitalism must come first. I get the sense with Postone
that his desire to label the former USSR ‘state-capitalist’ strongly influences
his interpretation of capital’s core categories, thus corrupting the degree of
objectivity that is possible in this region of theory. Moreover, capitalism has
always involved significant degrees of state intervention, but this does not
necessarily end market competition. Markets and competition take many
forms and can exist in varying degrees. It is not necessarily the case that
market competition today is decisively diminished relative to former times.

Not only are these moves unnecessary, but also they fly in the face of the
ephases in Marx’s *Capital* itself. Marx clearly argues that the laws of motion
of capital are most fully displayed in a context of pure capitalism where there
are no constraints on competition, where all property is private, and where
all profits ultimately stem from the exploitation of labour by capital. In reality,
pure capitalism never exists, but this does not prevent the theorisation of
capital under conditions where its laws of motion are not interfered with by
extra-economic forces from clarifying situations where they are. Indeed, even
with a strong theory of capital’s inner logic, the question of how much and
what forms of political intervention are still consistent with capitalism is, to
some extent, a judgement call.

Postone argues that markets are necessarily attached to static equilibrium
and that the law of value is not a static law of the market, but a dynamic law
of history. Put this way, how can we not agree with Postone? The problem
is that Marx does assume a dynamic tendency towards an equilibrium that
is never reached. Indeed, this assumption is so basic that his entire theory
can be seen as based on how the tendencies towards equilibrium are
periodically disrupted, forcing a restructuring that moves towards a new state
of equilibrium. It is difficult to see how Postone can adequately understand
the anarchy of production that drives the system feverishly from one crisis
to the next without market competition. This would, in fact, seem to be
essential to the ‘quasi-objectivity’ and ‘quasi-autonomy’ of the system that
Postone places so much emphasis on. It would seem, then, that Marx did not, and we do not, have to decide between ‘static market laws’ and ‘dynamic historical laws’.

Postone’s effort to break with the class reductionism of ‘traditional Marxism’ leads him to some awkward and questionable formulations. If, as some have argued, a basic division amongst Marxists is between ‘class-theoretical’ and ‘capital-theoretical’ approaches, it seems that approaches that overcome this division would be desirable. Unfortunately, Postone unnecessarily deepens the division between these possible divergences. For example, he claims that

> At issue is the level at which the critique engages capitalism – whether capitalism is understood as a form of society or merely as a form of class domination…

It is not clear to me why we cannot say that capitalism is a form of society within which class domination plays a central role. Why this artificial opposition? I accept Postone’s emphasis on the importance of reified social relations and on the centrality of the value/use-value opposition to capital’s dialectic, but, within this dialectic, it is clear that the most central and important use-value that capital must manage is labour-power. Indeed, labour-power must be commodity-economically managed in ways that maximise short-term surplus-value and profit. This means that, if there is a central category to the entire theory, it must be ‘class exploitation’. In order to avoid theorising the centrality of the capital/labour class relation, Postone often reduces capital to a self-reflexive relation, where labour self-generates domination over itself. The result is that Marx’s opposition between capital and labour is transformed into an opposition between the actuality of alienated labour and the possibility of emancipated labour, and capital is swallowed up into labour as simply a moment in its relation to itself. In my view, this is a theoretical sleight of hand that is not only completely out of line with the core categories of *Capital*, but also unnecessarily and radically opposes a dead-labour-theoretical approach to a class-theoretical approach, when there need be no opposition at all between capital-centric and class-centric approaches.

Postone makes it very clear that it is the ‘reconsideration of the significance of Marx’s concept of labour that provides the basis of my reinterpretation of his analysis of capitalism’. But there is almost no discussion in the book of

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22 Postone 1996, p. 5.
the actual labour processes of capitalism or of the crippling effects that the value management of the use-value labour-power has on the human substance. Instead, over and over, Postone in different ways repeats that the social powers of labour become alienated in a form of social domination that has all the ‘quasi’ characteristics (independence, objectivity, autonomy, etc.). As argued above, at least in a purely capitalist society, these characteristics are full and not ‘quasi’, and in the theory of a purely capitalist society it is rather obvious that all agency simply fuels self-valorising value. Indeed, this must be the case if we want a theory that clearly reveals capital’s inner logic, which is ‘inner’ and essential precisely because it is not interfered with by forces outside capital. In order to understand how resistances may alter capital, we must first understand how capital operates without resistance.

While it is true and widely recognised that, as Postone claims, ‘labour in capitalism is historically specific’, it is not necessarily the case that ‘the fundamental categories of social life in capitalism are categories of labour’.\footnote{\textit{Postone 1996, p. 22.}} For, while the basic social form or social mediation in a purely capitalist society is value and value is ultimately an expression of labour, a ‘purely capitalist society’ is not the same thing as ‘capitalism’. In an actual capitalist society as opposed to an abstract inner logic, many social forms and forces may articulate with value, such that we cannot always simply assume the primacy of value. For purposes of understanding some aspects of social life, gender or race may be more important than value, and we must always study specific contexts and not declare in advance the primacy of value or of labour. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that ‘value is a social form that expresses . . . the expenditure of direct labour time’.\footnote{\textit{Postone 1996, p. 25.}} This would suggest an ‘embodied labour theory of value’, which, in my view, is highly problematic for many reasons. Perhaps the most obvious relates to Marx’s claim that labour expended for which there is no social demand is wasted and therefore cannot form part of value. But, also, such a way of thinking could produce an expressive account of value that fails to sufficiently account for the mediations that separate a category such as ‘interest’ from ‘direct labour time’.

For Postone, it is essential to find contradictions in the core categories that point beyond capitalism to the possibility of its transformation. But, as I shall argue at greater length later, the possibility of thinking the transformation of capitalism from within does not depend on such contradictions. The
contradictions within the dialectic of capital serve only to propel the unfolding of the core categories, and this is very different from exposing contradictions between actuality and possibility in the current conjuncture. To collapse the two together tends towards an extreme form of essentialism, or perhaps idealism, that does not sufficiently differentiate between logical contradictions and the sort of collective agency required to transform capitalism. If we follow through with Postone’s claim that ‘Marx characterises capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject’,25 the result will be a theory which represents the self-unfolding of capital, or, in other words, capital’s theory of itself. From my point of view, that which is most objectionable about capital’s inner logic, is precisely the reification of social forms, that, if not resisted, will force us to be the slaves of short-term profit maximisation no matter what the human costs. However, since capital only achieves totality at the level of pure capitalism, its grasp on our history is always partial. At the level of history, we always have and always will resist capital, precisely because of its total indifference to all human values in the face of the urge to profit. It is only necessary to find the sort of contradictions that Postone is looking for in the core categories to the extent that we assume that these categories form a totality at the level of history. But I think that even Postone would not see it this way.

According to Postone, ‘value becomes less and less adequate as a measure of the “real wealth” produced’.26 This may be the case in some sense, but I am not convinced by Postone’s arguments. Because value is inherently indifferent to use-value, it is never an adequate measure of real social costs and benefits. Just because the productivity of labour increases, I am not convinced that the adequacy becomes ‘less and less’. Capitalism, in principle, could have been and can be overthrown at any time in its history and, in its different phases of development, different use-value blindesses may come to the fore as particularly strong reasons for mass mobilisations. Today, it is more important to form powerful counterhegemonic collective agents around the current use-value indifferences which hurt the most, than to follow Postone in finding ripening contradictions in the core categories which will eventually hit us in the face with such radical alternatives between actual labour and possible labour that only fools would resist embracing the possibilities.

Postone claims that the dialectic of capital is rooted in the contradiction within the commodity-form of value and use-value, and yet he only focuses on this contradiction in a very selective and limited way. As already mentioned, the core categories seem to stop with Volume I, but even his reconceptualisation of Volume I is selective and one-sided. Very often, he substitutes ‘wealth’ for ‘use-value’, claiming a fundamental contradiction between value and wealth. In some ways, this substitution would seem innocent enough; however, by focusing so much attention on this very general contradiction, he fails to discuss the many important contradictions between value and use-value that run through the entire three volumes, and he plays down the crucial contradictions between self-valorising value and the use-value labour-power. There is no extended discussion of the important value/use-value contradictions associated with money, while entire sections of his book deal with the commodity and with capital. ‘Relative surplus-value’ is important to Postone because of his focus on productivity growth; however, the discussion of this category in Volume I is radically incomplete because it occurs in the context of homogeneous capital and cannot therefore systematically theorise the mechanism that spurs productivity growth (namely, the mechanism of surplus profit theorised in Volume III), nor can it theorise the knotty problems of fixed capital replacement and its relation to periodic crises (Volumes II and III).

Postone’s discussion of time is very interesting, but much of it is derived from sources outside Capital, when, arguably, there are even richer though somewhat underdeveloped discussions of temporality in Capital Volume II. Here, we have the complexities of the diverse temporalities associated with various moments within the circuits of capital – the purchase and turnover of variable capital, and of fixed and circulating constant capital; working time and production time; the sale of the product and the accumulation of surplus-value; and, finally, the total circulation time and the total production time. There is a brief discussion of the relation between fixed capital replacement and the periodicity of crises. There is a discussion of the temporality of the three circuits of money capital, productive capital, and commodity capital. And, overlaying all of this, there is the all-important drive to shorten the overall turnover time of capital which is manifested in the characteristic frenzy of capital to speed up the turnover of capital relative to abstract time. While Postone is no doubt correct to emphasise the domination of abstract time and the tendency to collapse historical time into the present, I believe there are
ways of discussing temporality that are more integrated with the theory of capital and more complex than the discussion offered by Postone if we reflect in depth on various parts of Capital, Volume II.

Finally, by limiting his reconceptualisation of ‘core categories’ to a one-sided appropriation of certain categories in Volume I, he fails to discuss the use-value constraints associated with the circuits of capital, with turnover time, and with expanded reproduction in Volume II, he fails to discuss the use-value contradictions that constrain the formation of capitalistically rational prices, the use-value constraints associated with commerce, and banking, and finally the use-value contradictions associated with the commodity-economic management of land in Volume III.

**Theorising the logical and the historical**

I have already suggested that some of Postone’s unclarity in theorising the core categories of capital stems from an unclarity on the relation between the logical and the historical. Because this relationship is unclear, his object of knowledge is unclear. Some of the concepts that he uses to refer to his object of knowledge are: ‘modernity’,27 ‘social totality of capitalist civilisation’,28 ‘modern society’,29 ‘capitalist society’,30 ‘the capitalist social formation’,31 ‘the fundamental core of capitalism’,32 ‘the history of modern society’,33 ‘categories in fully developed capitalism’,34 ‘a very abstract logical level of capital’,35 ‘the nature of capitalism’.36 While this sort of listing might be considered a little unfair since different terms emphasise different aspects of his object in different contexts, I find this listing extraordinarily diverse and loose, particularly given his explicit recognition of the importance of distinct levels of analysis. Such a casual use of terms can only be accounted for by his failure to problematise the crucial logical/historical relation. As I have already argued ‘capitalism’, or ‘the social totality of capitalist civilisation’, is not the same thing as ‘the

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27 Postone 1996, p. 3.
30 Postone 1996, p. 3.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Postone 1996, p. 31.
34 Postone 1996, p. 129.
core categories of capital, since the logic of capital only has a partial grip on history. Indeed, in my view, a large part of Marxian political economy ought to concern itself precisely with the strong and weak points of that grip and the points of resistance that could, potentially, most effectively loosen it.

If the core categories of capital have a historically directional dynamic, it is only in a very abstract and limited sense. It is precisely for this reason that no teleology can be derived from capital’s inner logic. Postone focuses a great deal of attention on the growth of productivity as a directional dynamic. It is probably true that capitalism would be incompatible with anything even slightly approaching total automation; however, such a growth of productivity is only an intimation that capitalism is mortal. We have no idea exactly how much productivity growth capitalism can absorb or how long it may take for the contradiction between the actuality of productivity growth and its possibilities stares us in the face with possibilities that we cannot refuse. It may be that capitalism will come to an end long before the potential contradictions of very high levels of productivity ripen, or it may be that capitalism comes to an end for reasons that have little to do with productivity growth. Capitalism may, at least in the short term, be replaced by alternatives that are worse. Indeed, it seems unlikely that capitalism will ever approach at all close to total automation.

Similar arguments could be made with regard to other tendencies discussed in Marx’s theory of capital’s necessary inner connections. For example, the tendency towards concentration is a tendency towards larger firms in a sector, but not necessarily fewer. And, while centralisation implies fewer, it is not clear within the dialectic of capital how fast centralisation might occur in history and to what extent this tendency might be counteracted by other tendencies. Similar things could be said about the tendency for capital to expand, the tendency towards periodic crises, the tendency for fixed capital to increase as a portion of capital, etc. These are only very abstract tendencies with a very abstract directionality, a directionality that at the level of the concrete can be to some extent be deflected or blocked over long periods of time. It is misleading then to refer to the theory of core categories as being directly a theory of on-going historical development.

Besides the increase in productivity, the other directional dynamics that Postone features have to do with the contradictions between value and wealth and between abstract time and historical time. As I have argued above, it is not obvious that the contradiction between value and wealth is necessarily
worse today than in certain times in the past. And, while the contradiction between abstract time and historical time would seem to be worse today, as it generates new theoretical preoccupations such as ‘speed theory’, it is not clear what role this contradiction might play in the overcoming of capitalism. Indeed, the contradictions that Postone discusses are far too abstract to generate anything even approximating an on-going historical directionality with sufficient concreteness to aid very much in producing the forces for radical change that Postone would like. It follows from the above arguments that Marx’s theory of the logic of capital is a theory of the development of core categories and not of the development of history – although, obviously, capital’s logic plays a crucial role in the development of history.

Postone describes his approach as ‘one of the relation between a historically specific form of social mediation and forms of social “objectivity” and “subjectivity”’. Further, while capital may be a quasi-objectifying, he does not want to theorise consciousness as simply a ‘reflex of objective conditions’. This is an important area of discussion because many theorists have abandoned Marxism for some form of poststructuralism because of the recent preoccupation with theorising the construction of subjectivity and, whether rightly or wrongly, a general estimation that Marxist theory is limited, if not impoverished, when it comes to such investigations. In fact, I believe that Marxian political economy can contribute importantly to the theory of subjectivity, but only if combined with other approaches. In the context of a purely capitalist society, where consciousness is conceived as a reflex of objective conditions, only very limited conclusions can be drawn about forms of subjectivity. For example, in a purely capitalist society, individuals must be conceived of as legal subjects capable of buying, selling, contracting, and owning property. But, at the level of history, being a legal subject takes various degrees and forms depending on the phase of capitalist development, and it is applied to varying extents, to certain collectivities such as states, corporations, or trade unions. For example, women who marry lost most of their legal subject status in England until the late nineteenth century. This example suggests that forms of subjecthood derived from capital’s logic are rather abstract and require to be articulated with a host of other forms, some closer to capital’s logic and some more

37 Virilio 1986.
38 Postone 1996, p. 5.
autonomous. When it comes to theorising subject construction, Marxian political economy would do well to remain open to Foucauldian, Lacanian, and other approaches that shed new light on how various forms of subjectivity and objectivity get constructed and interrelated, while, of course, integrating these approaches with the various levels of Marxian political economy.

I also find Postone's use of 'totality' problematic because of his tendency to collapse the logical into the historical. For example, what are we to think when he claims that 'The capitalist social formation . . . exists as a social totality'? Is the capitalist social formation a 'totality' in the same sense as the theory of capital's inner logic? Surely not. Indeed, I would argue that the capitalist social formation is not a 'totality' at all, at least not in any strong sense of the word implying a principle of unity. All actual capitalist social formations are only partially capitalist, and capital's logic, though probably the single strongest social force, does not always override all other social forces. Even in the United States, a great deal of labour that takes place is not capitalist wage-labour (for instance, self-employed labour, volunteer labour, domestic labour, forced labour, etc.). While the theory of a purely capitalist society is the theory of a totality in the strong sense, at the level of concrete history this logic is never totally in command and, to the extent it is in command, it is bent in all sorts of unexpected directions by various supports, and resistances. No doubt it is true that capital is a totalising force, but, at the level of history, it never achieves a totality, and if it did, our only hope for transforming capitalism would seem to be something like Postone's internal contradictions or Marcuse's aesthetic rebellion against a reified totality.

Postone writes of the 'mutual constitution of deep social structures and everyday action and thought'. No doubt this is partially true since, if everyday action and thought were to change radically, the deep structures would have to change and vice versa. I would argue, however, that the relation between deep social structures and everyday action is distorted if it is considered to be one of direct 'mutual constitution'. The problem with this formulation is that the deep structure of capital defines what it is, and because the structure is deep, changing it must be radical or revolutionary. Moreover, precisely because the structure is deep, individuals are conditioned by it from birth, so much so that opposing it is fraught with difficulties and dangers. Thus, 'everyday action' is constituted to some extent by capital's deep structure,

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40 Postone 1996, p. 79.
and that deep structure persists until a sufficiently self-aware and powerful collective agency can dismantle capitalism. Everyday action does not occur in a purely capitalist society or in the categories of Volume III of Capital. Volume III, for example, assumes that all land is owned by a separate landlord class and none of it is owned by capitalists. It assumes that capital can move easily from one branch of production to another in order to produce an average rate of profit. It assumes that there is no monopoly, no state intervention, and that labour is mobile. None of these conditions are present in the ‘everyday action’ of contemporary capitalism. I have argued throughout that it is a mistake not to realise that there are many complex mediations that separate the logic of capital and everyday action. Thus, the deep structure of capital and everyday action have a connection, but it is not one of direct mutual constitution.

For Postone, the totalising power of capital is such that ‘it has increasingly undermined, incorporated, and superseded other social forms, while becoming global in scale’.\(^{42}\) This claim may be partially true, but it needs qualification. The reifying power of capital is such that it does tend to influence other social forms more than it is influenced by them, but I believe that it is too strong to say that it has ‘undermined, incorporated, and superseded other social forms’. Sometimes, social forms such as fundamentalist religion or nationalism may develop as a reaction to capitalism, only to gain sufficient strength and autonomy to act back on capitalism and alter it. Certain forms of social life may maintain a relative autonomy from capitalism for long periods, and from their base of relative autonomy may act on capitalism to alter it. An example of this would be the modern state. Still, it is hard to imagine other social forms such as language being subsumed totally to capital, though it may be influenced by capital. But, being ‘influenced by’ is very different from being ‘incorporated into’. Furthermore, though capitalistic rationality in the form of instrumental reason is very powerful in the world, there really would be no hope were all reason to be incorporated into capitalistic rationality. It would then be impossible to even think against capitalism, much less to act against it. It follows that many social forms remain relatively autonomous from capital and, in its historical development, capital may help to generate new social forms that may achieve a degree of relative autonomy. Even as the commodity-form is generalised, it may also become compromised to some

extent as it runs into resistant use-values, and even as capital is globalised, it may also become compromised by political exigencies that it cannot control. At the level of history, value, thank goodness, is never a socially total mediation.

According to Postone, ‘Marx intends his mode of presentation not as a historical unfolding, but as a logical unfolding that proceeds from the essential core of the system’.43 However, once we get to the category ‘relative surplus-value’, according to Postone, the logical fuses with the historical. But how can that be? Relative surplus-value assumes homogeneous capital and labour, a condition that never exists in history. Furthermore, if by relative surplus-value we simply mean increases in productivity, this is prominent in capitalism long before the industrial revolution, but Postone claims that a ‘dialectical logic of history – is specific to developed capitalist society’.44 Presumably, this refers to factory production. So when does capitalism become developed such that its dialectical logic is put into gear? In 1850, England is the most developed capitalist country in the world, but a relatively small part of its total economic activity takes the form of factory production. It is easy to see how Postone has fallen into this error, since Marx himself sometimes speaks as if co-operation, division of labour, and mechanisation were three phases of capitalist development. If one examines actual history, no such phases can be located and, indeed, from beginning to end, capital involves all three. For example, in the putting-out systems prior to factory production, improvements in spinning wheels and hand looms did more to increase productivity than did changes relating to co-operation and the division of labour. Indeed, these latter only become really important with the dawning of factory production. From my point of view, Postone’s single greatest error is the claim that, once capitalism is developed, the logical and the historical become fused. For, once he takes this position, he is totally cut off from exploring the complex mediations that must relate the logical and historical if we are to avoid essentialism and reductionism.45

Transformation

I agree with some of the central theses of Postone’s views on the need for a radical break with capitalism. His recognition of the fact that the use-value

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45 While I am generally critical of much poststructuralism, Marxists need to avoid crude forms of essentialism. For more discussion of this see Albritton 1999.
dimension is warped or infected by the value dimension means that it is not simply a matter of liberating use-value from value, but, rather, of discovering the use-value potentials that have been crippled by value. Consider, for example, food production and distribution.

We know a good deal about optimal human diet and we know a good deal about sustainable agriculture, but very little headway has been made or can be made in this area as long as value is in command. The extreme pressures to increase productivity in agriculture are generating increasing ecological damage, while the need to addict people in advanced industrial countries to highly processed foods in order to maximise profits has produced epidemics of obesity and other health problems, while half the world’s population has an inadequate diet because of poverty, which is to a large extent generated by capitalism. The need to reorganise all our use-value practices would, of course, importantly include labour processes, production, and distribution. And one result of this reorganisation would be the abolition of the commodification of labour-power. I believe that for, most Marxists today, all this is rather uncontroversial.

Disagreements start with Postone’s claim that ‘actually existing socialism’ was simply ‘an alternative (and failed) form of capital accumulation . . .’. Given the ideological pressures in today’s world, this is a popular thing to say since, in this way, socialists can maximally distance themselves from the Stalinism that developed in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. In my view, however, it makes things too easy for socialists. We need to learn from the failed socialism in the Soviet Union and not simply dismiss it as a form of capitalism. By basing our understanding of what capitalism is on the theory of capital’s inner logic, we can have a clear and determinant reference point for considering the ways in which the USSR was capitalist and the ways socialist. The USSR represented a huge effort to realise socialism and its failure to do so is tragic. It was relatively successful in some areas and less so in others, and its efforts were in many ways thwarted because it had to compete with a hegemonic world capitalism. I believe we cannot learn the lessons that we should if we simply write off the USSR as a failed form of capitalism.

Also I think Postone is correct to play down the market versus planning debate, though I disagree with his view that a planned economy may be capitalist. A planned economy could be a form of barbarism. Any economy

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that is an advance on capitalism must not replace markets with extra-economic coercion, and the only way for this to occur is for there to be a huge advance of democracy. Moreover, advances in economic democracy are likely to involve various planned uses of markets. A hundred years from now, markets may be viewed as crude instruments for valuing things, instruments that humankind had to rely on over a whole historical epoch. There are many problems with markets, but one increasingly obvious one is that what they exclude as ‘externalities’ may be central to the real social costs or benefits of a product. But, if we begin to factor real social costs and benefits into prices, then prices become planning instruments that we consciously set.

Another problem I see with Postone’s vision of transformation is his emphasis on the centrality of the contradiction between actual capitalist labour and potential socialist labour. This is a rather intellectualistic way of conceiving of transformation without some discussion of the formation of a counterhegemonic collective agency. Of course, a successful transformation must among other things involve a widespread and on-going discussion of radical alternatives. The problem is that, given the current hegemony of neoliberal ideology, while many alternatives can be proposed, they may not appear feasible, they may appear too radical, or they may not get a hearing. How do we convince people that a socialist organisation of labour is both desirable and possible?

Is the proposing of alternatives by intellectuals likely to topple the system? Surely, part of this must be the gradual mobilisation of people on a global scale, a mobilisation within which the working class is bound to play a leading role? And, in this mobilisation, I do not see any reason to separate the class contradiction from the contradiction between the actual and possible, since it is precisely these two contradictions that most resonate with each other. The greater the class mobilisation, the more feasible and practical the alternatives become.

If we read Capital first and foremost as a theory of pure capitalism, as a dialectical logic based on the contradiction between value and use-value, then we already have a social ontology the critique of which can provide a framework for thinking about socialism.47 Such a theory reveals the ways in which self-expanding value torments and tortures use-value at every step of the dialectic, and, since the dialectic only has a partial grasp on history, we

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are both within and without it. This means that we can achieve critical distance and use our reason to ruthlessly criticise capital’s logic – not just its organisation of labour, but its organisation of all dimensions of social life where it has some impact. The dialectic of capital reveals that the use-value that capital has the most difficulty managing commodity-economically is labour-power. But the difficulties by no means stop there. Land is also very difficult to manage, as is money, finance in the form of interest-bearing capital, and technology in the form of fixed capital. When we examine capitalism at more concrete levels of analysis, we find many more use-value obstacles, the taming of which may require massive, political, ideological, and legal supports. Indeed, even with these supports, labour-power, land, and money are never totally commodified at the level of history.

Since capital in its pure form sacrifices all human values to the value of short-term profit, the possibilities for criticism are immense. However, given the weakness of the Left at this time in history, I believe that we must focus on the values that are most important to people, such as subsistence, shelter, food, water, health, work, education, leisure, politics, violence, religion, technology, and the environment; and, in each area, propose policies, some more radical and some less, that will constrain capitalism and will raise the possibilities of different ways of relating to the use-value dimension of life. Yes, we need to think about alternatives, but, at first, they need to be primarily reformist alternatives, such as a 30-hour week or debt forgiveness or a decent guaranteed annual income.

I believe that there is some truth in the contradictions that Postone points to at a very abstract level, particularly the ‘treadmill effect’ that forces ever greater increases in productivity the higher the level of productivity. I also happen to believe that we are already entering a long phase of transition away from capitalism, and this belief is not simply the projection of some idle wish-fulfilment for it is theoretically grounded. If I am right about this, the new century will be rife with turmoil of all sorts, and, to avoid the worst excesses of barbarism, the Left will have to rise again and will need all the theoretical, ideological, political and organisational skills that it can muster. The twenty-first century will offer the Left many opportunities, but the question remains whether we will be up to an effective counterhegemonic response?

Postone’s book is the sort of rich and intelligent theoretical work that we

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need. It is a work well worth criticising, for, precisely because of its richness, it provides substance to really engage with and move forward.

References


Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is a rich text containing much of interest that I cannot discuss here (for example, the notion of ‘abstract time’). I wish to respond to just two of its central ideas. First, he argues that capital is the self-constituted ‘Subject’ of our epoch, glossing ‘Subject’, and its movement, in the Hegelian sense. Here, I agree one hundred per cent. Second, he denies that the critique we require is to be rooted in the social standpoint of the proletariat. Here, I disagree fifty per cent.

**The Hegelian Subject**

To begin with, then, let us review Postone’s position on the ‘subject’ of our epoch and the relevance of Hegel in this. The debate on the relation of Hegel and Marx has too often been posed as a rigid dichotomy: if Marx was not a Hegelian, then he must have rejected all Hegel’s insights, with any residue of Hegel’s turns of phrase being merely stylistic and insubstantial; conversely, if Marx’s debt to Hegel was real, then Hegel’s method must be taken on board wholesale and Marx’s disagreement with Hegel obtains only at the substantive level of social analysis.
Postone takes a middle position through the strategic relocation of Hegelian
dialectic from a universal logic to a specifically capitalist one. What Hegel
presented in affirmative terms as the historical process of the self-realisation
of Spirit, Postone presents critically as the specifically capitalist development
of the domination of totalising abstraction. ‘Marx suggests that a historical
Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism . . . that the social
relations that characterize capitalism . . . possess the attributes that Hegel
accorded the Geist’.1 In other words, Hegel grasped the contradictory social
forms of capitalism but ‘not in their historical specificity’.2 Thus:

The structure of the dialectical unfolding of Marx’s argument in Capital
should be understood as a metacommentary on Hegel. Marx did not ‘apply’
Hegel to classical political economy but contextualized Hegel’s concepts in
terms of the social forms of capitalist society.3

Whereas a simple inversion of Hegel produces a materialist philosophy of
history founded in some a priori dialectical schema, the real achievement of
Marx’s critique of political economy is to socially specify the forms which
Hegel’s concepts absolutise and idealise. In these forms a historical ‘logic’
can indeed be seen; but it is one restricted to the parameters of capitalist
development, because its social forms are uniquely constituted through material
abstraction in a way that grounds a dialectic. The method corresponds
to the object. Postone also correctly argues that the object is developed
capitalist society; only there do we see ‘a totalizing category’, namely value.4
As Postone says,

other social formations are not so totalized: their fundamental social relations
are not qualitatively homogeneous. They cannot be . . . unfolded from a
single structuring principle, and they do not display an immanent, necessary
historical logic.5

Postone rightly twits those ‘post-Marxists’ and ‘postmodernists’ who deny
the validity of the category of totality, as if Hegel and Marx were at fault;
whereas Hegel, uncritically, and Marx, critically, reflect the totalising logic of
the value-form which imposes itself in such a manner that all relationships

1 Postone 1993, p. 75.
2 Postone 1993, p. 81.
3 Ibid.
5 Postone 1993, p. 79.
become inscribed within it. Value ‘is not merely a regulator of circulation, nor a category of class exploitation alone; rather, as self-valorizing value, it shapes the form of the production process and grounds the intrinsic dynamic of capitalist society’.  

It follows that Marx has identified a most peculiar ‘Subject’ in capital, which has strong affinities with the Hegelian ‘Spirit’. ‘Marx’s Subject, like Hegel’s, is abstract and cannot be identified with any social actors. Moreover, both unfold in time in a way that is independent of individual will’. This dialectic of development therefore ‘presents itself as a logic’. In this way, far from inverting Hegel’s idealist dialectic, Marx gives it a ‘materialist’ justification. ‘Marx implicitly attempts to show that the “rational core” of Hegel’s dialectic is precisely its idealist character: it is an expression of a mode of social domination constituted by structures of social relations which . . . acquire a quasi-independent existence’.

However, there are differences with Hegel also to be noted. Whereas Hegel’s Subject is transhistorical and knowing, in Marx’s analysis it is historically determinate and blind. . . . It has no ego. . . . It does not possess self-consciousness. Subjectivity and the socio-historical Subject must be distinguished.

Postone is to be congratulated on searching for the disanalogies here. Too often, commentators content themselves with referring to capital as a ‘quasi-subject’; but this is not good enough; the force of each term needs explicating in more precise terms, as we have just seen with Postone. However, in this passage, the qualifications to the basic thesis seem so strong it is unclear what remains of such a ‘Subject’ if there is no ego, no self-consciousness, no knowing, and no subjectivity. Agency without self-consciousness or subjectivity we might wish to attribute to animals whose activity secures their subsistence, just as capital bent on self-valorisation preserves and increases its ‘substance’ through reflexively incorporating its increment. But is this tendency to self-preservation enough to constitute a subject?

From a Hegelian point of view, the most abstract capacity of a subject, that which makes possible its freedom, is the capacity to range things under their
universal concept, and treat them accordingly. It is the way heterogeneous commodities are posited by capital as bearers of value and surplus-value, the universal substance of capital, and the way the production process is shaped so as to maximise valorisation, that means we are faced with a ‘Subject’ here, albeit of a ‘logical’ kind rather than a flesh and blood one. Moreover, the complementary moments of consciousness, knowing, etc., are secured insofar as this structure of valorisation imposes its logic on the personifications of capital, namely owners and managers.

Postone’s account of the relation between Hegel and Marx I find convincing; not surprisingly, because it accords with the view I have myself developed. However, it is also my view that the claim that Marx’s work can be read as a transposition of Hegel’s needs a good deal of detailed development. Only then does it get to grips with the subject matter concerned and succeed, or not, in illuminating it. The project of expounding the dialectic of capital in detail is fraught with difficulty, and it leaves much room for divergence and controversy.

A good illustration of the difficulties involved in appropriating Hegel’s metaphysics is provided by Postone’s treatment of Marx’s references to ‘substance’. There are three passages cited. First Postone reminds us that, in 1845, Marx made fun of Hegel’s speculative construction of ‘substance as subject’. He then points out that Marx had evidently changed his mind by 1867, and he cites two passages containing the term ‘substance’. But Postone has not understood that these are different from each other and different again from the context of 1845.

The first is the well-known passage in Chapter One of Capital referring to value as having a ‘substance’, which Marx identifies with abstract human labour. The second is from Chapter Four, in which Marx refers to ‘value’ as ‘an automatic subject’ and ‘as a self-moving substance’. Postone comments:

Marx . . . characterizes capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject.
In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism.

Notice the slippage here from ‘value’ in the quotation to ‘capital’ in the comment; however, this is of no moment because, in this section, Marx is

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12 Marx 1975 [1845], pp. 57–61; compare Hegel 1949 [1807], pp. 80–4; Marx is also very critical of Hegelianism in Marx 1976 [1847], pp. 162–5.
13 Postone 1993, p. 75.
14 Ibid.
discussing precisely how ‘value becomes capital’. More seriously, Postone has failed to observe that there is a slippage of reference in the two Capital chapters from ‘abstract labour’ to ‘value’. Moreover, in my opinion, this is not, in fact, a slippage because it is better understood as two different senses of the term ‘substance’. This is a notoriously slippery term. There are three senses to be discriminated here.

First there is the Aristotelian sense in which substance is associated with what is self-subsistent, exists on its own account, and supports ‘accidents’. In this sense, every human being is a different substance, whereas their ‘colour’ would be an accident. This is the sense which Spinoza absolutised. For him, there is only one universal substance which appears in different ways. This, moreover, is the sense that appears in Hegel’s Logic as the culminating category of the Doctrine of Essence, distinguished therefore from ‘Being’ on the one hand, and ‘Concept’ on the other. It is also surely the sense in which value is itself a substance in the second Capital passage. Another sense of substance, that in which it contrasts with form, is a more everyday one, referring to what things are ‘made of’, the clay as opposed to the pot shaped from it. I suggest Marx’s contrast in Chapter One between substance and form of value means this is the sense he is using when he speaks of abstract labour as the substance of value. Thirdly, there is the sense found in Hegel’s Phenomenology, in which ‘substance’ is contrasted with ‘subject’, and which is mocked by Marx in 1845. Here, substance is what appears phenomenally over against the knowing subject. The trick, says Hegel, is to overcome this dichotomy by ‘grasping substance as subject’. In my view, while, with M-C-M, a subject has emerged, the Hegelian sense in which it is united with its ‘substance’ is best applied to capital’s real subsumption of the production process by the purposes of valorisation.

On a single page, then, Postone deploys all three senses, but as if they were all the same. However, they must be carefully distinguished, and deployed in their appropriate contexts.

Here, I just state briefly that my own insight about the relevance of Hegel is that the purity of the ontological forms idealistically developed in his logic up to the all-encompassing ‘Idea’ (which then is shown in Hegel’s Realphilosophie to embody itself in the external world) is exactly paralleled by the dialectic of the value-form (constituted through the abstractive power of exchange)

up to the general formula for capital (which then appropriates material production and forms it as a valorisation process).

**Abstract labour**

On my view, capital is self-mediating, albeit on the basis of the exploitation of labour. The totalising category is value; this appears in commodity-form, money-form, and the capital-form; then it gives itself a ‘substance’ in labour. But I think the exact relation between ‘value’ and ‘labour’ is hard to pin down.\textsuperscript{16}

Unhappily, I do not find a perspicuous account in Postone’s book. As I read, I find continual ambiguity as to which category is fundamental to the social totality and its mediations. In earlier quotations, I have chosen those from Postone in which value is assigned this place. But, more commonly, he assigns it to labour. This is not because he relies on some historical-materialist thesis about the centrality of productive activity to the constitution of all social formations, but because he holds that in capitalism, specifically, ‘labour’ is socially constitutive.

Anyway I cannot see how to make compatible the following two assertions: ‘Labor grounds its own social character in capitalism by virtue of its historically specific functions as a socially mediating activity. In that sense, labor in capitalism becomes its own social ground’;\textsuperscript{17} and ‘Value is... an objectified, self-mediating form of social relations’.\textsuperscript{18}

If, as Postone sees, capital is the subject, and only its totalising activity posits value as an actuality and abstract labour as a practical truth, then it seems plausible to argue that labour is not the self-mediating social ground, but rather a moment in the self-mediation of capital, with value as both origin and product of this subject.

If one says labour creates value, and then falls victim to its creation, one could then have labour as self-mediating, with the inflection that its mediations are alienating so it becomes through its own activity alienated and alienating. This was Marx’s position in 1844, when he had not comprehended the self-constitutive power of capital as a subject. But, if one says capital creates value, with labour as its negatively posited sublated ground, then labour is victim

\textsuperscript{16} For germane discussion, see Arthur 2001.
\textsuperscript{17} Postone 1993, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{18} Postone 1993, p. 154.
of capital’s self-positing through absolute negativity, constituted by capital as an abstract totality, its shadow side.

However, if one tracks Postone’s original introduction of the topic, it seems that he prioritises abstract labour over capital and that is why it is its own social ground. He introduces the notion of abstract labour in a different way from Marx, who brings it in as the substance of value. Rather, Postone argues that, in generalised commodity exchange, labour is abstract in the sense that, while its own activity is concrete and produces a specific product, it appears socially as a means of acquisition of any and every product through the exchange mechanism; hence its concrete specificity is displaced, and it takes on a form of abstract generality. It is only because all labours taken thus are integrated in a social totality that their products take the form of value.19

This argument strikes me as similar to putting the cart before the horse. In an exchange economy as such, labour certainly does not have the form of a means of acquisition in general, but only partially so, if one can find that interlocutor who happens to have a particular need for what one offers. It is only in a money economy that labour becomes a means of acquisition in general. The conditioning sequence does not run: abstract labour → value → money, but the reverse. Money posits all commodities as values, and their positing as value brings about the abstract identity of the labours embodied in all products.

My view is that capital posits itself as its own product, but in so doing covertly presupposes both labour and nature as its conditions of existence. These repressed others will take their revenge in the short (revolution) or long (ecological collapse) run.

The standpoint of critique

In his *Capital*, Marx explained that his critique represented the standpoint of ‘the class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of

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19 Postone 1993, pp. 148–52. An issue on which Postone is very brief is that of Stalinist social formations. He simply asserts without argument that value is not a category of ‘liberal capitalism’ alone (Postone 1993, p. 278), and that the job done by markets in the historical genesis of commodity production need not be essential and could be replaced by an administrative machine (Postone 1993, p. 291). I find this implausible. Possibly, he has in mind here the argument that, if the ‘logic’ of capital becomes ‘materialized’ (Postone 1993, p. 280) in industry, and hence ‘industrial production is the materialization of capital’ (Postone 1993, p. 352), then all industrial production must be capitalist. But this is an obvious fallacy. It is similar to the position advanced in Mészáros 1995, which I have rebutted in Arthur 2000b.
production and the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat’.20 He does not amplify there the reason for this, but I think it can be safely assumed he still held the view he expressed more than a quarter of a century earlier. The proletariat is compelled . . . to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property. . . . It is the negative side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property.21 The main reason for revolt is not so much that labour does not get its proper return, it is rather the revolt against labour:

In all revolutions up till now the mode of activity remained unchanged and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons, whilst the communist revolution is directed against the hitherto existing mode of activity, does away with labour . . . .22

However, it is important to realise that, at this date, by ‘labour’ Marx did not mean free productive activity but its alienation in systems of private property and the social division of labour.23 This usage of ‘labour’ is – unfortunately, in my view – dropped in the later Marx, where it is no longer free productive activity, but in The Critique of the Gotha Programme, ‘labour’ that is ‘life’s prime want’. Thus, ‘alienated labour’ in the early writings is something of a pleonasm, but not in the later writings.

Now, Postone disagrees entirely with Marx’s standpoint of critique, although, strangely, he does not acknowledge this. Rather, he claims ‘The logic of Marx’s presentation does not support the notion that the proletariat is the revolutionary Subject’.24 He does so because he thinks it follows from the fact that ‘labour’ is a determinant of the value system that, therefore, the proletariat cannot be the social standpoint of critique. His fatal mistake is to go from ‘capital cannot be grasped fully in terms of class alone’ – from this ‘fully’ and this ‘alone’ – to complete rejection of the relevance of class struggle for socialism. The

20 Marx 1976, p. 98.
21 Marx 1975 [1845], p. 36.
22 Marx and Engels 1976 [1846], p. 52.
23 Incidentally, Postone wrongly asserts that Marx treated ‘labour transhistorically’ in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (Postone 1993, p. 74). To the contrary: ‘labour’ there is Marx’s term for the specifically capitalist form of productive activity. Moreover Postone misreads also Marx’s reference to Hegel’s labour of the concept affirmatively, whereas Marx was referring to Spirit’s journey through alienation, what Hegel called in the Phenomenology ‘the labour of the negative’. (These points are exhaustively documented in my book Arthur 1986.)
24 Postone 1993, p. 325.
central claim of his book is that, whereas ‘traditional’ Marxism criticises capitalism from the standpoint of labour, with Marx, labour in capitalism is ‘the object’ of critique.\textsuperscript{25}

The conclusion he draws is that the working class is ‘integral to’ capitalism and its development, rather than ‘the embodiment of its negation’.\textsuperscript{26} Capital rests on proletarian labour, hence, Postone argues in a wonderful non sequitur, ‘overcoming capital cannot be based on the self assertion of the working class’.\textsuperscript{27} Of course it can! Workers are \textit{in and against} capital; bearers of its forms to be sure, but always incipiently in revolt against such ‘interpellation’.

Postone’s contrast between a standpoint of labour, and a critique of labour, is a false antithesis. Insofar as labour grasps itself as the ground of its own oppression it undertakes a \textit{self-critique}. Thereby, the social standpoint of labour gives rise to a self-transcending movement. Thus Marx’s position I characterise as ‘the critically adopted standpoint of labour’.\textsuperscript{28} Even if labour was entirely subsumed (which it never is in practice) by capital, although it is an activity the proletariat is forced to undertake, it is distinct from the class undertaking it. The critique is from the standpoint of labour considered as the negative: both negative to capital, in that capital must produce it as \textit{alienated labour}, and negative to the workers who are disposed to be recalcitrant to capital’s imposition on them of alien labour.

Thus, while all Postone’s points about the integrality of ‘labour’ as a category to the existing social totality are well taken, there is nothing about this that disqualifies the proletariat from forming itself as a counter-subject to capital, and rebelling against wage-slavery. Indeed, no one is more aware of this than capital itself, which certainly does not rely only on ‘dull economic compulsion’ to secure labour services, but actively seeks to atomise and demobilise its potential ‘gravediggers’. In Michael Lebowitz’s superb phrase, it must continually ‘negate its negation’.\textsuperscript{29}

The secret of critique lies in uncovering the repressed ‘others’ of capital that it pretends to have reduced to sublated moments, namely land and labour, and in basing the breakout from capitalism on the self-assertion of the proletarian counter-subject.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Postone 1993, p. 388.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Postone 1993, p. 389.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Postone 1993, p. 371.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Arthur 1986, p. 145.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Lebowitz 1992, p. 85.
\end{itemize}
References


Werner Bonefeld

On Postone’s Courageous but Unsuccessful Attempt to Banish the Class Antagonism from the Critique of Political Economy

I

Postone’s important book engages in a ‘fundamental reinterpretation of Marx’s mature critical theory’. One of its objectives is to overcome the theoretical dichotomy of ‘structure and action’. He later admits that the ‘relationship of structure and action’ has not been fully explained and that a ‘more complete account’ of ‘how value is constituted by people and can be operative’ is required to elucidate this relationship fully. This is a surprising statement at the end of a book devoted to the reconstruction of Marx’s critique of political economy.

He suggests that a fuller understanding of the relationship between structure and action would have to expound more strongly the implications of Marx’s analysis, which, for him, ‘implies that, although social actors are unaware of the essential structuring forms of capitalist society, there is a systematic relationship between these forms and social action’.

1 Postone 1993, p. 3.
3 Ibid.
An understanding of the dialectic between structure and action would thus require conceptualisation of the determining structure of capitalist society. This is, indeed, Postone’s view. In his account, social action is embedded within, and derives from, abstract social forms.

His approach, then, implies that theoretical mysteries do not find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. Instead, he sees human social practice to be ‘structured by, and embedded within, the social forms of the commodity and capital’. Critical reconstruction is thus not seen as an attempt at deciphering the human social content of economic forms. Throughout his book, human social practice is conceived as derivative and thus as a bearer of social and economic functions. His conception of the human being as an agent, actor or agency, is symptomatic, and leads him to a sociological reading of social action. Whereas efforts at a critical reconstruction of Marx’s critique of political economy associated with Backhaus and Reichelt argue that Marx’s work amounts to a reductio ad hominem, Postone presupposes what needs to be explained: he presupposes the class-divided human being as a personification or a character-mask – that is, as a human attribute of things.

II

According to Postone, ‘class conflict is a driving force of historical development in capitalism only because it is structured by, and embedded in, the social forms of the commodity and capital’. This view is reminiscent of Joachim Hirsch’s contribution to the state debate of the 1970s. As he put it, ‘the course of capitalist development is not determined mechanically or by some kind of law of nature. Within the framework of its general laws, capitalist development is determined rather by the actions of the acting subjects and classes, the resulting concrete conditions of crisis and their political consequences’. This quotation summarises Postone’s position well. As he puts it, the ‘characteristics of capitalist society cannot be grounded in the struggles of producers and appropriators per se’. Furthermore ‘the analysis

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5 Adorno 1993.
of value, surplus value, and capital as social forms cannot be fully grasped in terms of class categories. Indeed, he is adamant that class struggle is tied to the ‘capitalist system’: it is an ‘important factor in the spatial and temporal development of capital’, and ‘becomes a driving element of the historical development of capitalist society’, and, as such an element, it ‘represents capital-constituting, rather than capital-transcending, forms of action’. The idea that class struggle is tied to capital, and is constitutive of its dynamic, is banal. There is no need here to argue at length that Marx conceived of capital as a social relationship of ‘Man himself in his social relations’. Postone’s notion, however, that class struggle is merely a constructive force for the development of capitalism is an unquestionably useful, that is, consensus-creating and thus peace-making, deceitful publicity.

Why is it that ‘the significance of the category of surplus value cannot be understood fully in terms of exploitation’? The answer seems to lie in his differentiation between social antagonism and social contradiction. He argues that they ‘are not identical’. However, this differentiation merely articulates the traditional view according to which society is divided between an objective framework of general determinations and the subjectivity of social antagonisms that is embedded within this framework. Hence his repeated insistence that ‘the Marxian notions of class and class struggle acquire their full significance only as categories of an inherently contradictory and dynamic system’. This dynamic belongs to ‘capital’, and this would mean that labour is thus a mere mediating force, which exists solely within capital, that is, embedded within,
and derived from, its overarching framework. What, however, is meant by system? Marx’s critical question is important here: ‘why does this content [human social relations] take that form [the form of capital].’ This question entails research into the social constitution of economic categories, deciphering their human content. Thus, critique would have to demystify the autonomy of value and capital as an objective delusion. The objective delusion is fostered by the capitalist exchange relations themselves. They suggest that rationally acting subjects meet on the market to realise their rational interests, whereas, in fact, they act as executives in accordance with abstract social laws which they themselves have generated historically and reproduce through their rational behaviour and over which they have no control. Fetishism is real and, at the same time, it hides its social content.

Postone, too, sees labour as the central category of Marx’s critique. As he puts it, ‘the constituting centrality of labor in capitalism’ explains the ‘ultimate ground for the abstract structures of domination, the increasing fragmentation of individual labor and individual existence, and the blind runaway development logic of capitalist society and large-scale organizations that increasingly subsume people’. Yet, however central, his account rejects ‘critical reconstruction’ as the ‘return’ of ‘a relation of objects to one another’, that is, of economic categories to ‘relations between men’. Labour is merely mediating the abstract logic of capital. As he puts it, the structure of capitalist relations of production is constituted by the ‘labor-mediated form of social relations’. What might this mean? On the one hand, he argues that capital can ‘not exist without value-creating labor’, and thus cannot autonomise itself from labour. On the other, he argues that capital is a self-grounding and self-moving subject, and thus a ‘subject’ in its own right. Might he therefore be suggesting that value-creating labour is a mere economic resource?

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18 Bonefeld 2004.
21 Marx 1972, p. 147.
Postone focuses on labour as ‘the constituent source of domination in capitalism’, and he argues that ‘Marx describes [the system of social domination] as the domination of people by their own labor’.24 This view has much to commend it. Unfortunately, he does not develop its insights. Were he to have done so, he would have had to analyse the genesis of this domination and, through it, the social constitution of its objective appearance as an autonomous force. He does neither. He claims that so-called primitive accumulation is merely a historical precondition for capitalist social relations and that, once large-scale industry has developed, this precondition is no longer ‘structurally central’.25 His acceptance, then, of capital as a subject is only logical. He argues that this subject has a directional dynamic, is self-grounding and self-moving,26 and that its movement is ‘without limit’.27 In short, he sees the ‘capital form of social relations as an alienated, abstract, self-moving Other, characterized by a constant directional movement with no external goal’.28 As a consequence, Postone’s reconstruction transforms Marx’s programme of a ‘general critique of the entire system of economic categories’,29 a critique that seeks to decipher the fetishism of the commodity-form on a ‘human basis’, into a theory of capital.30

If, however, the separation of labour from its means is the precondition of capitalist social relations, would this not imply that it remains ‘structurally central’? What would happen to capitalist reproduction were it not to reproduce the divorce of labour from its means – a divorce that constitutes the ‘sine qua non of the existence of capital’?31 Would labour remain ‘object-less free labor’, or would the means of production transform into means of emancipation? Postone’s transformation of the critique of political economy into a theory of capital separates the genesis of social forms from their constituted existence. Horkheimer’s remark that ‘human beings produce, through their own labour, a reality which increasingly enslaves them’,32 is of key importance for the
issues raised here. At first sight, the sentence provides a paradox. On the one hand, human beings are the subject of the sentence. They are active and creative. They produce their own reality. They are the essence of the sentence. On the other hand, they are merely the object of an enslaving reality. Human beings are reduced to functional actors who are directed by something that stands above them and which merely develops through their actions. How do we understand human activity: subject and, as such, essence of reality; or merely the object of reality? In other words, is human practice merely an innocent bystander (or functional actor) of a reality which determines social relations, as in Postone; or is human practice a productive power? Horkheimer’s remark has a critical meaning: how can one understand the circumstance that human practice exists against itself in seemingly extra-human forms? How, then, is it possible to understand the situation in which human action is constitutive action at the same time as human beings appear to be ruled by already existing abstractions? Horkheimer rightly identified the separation between the genesis of social forms from their constituted existence as the blind spot of dogmatic thought. Postone’s reconstruction argues against the dogmatic tradition of Marxist thought – yet, it resists the critical understanding of Marx’s abstractions as the ‘constituted conceptuality’ of a class-divided social practice, a social practice that exists within, suffuses and contradicts, the things themselves. Postone’s social theory assumes the ‘objective appearance’ of capital as the objective framework of social action, as if this framework were a subjective-objective thing apart. He calls this thing ‘the capital subject’. In short, his approach affirms what needs to be negated.

In contrast to Postone, Marx’s critique of political economy argues that the positing of the results of human labour as a force over and above the social individual, including both the capitalist and the wage-labourer, is founded on the continued separation of labour from its means. The means of production become capital only in so far as they have become separated from labourer and confront labour as an independent power. Marx conceived of capitalist accumulation in terms of the separation of labour from its conditions and the concentration of these in the hands of ‘non-workers’. In fact, he argued that
The separation 'forms [bildet] the conception [Begriff] of capital'. The human history of primitive accumulation is thus not only a constitutive presupposition but also the foundation upon which the constituted existence of capital rests. Primitive accumulation, in short, is the ‘foundation of capitalist reproduction’. The class struggle, then, that freed master from serf and serf from master is constitutive of the relation between capital and labour. As Clarke put it, class struggle is the ‘logical and historical presupposition for the existence of individual capitalists and workers’ and ‘the basis on which exploitation’ rests. Were this not so, the understanding of history as a history of class struggle would make little sense. The divorce of labour from its means persists, within the capital relation, as its constitutive pre-positing action [vorausetzendes Tun]. This ‘Tun’ lies at the heart of capitalism’s reproduction: the pre-positing action of the separation of labour from its condition is not the historical result of capitalism but its presupposition, a presupposition which renders capital a social-production relation based on the separation of labour’s social productive force from its conditions and, even more pronounced, confers on these conditions the power of applying labour rather than being controlled by it. Still, the systematic character of primitive accumulation subsists in suspended [aufgehobene] form in capitalist social relations. This is because the separation is now posited as the presupposition of capitalist reproduction. It no longer ‘figures’ as the condition of its historical emergence but, rather, as the presupposition of its fanatical bent of reproducing human relations as relations between commodity owners, that is as social categories of capitalist production of abstract wealth for the sake of abstract wealth. In short, capitalist ‘accumulation merely presents as a continuous process what in primitive accumulation, appears as a distinct historical process, as the process of the emergence of capital’.

The terror of separation, of capitalism’s primitive, or original, beginning, weighs like a nightmare on the social practice of human purposeful activity. The commodified existence of human social practice in form of wage-labour confronts its conditions as alien conditions, as conditions of exploitation, and as conditions which appear, and so exist, contradictorily, as relations between things.

38 Marx 1966, p. 246
40 Clarke 1982, p. 80.
42 On this, see especially Negt/Kluge 1981; see also Bonefeld 2002.
43 Marx 1972, p. 272; see also Marx 1983, p. 688.
Man is confronted by things, labour is confronted by its own materialised conditions as alien, independent, self-contained subjects, personifications, in short, as someone else’s property and, in this form, as ‘employers’ and ‘commanders’ of labour itself, which they appropriate instead of being appropriated by it. The fact that value – whether it exists as money or as commodities – and in the further development the conditions of labour confront the worker as the property of other people, as independent properties, means simply that they confront him as the property of the non-worker or, at any rate, that, as a capitalist, he confronts them [the conditions of labour] not as a worker but as the owner of value, etc., as the subject in which these things possess their own will, belong to themselves and are personified as independent forces.44

The ‘perverted form’ of value45 presents, in other words, the mode of existence of human purposeful activity in the form of impersonal relations, conferring on the human being the indignity of an existence [Dasein] as a personification of things. Thus, concerning the capital-labour relation, ‘the worker produces himself as labour capacity, as well as the capital confronting him’. At the same time, ‘the capitalist reproduces himself as capital as well as the living labour capacity confronting him’.46 ‘Each reproduces itself, by reproducing the other, its negation. The capitalist produces labour as alien; labour produces the product as alien’.47 In short, ‘the relation of every capitalist to his own workers is the relationship as such of capital and labour, the essential relationship’.48 Postone’s reconstruction fails to conceptualise this essential relationship, that is the antagonism between capital and labour. His account merely recognises constituted character-masks. He conceives of human social ‘action’ as something that is embedded within the framework of abstract social forms. This renders ‘social action’ a mere attribute of things. As a consequence, Postone conceives

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45 Marx 1979, p. 90. In the English translation, the German verrückte Form, is translated as ‘absurd form’ (Marx 1983, p. 80). The translation is ‘absurd’. In German, ‘verrückt’ has two meanings: verrückt [mad or crazy] and ver-rückt [displaced]. Thus, the notion of ‘perverted forms’ means that these forms are both mad and displaced. In other words, they are the modes of existence of social practice, in which ‘subject and object do not statically oppose each other, but rather are caught up in an “ongoing process” of the “inversion of subjectivity into objectivity, and vice versa”’ (Backhaus 1992, p. 60, quoting Kofler). In the following, ‘perversion’ or ‘perverted’ will be used in this double sense.
47 Ibid.
of class struggle merely as a struggle between personifications or character-masks, that is between the subjective agents of an ‘enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things’.49

In contrast to Postone’s view, this section has argued that Marx’s critique amounts to a determinate negation of the constituted forms of capital as ‘relations between humans’.50 Adorno rightly saw this ‘reductio ad hominem’ as the essential core of Marx’s critique of political economy.51 It deciphers the ‘puzzling forms’ of value as forms ‘assumed by social relations between man and man’52 and reveals their social constitution in the peculiar social character of labour that ‘becomes productive only by producing its opposite’, i.e. capital.53 In short, the objective appearance of capital hides ‘its genesis’54 and thus makes its human content invisible. The critique of political economy is thus subversive: its task is to make visible the hidden human content of economic categories so that humans gain consciousness of themselves as the producers of their own forsaken world.55 ‘The constitution of the world occurs behind the backs of the individuals; yet it is their work’.56 The reified world of capital is thus not only dependent on labour as the substance of value. It is also always dependent on the reproduction of labour as ‘objectless free labour’,57 and however much capital appears to have autonomised itself from human social relations, it remains a form of human social practice. In short, a reconstruction of Marx’s work that does not decipher the human content of economic forms, and that therefore does not comprehend the forms of capital as perverted forms of social human practice, is condemned to conceive the bourgeois world only in the form of an objective-subjective thing.58 Postone’s notion of labour as a mediating force, and of class struggle as a means of capitalist development, is therefore apt.

49 Marx 1966, p. 830.
50 Marx 1972, p. 147.
51 Adorno 1993.
52 Marx 1983, p. 94.
54 Adorno 1993, p. 25.
56 Marcuse 1988, p. 151.
58 See Reichelt 2000.
IV

Postone justifies the thrust of his reconstruction by arguing that Marx shifted his position ‘from a theory of social relations understood essentially in terms of class relations to a theory of forms of social mediation expressed by categories such as value and capital’. These categories cannot be grounded in the relations of exploitation. ‘The categories of value and surplus value refer to objectified forms of social mediation and cannot be understood solely in terms of class relations of exploitation’, and according to Postone, therefore, Marx shifted from a class analysis to an examination of capital as ‘the historical Subject’. This Subject consists of objectified relations, the subjective-objective categorial forms characteristic of capitalism, whose ‘substance’ is abstract labor, that is, the specific character of labor as a socially mediating activity in capitalism. Marx’s Subject, like Hegel’s, then, is abstract and cannot be identified with any social actors.

It is a ‘total Subject’, the historical Subject ‘is the alienated structure of social mediation that constitutes the capitalist formation’. Instead, then, of a critique of totality, he affirms that ‘capital is “self-valorizing value”’. He thus seems indifferent to the fact that Marx actually criticises the conception of capital as a self-valorising value as the ‘fetishism of capital’. The constitutive fetish of capital does indeed render its character as a social relationship ‘invisible’. Yet, critical social theory is not theology. Its task is not to derive social relations from the invisible but, rather, to derive the ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ from the self-contradictory social relations themselves. The task, then, is ‘to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations’. Marx’s critique of fetishism focused on the ‘relationships amongst the things themselves’, where ‘all productive power of labour is projected as powers of capital, the same as all forms of

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59 Postone 1993, p. 79.
60 Postone 1993, p. 314.
61 Postone 1993, p. 79.
63 Postone 1993, p. 308 referring to Marx.
64 Marx 1966, p. 829.
66 Marx 1983, p. 76.
value are projected as forms of money’. All these projections, externalisations, and fetish-forms hide the fact that they are ‘the product of a social relation, not the product of a mere thing’. Against political economy’s formidable attempt to theorise the invisible, Marx argued that each ‘form’, even the most simple form such as, for example, the commodity, ‘is already an inversion and causes relations between people to appear as attributes of things or, more emphatically, each form is a ‘perverted form’. The most developed perversion, the constituted fetish of capitalist society, is the relationship of capital to itself, of a thing to itself. Marx’s programme amounts thus to a ‘radical critique’ of the hypothetical subject of political economy, as we shall see below.

Postone’s conception of capital as an ‘automatic subject’ renders the critique of capital as a definite social relationship impossible, unless of course the subject relates to itself as if it were a person apart. This seems indeed to be his position. His theory of capital presupposes that capital reigns supreme. The historical subject has to reign supreme – otherwise its determination as the historical subject would make little sense. However, and in contrast to Postone, Marx’s conception of capital as the subject posits no more than the theoretical hypothesis of political economy. If, however, capital really is the subject, then we are dealing with the ‘invisible’, and social theory would reveal itself as a secularised theology of the capital-thing as an extra-mundane subject. Yet, however perverted and reified, capital is a human form of existence. As indicated by Schmidt, Marx’s work is foremost characterised by the primacy of ‘practice’, and that his critique amounts to a conceptualised praxis, that is, a theoretical understanding of the totality of human action which constitutes, suffuses and contradicts the perverted world of capital. Postone is right to argue that wage-labour is not an antagonistic subject. The standpoint of capital and wage-labour is the same. In its simple

70 Marx 1966, p. 391; see also Marx 1972, p. 147.
71 Marx 1972, p. 508.
72 Marx 1979, p. 90.
73 See Marx 1972, p. 515.
74 In the German edition of Capital (Marx 1979, p. 169) uses the phrase ‘automatisches Subjekt’. In the English edition, this phrase is translated as ‘automatically active character’ (Marx 1983, p. 152).
75 On this, see Backhaus 1997, and Bonefeld 2001.
76 Schmidt 1974.
77 See Marx 1966, Chapter 48.
capacity, labour is purposive productive activity. This activity exists against itself as a value-creating, abstract wealth-producing commodity (wage-labour). Purposeful human social practice exists against itself as a mere economic resource. Human social practice exists, then, through the constituted forms of capital: ‘in-itself’, as relations between things whose constituted form is the separation of human social practice from its conditions, and ‘for-itself’ because human social relations subsist in and through the relations between things, a world of things that is reproduced by ‘active humanity’ in and through its class-divided social practice. It follows that human social practice subsists also ‘against-itself’ as, on the one hand, a perverted social category and, on the other, as a power that makes history and is thus capable of leaving behind its own perverted existence.

V

Postone’s characterisation of capital as ‘the historical Subject’ accords to labour the function of social mediation: labour mediates the ‘relations among people as well as relations between people and nature’. He sees his contribution as a critique, not of capital, but of labour. He argues that the core antagonism of capitalist society is contained in labour itself. He emphasises the dual character of labour as abstract labour and concrete labour and grounds the exchange-value and use-value dimension of the commodity-form in labour’s dual character. In sum, Postone argues that ‘labor is separated from its purpose and becomes a means toward a goal given by the alienated structures constituted by (abstract) labor itself’. Capital, then, ‘refers to a contradictory and dynamic structure of alienated social relations constituted by labor’. According to Postone,

78 Marx 1966, p. 825.
79 Postone’s conception of ‘mediation’ is similar to Habermas’s ‘media’, itself derived from Parsons. For an account of Marx’s conception of ‘mediation’, see Gunn 1987, and Bonefeld 1987. In Marx, the term ‘mediation’ is not employed as a means of theorising the relationship between ‘structure and action’. Rather, it is ‘form-constitutive’: mediation ‘is generally the way in which real contradictions are reconciled’, allowing antagonistic relations ‘to exist side by side’ without sweeping away the antagonism (Marx 1983, p. 106). Mediation thus gives ‘social form’ to antagonistic relations and these do not exist external to these forms but constitute and subsist in and through them.
81 Postone 1993, p. 308.
the function of labor as a socially mediating activity is what [Marx] terms ‘abstract labor’. . . . What makes labor general in capitalism is not simply the truism that it is the common denominator of all various specific sorts of labor; rather it is the social function of labor which makes it general. As a socially mediating activity, labor is abstracted from the specificity of its product, hence, from the specificity of its own concrete form.82

Abstract labour renders capitalist commodity production social and thus makes it possible for the commodity to exist in a social context.

The contradiction, then, is not between capital and labour but, rather, between abstract labour and concrete labour, between exchange-value and use-value. Both concrete labour and abstract labour, exchange-value and use-value, are constitutive of the commodity-form – leading to a conception of a contradictorily constituted social world. He thus juxtaposes ‘the value dimensions of the forms (abstract labor, value, abstract time) and their use value dimension (concrete labor, material wealth, concrete time)’.83 In this way, then, the fact that capital depends on the exploitation of labour is not unimportant. However, much more important is the contradictory relationship between use-value and exchange-value, between abstract labour and concrete labour. As Rakowitz notes,84 Postone’s conception of labour as estranged labour leads to the idea that the alienated structures of capital are constituted by abstract labour itself. It is therefore only logical that Postone sees emancipatory potential in the use-value dimension of the commodity-form.85

As Postone sees it, ‘the potential of the use value dimension, no longer constrained and shaped by the value dimension, could be used reflexively to transform the material form of production’.86 He discusses this insight in terms of the crisis-ridden tension between social ‘wealth’ and capitalist ‘value’. Postone does not develop this insight. This is unfortunate because its development might well have opened his interpretation to the political economy of labour, a political economy of struggle for human co-operation, solidarity, dignity, and the democratic organisation of social time. The time of class struggle entails a different conception of time to that which holds that time is money. Since, however, class struggle is conceived as capital-reproducing,
his notion that use-value has to be emancipated from exchange-value remains without social foundation. What, in other words, is the ‘social ground’ upon which Postone’s standard of critique rests? Postone recognises that the ‘problem for social theory of the standards of critique is, of course, difficult’ and his study does not deal with the ‘question of the standards by which that which exists can be criticized’. Is it really possible to supply a critique of capital, or a critique of labour, without a proper understanding of the standard of critique? In the Introduction to his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx rejects the idea of a different state form as a means for achieving a more just society by saying ‘Poor dogs! They want to treat you like human beings!’ Does Marx here indicate the standard of critique, or is it better ‘grounded’ in the insight that even the ‘simplest form, the commodity for example, is already an inversion’ and, that is, a perverted form?

### VI

I agree with Postone that many of the ‘explicit themes and concepts of the early writings (such as the critique of alienation, the concern with the possibility of forms of human activity not defined narrowly in terms of work, play, or leisure, and the theme of the relations between man and women) remain central, if implicit, in Marx’s later works’. Backhaus has shown that Marx’s critique of political economy is fundamentally a critique of social constitution and therewith human social constitution in perverted forms. According to Backhaus, the value-form is conceptualised as a perverted form of human practice, whose existence appears, necessarily, as a thing in-itself as if it were a power unto itself. This is because social labour is constituted in such a way that it has no consciousness of itself, a consciousness that, instead, appears to be the property of the product of human purposeful activity: the life of the commodity. In order, then, to comprehend the social constitution of class struggle, of capital and wage-labour, one has to investigate the critical intention of Marx’s argument that he deals in *Capital* with workers and capitalists only as ‘personifications of

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87 Postone 1993, p. 219, footnote 115.
88 Marx 1975a, p. 182.
91 Backhaus 1997.
economic categories’. The critical dimension of Marx’s critique of political economy is the return of the world of things to its human basis. Marx’s announced this reduction when he argued that critique amounts to a ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be’. Marx wanted neither to construct nor affirm. Postone is therefore correct when he argues that Marx wanted primarily to negate. However, Marx does not negate for the sake of negation. Such endeavour is without standard and merely leads to the reconciliation with existing relations of power – the so-called negation of the negation. What then might the standard of critique be? Critique, Marx argued, has to demonstrate *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. ‘To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for Man the root is Man himself’ and ‘Man is the highest being for Man’ and all relations ‘in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being’ have to be overthrown. The standard of critique is the human being, her dignity and possibilities.

There is no doubt that society’s laws of motion abstract ‘from its individual subjects, degrading them to mere executors, mere partners in social wealth and social struggle. The debasement was as real as the fact that on the other hand there would be nothing without individuals and their spontaneities’. Reification, then, ‘finds its limitation in reified Man [Mensch], and that is, the reality in which the social individual moves day-in and day-out has no invariant character, it is not something which exists independently from Man. Horkheimer’s characterisation of Marx’s critique of political economy as a ‘judgment on existence’ expresses the same fundamental idea. From this perspective, the so-called autonomisation [Verselbständigung] of capital stands for the autonomisation of the relations of production which, although rendering the human being invisible, exists in and through and rests on human social practice in its entirety. However much capital appears to have autonomised itself, it presupposes human social relations as its substance. In sum, the

93 Marx 1975b, p. 142.
94 Marx 1975a, p. 182.
95 Ibid.
96 On Marx’s ‘mature’, *ad hominem* critique of capital, see Backhaus 2004.
97 Adorno 1990, p. 304.
98 Adorno 1975, p. 25.
critique of capital has to show the human content, however perverted and debased, of the capitalist constitution of social existence. Postone argues, rightly, that Marx’s critique amounts to a theory of social constitution. However, he discusses social constitution merely in terms of the objective framework within which human social practice unfolds. The existence of sellers and buyers on the labour market presupposes, as Reichelt argues, the constitution of capitalist society and thus the class antagonism between capital and labour, an antagonism where the means of production are posited as capital and where human productive power is rendered a labouring commodity and, as such, an exploitable resource. In capitalist society, individuals produce in and for society as social individuals. Yet, at the same time, their production appears as a mere means of objectifying their individuality as personifications of things. Thus, their existence as private persons in a social context entails that the social individual subsists as an individualised individual whose social existence appears to derive from the relations between the things themselves. In short, human social practice subsists through fetishised forms as if they were a person apart. Marx’s work focuses on forms, at first on forms of consciousness (such as religion and law), then later on the forms of political economy. For Marx, the focus on forms was identical with the critique of the inverted forms of social existence, an existence constituted by human social practice. All these forms obtain as inverted forms of a ‘community’ that is external to the individuals, and from which they must emancipate themselves in order ever to be able to interact with one another ‘as individuals’. This central idea is presented most emphatically in The German Ideology: ‘The reality [das Bestehende], that communism creates, is precisely the real [wirkliche] basis for rendering it impossible that any reality should exist independently of individuals, in so far as this reality is only a product of the preceding intercourse of the individuals themselves’. It is thus a matter of deciphering the appearance [Schein] of independence that this ‘surrogate of community’ posits, and then of abolishing it so as to permit human beings to enter into relationship with one another, not as personifications

100 Reichelt 2002 [1971].
101 This part draws on Reichelt 2000.
102 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 70.
103 Ibid.
104 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 74.
of economic categories, but as social individuals; not as categories of antagonistic class interests, but as ‘communist individuals’.105

VII

The human being is inseparable, that is, it cannot be separated, unless through force and violence, into, for example, an economic factor of production and, quite distinct, a human actor endowed with equal rights. In bourgeois society, however, this separation is real in practice: the separation of the human being from the means of production and the constituted existence of these as capital underlies the separation between the political and the economic. The ‘logic of separation’ is the ‘real generation process of capital’106 and ‘the whole system of capitalist production is based on the fact that the workman sells his labour-power as a commodity’.107 This separation of the labourer from her means is constitutive of the alienated existence of labour as a wage-labouring commodity. Any social theory which presupposes human social practice as an attribute of things, that is as acting human agents, amounts to an affirmative theory of separation. As a consequence, such social theory can do no other but to presuppose capital as a self-valorising value and thus as a subject. This, then, is the basis upon which Postone seeks to analyse the relationship of structure and action. Yet, the human being is inseparable. While, in other words, ‘the subdivision of labour is the assassination of a people’,108 it consolidates the ‘original’ separation of labour from its conditions through further and further fragmentations of the social labour process. Yet, however fragmented social labour is, divided and subdivided, human co-operation remains ‘the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production’.109 Without human co-operation, there would be neither production nor exchange. This co-operation exists against itself in the commodity-form that integrates the ‘assassination of a people’ with the respectful forms of bourgeois relations of exchange: equality, freedom and liberty.

The understanding of ‘class’ hinges on the conception of social relations. In Postone’s work, social relations stand removed from the class relations.

105 Marcuse 1963.
106 Marx 1972, p. 422.
He conceives of the working class as an economically constituted class. Class, he argues, is a ‘relational category – classes are determined in relation to other classes’.\footnote{Postone 1993, p. 320.} Although his book seeks to reconstruct Marx’s critique of political economy as a critical social theory, class relations are nevertheless perceived in economic terms; class is seen as a relationship between producing and appropriating social groups. In addition to this ‘economic’ relationship, ‘other social strata and groupings’ exist who are ‘organized around religious, ethnic, national, or gender issues’.\footnote{Postone 1993, p. 321.} This view is reminiscent of Giddens’s idea that distinct social interests and conflicts correspond with specific structural relations such as ‘economic relations’ (characterised by ‘wage labour conflict’), ‘ecological relations’ (characterised by ‘ecological conflict’), ‘ethnic relations’ (characterised by ‘racism’), ‘gender relations’ (characterised by patriarchy and sexism) and so on.\footnote{Giddens 1990.} However, even if we accept that there are many distinct social groupings in society, should there not be at least, paraphrasing Bellofiori, the acknowledgement that individuals who accept the mutilation of themselves during a part of the day are marked throughout the whole of their daily activity? There is no reason to assume why this should be different for the whole of society. Besides, the categorisation of forms of social conflict according to distinct conflict-generating social structures does not enquire into the social constitution of these structures. Instead, it presupposes the explanandum in the explanation.

Postone’s treatment of ‘class’ in terms of a theory of social groupings is disturbing but hardly surprising. As he sees it, ‘the analysis of value, surplus value, and capital as social forms cannot be fully grasped in terms of class categories’ and a Marxist analysis that does just that commits a ‘serious sociological reduction of the Marxian critique’.\footnote{Postone 1993, p. 153, footnote 87.} This is because overt and direct social relations do continue to exist, but capitalist society is ultimately structured by a new, underlying level of social interrelatedness which cannot be grasped adequately in terms of the overtly social relations among people or groups – including classes. The Marxian theory does, of
course, include an analysis of class exploitation and domination, but it goes beyond investigating the unequal distribution of wealth and power within capitalism to grasp the very nature of its social fabric, its peculiar form of wealth, and its intrinsic form of domination.\footnote{114 Postone 1993, p. 153.}

Are class relations really just an expression of the unequal distribution of wealth and power? Equally disturbing is his view that the struggle for the shortening of the working day is ‘structurally intrinsic to capitalism’ and hence ‘an important constitutive element of the dynamic of that system’.\footnote{115 Postone 1993, pp. 36–7.} It undoubtedly is. Yet, the struggle for the shortening of the working week is also a struggle over the organisation of socially necessary labour to meet human needs. The democratic organisation of social time by the associated producers themselves and the reduction of time to an abstract measure of wealth belong to two different worlds. However important, then, this struggle has been for the development of capital, ‘the shortening of the working day is the basic prerequisite’ for human emancipation.\footnote{116 Marx 1966, p. 820. On this see especially Negt 1984.} How much labour time was needed in 2003 to produce the same amount of commodities that was produced in 1993? Twenty per cent? Forty per cent? Fifty per cent? Whatever the percentage might be, what is certain is that labour time has not decreased. It has increased. At the same time, we witness ever more vicious conquests of atoms of additional labour time through means of labour flexibilisation and deregulation. Sennet has rightly argued that this conquest corrodes the character.\footnote{117 Sennet 1998.} Is resistance to this conquest really just constitutive to the development of capitalism? Besides, strike action, refusal to comply, and resistance take courage. Do workers strike as wage-labouring personifications of variable capital or do they strike because they have character? Yet, there is only one world, a world of class antagonism between the political economy of labour and the political economy of capital. This is the site of class antagonism and class struggle. In order to understand these things, one has to be within them. In short, ‘already the simple forms of exchange-value and of money latently contain the opposition between labour and capital’.\footnote{118 Marx 1973, p. 248.}

Postone’s insight that capital ‘refers to a contradictory and dynamic structure of alienated social relations constituted by labor’,\footnote{119 Postone 1993, p. 307.} is important. If, however,
'one speaks of labour, than one is dealing immediately with Man himself. The new positing of the question is already its solution'. Postone's substitution of the critique of capital with a theory of capital and a critique of labour, belies this insight. The theoretical and practical consequences are formidable.

References

120 Marx 1959, pp. 73–4.
Engemann, Christoph et al. (eds.) 2004, Gesellschaft als Verkehrung: Perspektiven einer neuen Marx-Lektüre, Freiburg: Ça ira.
Negt, Oskar 1984, Lebendige Arbeit, enteignete Zeit, Frankfurft: Campus.


Joseph Fracchia

On Transhistorical Abstractions and the Intersection of Historical Theory and Social Critique

Reading Marx as a critical social theorist, Moishe Postone designates the *Grundrisse* (1857–8) as the first of Marx’s ‘mature’ writings. In this, he disagrees with Marx’s own retrospective, written in 1859, which points to the first sketch of the materialist conception of history in the *German Ideology* (1845) as his work of self-clarification and, presumably, his entry into maturity.¹ My point in raising this is not simply to quibble about when Marx matured, but to note that this question of intellectual biography has a methodological flip-side that involves the relation between historical theory (the materialist conception of history developed in *The German Ideology*) and the analysis of a specific socio-economic form (developed in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*). A joint consideration of these two matters gives rise to the following questions: was Marx’s work ‘only’ a critique of capitalism? Was his entire intellectual career a continual shedding of his various theoretical skins until he was able to focus exclusively and clearly on capitalism? Were those metamorphoses all

sublated in *Capital* as the materialist counterpart to Hegel’s *Logic*? Or did Marx construct his critique of capital by deploying the fundamental guiding threads that made up his materialist conception of history in a historically-specific manner – in which case they would be applicable to other socio-economic forms.

Perhaps the best way to present the problem is by reflecting on Postone’s own description of his intention to reinterpret Marx’s critique of capitalism by ‘reconstruct[ing] its systematic nature and recover[ing] its internal logic’.² Necessarily central to this ambitious reconstruction is the attempt to interpret the fundamental categories of Marx’s critique of political economy in as logically coherent and systematically powerful a way as possible, in order to work out the theory of the core of capitalism – that which defines capitalism as such throughout its various stages – implied by those categories.³

Refuting those who narrowly understand Marx’s categories in purely economic terms, Postone claims that in order fully to grasp ‘the breadth and systematic nature of Marx’s critical theory’, those categories must be understood ‘as determinations of social being in capitalism’.⁴ And his reconstruction most successfully demonstrates that Marx’s ‘analysis of labor in capitalism is historically specific, and [that] his mature critical theory is a critique of labor in capitalism, not a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor’.⁵ The ‘radical’ character of *Capital*, he shows, is that it does not stop at a critique of the social distribution of wealth, but digs deeper to expose the roots of the problem, demonstrating that ‘the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist totality [is] intrinsic to the realm of production itself’.⁶

This understanding of *Capital’s* focus on the very constitution of labour in capitalism enabled Postone, in a prefatory section, to sharply differentiate Marx’s critical theory from ‘traditional Marxism’. Despite its success, traces of a problem concerning categorial construction begin to appear in the course of this differentiation. The categories of traditional Marxism are, Postone correctly argues, transhistorical and ontological – ‘labour’, for example, being treated as the ‘transhistorical essence of social life’, ‘the ontological ground of society – that which constitutes, determines, and causally controls social

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Postone 1993, p. 18.
⁵ Postone 1993, p. 22.
life’. He relentlessly exposes the theoretical and practical consequences of the use of such transhistorical and ontological categories, and these range from a transhistorical teleology to the obvious dangers of political vanguardism. He also shows that Marx was only able to develop his critique of capital by rejecting transhistorically ontological categories and constructing historically specific ones. With regard to the category of labour, this means that ‘labor is indeed socially constituting and determining . . . but only in capitalism’.

So far, so good, and as long as his focus remains on Marx’s critique of labour in capitalism, Postone remains on solid ground. His reading of Capital against the background of the Grundrisse is illuminating, and his successful reconstruction of the categorial logic of Capital outfits Marx’s theory in terms of the exploration of the ever-changing character of contemporary capitalism as well as of its social and cultural forms. There is, however, a problem that appears on the margins of his analysis, in his methodological discussion that adequately depicts neither Marx’s nor, ironically, his own construction and deployment of categories. His methodological reflections suffer from a degree of diachronic short-sightedness and from a fuzziness about the peripheries of his synchronic vision that obscure the transhistorical dimension of several of the key categories that both Marx and he deploy. For example, Postone is able to criticise the specifically capitalist constitution of labour as abstract labour, and of material wealth as value, only through the deployment of categories that transcend the boundaries of capitalism (such as concrete labour, use-value and material wealth). It is precisely the ‘transhistorical’ dimension of these categories that enables him (and Marx) to differentiate between the production of value and the production of material wealth, to recognise the historical specificity of the capitalist constitution of labour, and to expose capital’s historically specific contradictions. Thus, Postone correctly and effectively uses transhistorical (though not ontological) categories, but his methodological discussion denies such categories any validity.

The problem is that, while Postone rightly insists on the historical specificity of Marx’s categories, he never addresses the question of how such historically specific categories are constructed. Do they emerge simply from the critical observation of a specific socio-economic form? Or is transhistorical reflection required in order to determine what is specific to each discrete socio-economic form? This is an essential matter for historical-materialist methodology that

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7 Postone 1993, pp. 60–1.
8 Postone 1993, p. 62.
concerns the relation between the synchronic study of the capitalist mode of production and the diachronic reflection required to delineate capitalism’s historical specificity – the relation, that is, between social critique and historical theory. Overreacting, perhaps, in the conclusions he draws from his excellent critique of ‘traditional Marxism’, Postone establishes a categorial either/or: either categories are transhistorical and ontological, or they are historically specific and determinate. Understandably seeking to avoid the former, he gets trapped in the latter. One rather problematic consequence of this categorial imperative is to relegate historical theory to the status of untenable universalisation. Though this does not affect Postone’s own reconstruction of Marx’s critique of capitalism, it does effectively cut social theory off from historical theory and essentially reduces Marx’s materialist conception of history to a materialist conception of capitalist society.

What is needed in order to avoid this categorial binary is a third option: one that covers the dual need for transhistorical reflection and historically specific analysis. I contend that Marx (and Postone, too, in his analytical practice) rejected the mutually exclusive choice of transhistorically ontological versus historically specific categories, and developed, instead, transhistorically abstract categories as the foundation for the construction of historically specific categories. Such categories depict transhistorical constants, crucial aspects of all historical epochs and, therefore, essential to the analysis of any given epoch. But it is precisely their ‘transhistoricity’ that renders them abstract. In order to reach the level of historical specificity, the particular content of these categories within a given socio-economic form must be determined, as must the categorial constellation that is peculiar to that form and consists of both transhistorically abstract and historically specific categories.

These transhistorically abstract categories play a crucial role in the critique of social form: they provide a normative standpoint for the critique of exploitation and immiseration and for the development of alternative visions of social organisation. They can play this role because of the particular, and very materialist, character that Marx gave these categories, having derived them from a third – transhistorically and abstractly conceived – category, namely: the ‘corporeal organisation of human beings’ or the human body, which, as Marx insisted in the *German Ideology*, ‘is the first fact to be established’ for historical theory.9 Though he never systematically elaborated this offhand
axiom, he did, as I shall argue, derive the content of such key, transhistorically abstract, categories as use-value, concrete labour, material wealth, and immiseration from human corporeal organisation. More than just purely economic categories, these corporeally rooted categories are essential to Marx’s critique of capital’s exploitative constitution of labour – giving corporeal depth to his notion of immiseration, and to the determination of what constitutes ‘material wealth’. In the following analysis, then, I shall first demarcate the transhistorically abstract dimensions, and expose the corporeal roots, of the key categories, use-value and concrete labour, in order to explain why and how they are essential to the construction of the historically specific categories, such as exchange-value, abstract labour, and to the delineation and critique of the historically specific capitalist constitution of labour. Then, in a concluding section, I shall discuss some methodological and categorial problems that arise when the relation between historical-materialist theory and socio-economic critique is overlooked.

In a letter to Engels dated 24 August 1867, shortly after he had put the finishing touches on the first volume of Capital, Marx proudly pointed to what he considered its two best aspects. The first of these, and our only concern here, is ‘the emphasis, already in the first chapter, on the double character of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value’ – a distinction on which depends ‘all understanding of the facts’. In a letter of 8 January the following year, Marx returned to this theme and elaborated it: ‘without exception’ the political economists did not understand that ‘if the commodity possesses the double character of use-value and exchange-value, then the labour presented in the commodity must also possess a double character’; and he concluded: ‘this is indeed the entire secret of the critical conception’. This is quite a claim that immediately raises the questions: why had this secret eluded the political economists? And why was Marx able to discover it? The answer to both questions had already been given in a single comment by Engels in his review of Marx’s first attempt to expose capital’s exploitative constitution of labour, The Critique of Political Economy (1859). There, Engels insisted that the uniqueness of Marx’s economic analyses lay in the fact that they were always ‘grounded in his materialist conception of history’. Read together with Engels’s reference to the relation

10 Marx 1974, p. 326.
11 Marx 1973, p. 11.
between historical theory and socio-economic critique, Marx’s comment on
the importance of particular categories indicates that historical theory is crucial
to the construction of the categorial constellation that permitted the historically
specific critique of capitalist socio-economic form.

The historically specific deployment of transhistorically abstract categories
is evident already in the analysis of the anatomy of the commodity with
which Marx begins Capital. The first category that he encounters in his
anatomical probing is use-value:

Indicating the evolving socio-historical character of needs, he explains: ‘To
discover the different sides of things and ... the manifold modes of using
them are historical acts’, but whatever its specific qualities, however, ‘a thing’s
usefulness makes it into a use-value’. Crucial, though left unexplained here,
is the implied link between use-value and systems of needs that determines
what constitutes use-value. To appreciate the significance of this link, it is
necessary to consider one of Marx’s notes to himself in the Grundrisse where
he asks: ‘These questions of the system of needs and the system of labours –
where are they to be treated? Having linked systems of use-value-producing
concrete labour to specific systems of needs, Marx had to determine how and
where these (transhistorically abstract) categories fit into the analysis of the
capitalist mode of production. In Capital, Marx seems to have ignored this
reminder; and the lack of sustained discussion of use-value defined by a
system of needs resulted in the irony that he suffered the same charge from
the German historical economists, Adolph Wagner and Karl Knies, that he
himself had levied against Smith and Ricardo, namely, that he dismissed use-
value or treated it only ‘exoterically’, as a ‘simple prerequisite’. Wagner, for
example, accused him of wanting ‘to remove use-value from science’.

Marx’s response was the collection of vitriolic, but important comments
titled ‘Randglossen zu Adolph Wagners “Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie”’,

13 Marx 1971, p. 49.
14 Marx 1971, p. 50.
16 See Marx 1993, p. 540.
which reiterate the position espoused in the *Grundrisse*. ‘Only a *vir obscurus*,’ Marx ranted, ‘who did not understand a word of *Capital* can conclude... that use-value played no role.’\(^{18}\) He explained that the production of use-values, themselves defined by a given system of needs, is a transhistorical constant, but its historically specific role, and, accordingly, its place in the analysis, varies according to the mode of production.\(^{19}\) In modes of production geared to immediate consumption, the production of use-values is of crucial economic and analytical import (as in classical Greece, where *oikonomia* was essentially ‘home economics’, the law or management of the household). In commodity-producing economies, however, in which exchange must precede consumption, use-value is reduced to being only a prerequisite of commodity exchange, and is replaced by exchange-value as the determinant of economic form [*ökonomische Formbestimmung*]. But, as Marx lectured Wagner: ‘neither “Value” nor “exchange-value” is [the] subject [of *Capital*], but the commodity’,\(^{20}\) which, of course, consists of both use-value and exchange-value. Thus, though the role of use-value is less central and less visible than that of exchange-value, and could, as Marx explained to Wagner, be discussed ‘in a few lines’,\(^{21}\) it is no less essential.

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\(^{19}\) Bryceson 1983, correctly insists that use-value is key to understanding non-capitalist modes of production. But she argues that Marx’s ‘ignorance or Victorian prejudices’ led him to define production in pre-commodity producing societies as ‘natural’ (Bryceson 1983, p. 48) rather than ‘social’ (Bryceson 1983, p. 30), which caused him to relegate labour in ‘natural economies’ (Bryceson 1983, p. 53) to the biological level of ‘innate responses to the particular natural habitats being occupied’ (Bryceson 1983, p. 31), thus implying that the behaviour of members of such societies is ‘instinctual’ and subject to ‘biological determinism’ (ibid.). First of all, in his most sustained theoretical reflection on ‘Pre-Capitalist Forms of Production’ in the *Grundrisse*, Marx does not use the term ‘natural economy’. He speaks of ‘naturwüchsige Gemeinwesen’ – a difficult term to translate literally, but which might best be rendered as ‘organic communities’. By this he does not mean that production and exchange are instinctually or biologically determined, but rather that they are structured around personal relations, not market relations. But, aside from this translation problem, the more important issue is that the opposition of ‘natural’ and ‘social’ economies is a false dichotomy. For Marx, the human animal is ‘a social animal’ (Marx 1971, p. 346), and all human production is ‘social’ in Bryceson’s sense – i.e. neither instinctual nor biologically determined. When Marx states that use-value expresses no social relations, this does not mean that use-value is natural and not social, nor that it plays no economic role; it simply means that the place of use-value in the analysis of a given mode of production depends on how that mode of production produces and distributes use-values. The production of exchange-value is Marx’s definition, not of a ‘social economy’, but of the capitalist mode of social production.


Contained too in ‘those few lines’ is the analytical locus of the ‘system of needs’ that Marx sought in the *Grundrisse*, but seemingly had never found. Every society has a system of needs that determines the character of use-values. Accordingly, the ‘system of needs’ is a transhistorical category. Yet every system of needs is historically specific, consisting always of a fundamental biological dimension whose specific form will vary according to the mode of production and cultural values. Though transhistorical, the category ‘system of needs’ is also necessarily abstract. For Marx’s purposes in *Capital*, it is not necessary to determine the specific content of the system of needs nor of use-values. It is, however, crucial to recognise that there is a necessary relation between the system of needs and the use-values it defines. And because the determination of what constitutes a use-value is always already embedded in a socioculturally specific system of needs, the system of needs is incorporated into the category of use-value itself. Marx realised, in short, that, for the analysis of the capitalist mode of production (as opposed to bourgeois societies in their sociocultural diversity), he did not have to find a specific place for the system of needs, since it enters into the analysis of a given economic form through the concept of use-value. Thus, although in *Capital* Marx only alluded to the system of needs and only devoted ‘a few lines’ to use-value, those allusions and lines are strategic, for they ground the historically specific analysis of the capitalist mode of production in transhistorical categories derived from the materialist conception of history. Concentrated though virtually invisible in the category of use-value, ‘the body of the commodity [*Warenkörper*],’ is always a historically specific system of needs rooted in human corporeality and modified by and supplemented with socioculturally defined wants. As a transhistorical constant (and despite astonishing sociocultural variation in its specific content), use-value stands both inside and outside the capitalist mode of production and the horizon of political economy.

Corresponding to its position both inside and outside of the capitalist mode of production, the category of use-value plays a dual role in its brief but essential appearance in *Capital*. On the one hand, it functions as a link to the materialist conception of history, and thus as a means of rooting the critique of capitalism in ‘the first fact to be established for a materialist conception of history’ – that is, in ‘human corporeal organisation’. On the other hand, use-value is crucial to the construction and presentation [*Darstellung*] of the

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22 Marx 1971, pp. 56, 57.
categories in *Capital*. In order fully to appreciate the specific category of use-value and the importance of transhistorically abstract categories more generally, it is worth considering in some detail both aspects of this dual role.

In explaining the process whereby use-value is reduced to the status of a ‘simple prerequisite’, a mere ‘material bearer’, of exchange-value, Marx states that, in a system of commodity production and exchange, the ‘corporeal characteristics’, ‘the bodies’, of commodities ‘are only to be considered insofar as these make them useful, that is, turn them into use-values’. These corporeal references are not merely metaphorical. Rather, they signify the concrete, qualitative characteristics of use-values that satisfy particular and concrete needs and wants; and they are the categorial means through which Marx deciphers the mystification that results as exchange-value supplants use-value as the determinant of economic form. Though the commodity’s corporeality is a necessary prerequisite for production in general, it is, for the system of commodity exchange, and as long as the bodies of commodities being exchanged differ qualitatively, only a ‘simple prerequisite’. Because of this qualitative difference, use-value cannot serve as the common measure enabling exchange. The key, therefore, to understanding the capitalist economic form is to determine how it effects the reduction of the qualitative differences of use-values to mere quantitative differences. The dissolving agent in this process, and as such the determinant of economic form, is, of course, the other half of the commodity’s ‘double character’ – exchange-value. But the dissolution of the qualitative differences in products *qua* commodities is also the disembodiment of the concrete corporeality of the commodity into the ideality of exchange-value.

In the *Critique*, Marx had already spoken of the ‘double-existence’ of commodities: their ‘real’ existence as use-values and their ‘ideal’ existence as exchange-values. This use of ‘ideal’ in reference to exchange-value is not to be understood as merely ‘imagined’. Rather, the ideality of exchange-value and of that which represents it, money, is not merely ‘a symbol, as little as the existence of the use-value of a commodity is a symbol’. Accordingly, the inversion occurring in commodity exchange that disembodies use-value and that veils social relations in the ideality of exchange-value is ‘not an imagined,
but a prosaic, real mystification’. Though ‘ideal’ vis-à-vis the corporeality of the commodity, the ideality of exchange-value is a ‘real’ product of the social relations of commodity production and exchange, and it produces a ‘real’ mystification, that is: the illusion that exchange-value, the socially produced ideality and essence of an object *qua* commodity, is a natural attribute of things themselves and that social relations among people are natural effects of the relations among things. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx formulates this even more powerfully: ‘in money as the incarnation of pure exchange-value, the memory of use-value is extinguished’. Starting, then, from use-value as a necessary prerequisite of production, Marx traces the inversion that dissolves the materiality of use-value, the body of the commodity, and enables money to become the ‘incarnation’ of the ideality that is exchange-value. With even the memory of the material extinguished, the ‘ideal’ attains the status of the ‘real’. Because, however, Marx started with the dual character of the commodity, he was able both to expose capital’s reduction of the commodity’s corporeality, use-value, to the status of a ‘simple prerequisite’ and to explain why the category ‘use-value’ appears in political economy only as an extinguished memory.

In *Capital*, however, use-value does not disappear as an extinguished memory, but plays rather a key role in the dialectical presentation of the categories – the other half of its dual role. Having deployed the category of use-value as the bridge from historical-materialist theory to the critique of political economy,

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28 As if to emphasise the point that exchange-value is a socially produced, idealist dissolution of the corporeality of use-values and of the material needs they should satisfy, Marx distanced himself, both in *Capital* and in his reply to Wagner, from the category of use-value. Though he adopted the term from the political economists, he understood it differently as a use-object. After explaining in *Capital* that ‘the value of a commodity is independently expressed through its representation as “exchange-value”’, he concluded that the ‘loose manner’ characteristic of his initial discussion of use-value was, ‘strictly speaking, false’ (Marx 1971, p. 75). Correcting himself, he wrote: ‘The commodity is use-value or use object [*Gebrauchsgegenstand*] and “value” [and] it presents itself as the double that it is as soon as its value possesses its own form of appearance that differs for its natural form’ (in Marx, 1971, p. 75, my emphasis). And, as he later explained to Wagner, the only thing that use-value has ‘in common’ with exchange-value is that ‘value’ appears in the name (Marx 1973, p. 369). Offering a practical excuse for his conceptual laxity, he decided that ‘if one knows this, then this manner of speaking does no harm, but serves as an abbreviation’ (Marx 1971, p. 75). This justification is not quite true, since it was precisely this abbreviation that enabled Jean Baudrillard to challenge Marx’s use of use-value – but only by ignoring completely Marx’s semantic qualifications and by engaging in dogmatic nominalism (see below).
Marx then paid it historical-materialist tribute by positing it as the initial category, the necessary first step, in the presentation of the categories. As the initial category, use-value becomes superseded in the ensuing unfolding of the categories. Nevertheless, its presence continues to be felt as it is incorporated in the category of concrete labour. Impatiently lecturing Wagner, Marx explained that his own analysis of the commodity ‘did not remain stuck in the dual manner in which it presents itself, but immediately proceeded to show that in this double being of the commodity the double character of labour also presents itself’.  

As one of the two necessary moments of the commodity, use-value provides the basis for Marx’s further discovery of the dual character of the labour congealed in the commodity – a discovery he described as ‘the focal point around which the understanding of political economy revolves’. Just as the exchange of a product as commodity resulted in the idealist dissolution of its material physiognomy in and by the spectre of exchange-value, so too does commodity-producing labour undergo a similar process: ‘labour, insofar as it is expressed in value, no longer possesses the same characteristics that it had as the producer of use-values’. To illuminate this metamorphosis, Marx first defines ‘concrete labour’. Labour whose product is a use-value that satisfies ‘needs of whatever kind’ is concrete useful labour. Recalling his comment that it is a matter of indifference whether the locus of these needs is the stomach or the imagination, it is apparent that his notion of concrete labour is not limited to producing material goods to satisfy biological needs; rather, the kinds of concrete labour are as diverse as the variety of needs that can be satisfied through them. Each form of concrete labour is ‘a specific kind of productive activity ... the nature of which is determined by its purpose, mode of operation, object, means, and goal’; and every form of concrete labour demands a specific set of corporeal skills, capacities, and various forms of dexterity in order to produce different use-values. Concrete labour is, in short, the qualitative measure of labour based on the specific bodily instruments, capacities and dexterity employed in producing the ‘body’ of a commodity (or, for that matter, of any product).

In addition to its qualitative measure, commodity-producing labour also has a quantitative measure:
If one neglects the specificity of productive activity and thus the useful character of labour, what remains of it is that it is an expenditure of human labour-power. Tailoring and weaving, though qualitatively different productive activities, are both the productive expenditure of human mind, muscle, nerve, hand, etc, and in this sense they are both human labour.\footnote{Marx 1971, p. 58.}

This quantitative measure makes possible the determination of ‘the value of the commodity’ that ‘presents human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human labour in general’.\footnote{Marx 1971, p. 59.} From this – that is, capital’s – viewpoint, the specific character, or use-value, of concrete labour is a matter of indifference, a ‘simple prerequisite’. It is, rather, the quantitatively measurable aspect of labour, the temporal duration of energy expenditure, that allows commodities to be compared as the prerequisite of their exchange. Commodity exchange thus effects a second disembodying inversion: just as the concrete qualities that define the use-value of a product are disembodied by their dissolution into exchange-value, so too are the specific corporeal qualities of concrete labour dissolved into the single ‘quality’ of abstract labour.

In summarising the qualitative and quantitative determinations of commodity-producing labour, Marx concluded:

\begin{quote}
All labour is on the one hand the expenditure of human labour-power in the physiological sense, and in this characteristic as equal, or abstract, human labour, it forms the value of the commodity. All labour is on the other hand the expenditure of human labour-power in a specific, goal-oriented form, and in this characteristic of concrete useful labour, it produces use-values.\footnote{Marx 1971, p. 61.}
\end{quote}

In re-emphasising the qualitative dimension of labour as the producer of use-values, this passage makes clear that, and how, the category of use-value continues to function as an integral part of the dialectical analysis: it makes possible the delineation of the dual character of labour; and this, in turn, makes possible the subsequent exposure of the extraction of surplus-value from wage-labourers whose contract is based exclusively on the abstract, temporal dimension of labour-power, and for which the concrete capacities or use-value of the commodity labour-power have also been reduced to ‘simple prerequisites’. Marx’s derivation of the dual character of labour from the dual character of the commodity, then, enabled him to delineate the historical...
specificity of the capitalist mode of production and to explain the mystification that occurs in commodity production and exchange.

This is the secret of the concluding section of the initial chapter in which Marx divulged the ‘secret’ of the fetish character of the commodity. To do so, he reiterated the decisive importance of the dual character of the commodity and exposed the categorial consequences of the political economists’ neglect of use-value. By failing to grasp the full import of the dual character of the commodity and of commodity-producing labour, political economists universalised both the historically specific value-form of the commodity, and of the abstract labour that is its quantitative measure, into inherent attributes of all products of labour, regardless of social form – that is, they elevated historically specific categories into transhistorically ontological ones. To find an analogy for such ‘phantasmagorical’ projections, Marx borrowed from ‘the misty regions of the religious world’ the term ‘fetishism’ to portray how commodity exchange ‘transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyph’. Having fled to the realm of religion for the fetish analogy, Marx’s next flight was ‘to other forms of production’ in search of contrasts to commodity production. He found, not surprisingly, that, despite variations of its particular role within different socio-economic forms, the production of use-values is a transhistorical constant, and thus that use-value is a necessary category for any historical-materialist analysis of socio-economic form. The fetishism section thus recapitulates the anatomical analysis of the dual character of the commodity and the dissolution of use-value by exchange-value – now, however, not within the historically specific constellation of capital, but on a more transhistorical level. Its comparisons and contrasts of the historically diverse modes of production, all of which produce use-values, demonstrate that the key to deciphering that social hieroglyph, the commodity, is first to understand the transhistorical character of use-value and then to establish the conditions of use-value production within a given social form.

In order to decipher capitalist social hieroglyphics, then, Marx fashioned his own ‘Rosetta Stone’ by constructing a categorial constellation that joined transhistorically abstract categories derived from the materialist conception of history to historically specific categories derived from the capitalist mode of production. Working in two dimensions or ‘languages’ (see below), he constructed the conceptual scaffolding on the basis of his materialist conception

37 See Marx 1971, pp. 86, 88.
These are the dimensions of ‘human corporeal organisation’ that are essential to a materialist conception of history and to which Marx refers consistently, though unsystematically, throughout his works. In addition to the system of needs, see the mention of bodily instruments, capacities and dexterities in the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993, p. 7) and in the discussion of ‘labour in general’ in *Capital* (Marx 1971, pp. 192ff).
way of conclusion, and, in doing so, I shall be able to expose more fully the corporeal roots of Marx’s critical categories.

Postone’s binary opposition of transhistorically ontoological versus historically specific categories digs an unbridgeable methodological abyss between historical theory and social critique. When Marx is seen as situated on the social theorist side of this abyss, then the methodological place-value of Capital will be overestimated as the culmination of his development and the concentration in one work of his ‘mature’ critical theory. Though such an overestimation does not prevent Postone from reconstructing Marx’s analysis of the historical specificity of capitalism, it can, however, also be wielded as a theoretical bludgeon. On the basis of such an exaggeration Jean Baudrillard, for example, mounted his fundamental categorial challenge to Marx’s materialist conception of history. Like Postone, Baudrillard treated Capital as the quintessential Marx, but whereas Postone focused on its historical specificity, Baudrillard read it as a transhistorical, ontological statement. A brief critical look at Baudrillard’s argument against the background of the foregoing analysis will reinforce my claim about the indispensable role of transhistorically abstract categories for historical-materialist analysis. And, by illuminating with a different vocabulary the dual character and corporeal dimensions of Marx’s categories, it will also show that the semiotics of Marx’s project are much more complex and rich than Baudrillard and other purely textual critics imagine.

In his Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, Baudrillard dispensed with any methodological consideration beyond Capital, believing that the interrogation of its textual logic alone would suffice to understand and evaluate Marx’s project. Forcing the structural pattern of Saussure’s sign onto Marx’s analysis of value, Baudrillard constructed the correlation:

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\text{Exchange-value} = \frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Use-value}} = \frac{\text{Signified}}{\text{Signified}^{39}}
\]

Having established this correlation, he could then insist that ‘use-value and signified do not have the same weight as exchange-value and signifier respectively’. In this ‘functional but hierarchical bipolarity, . . . absolute pre-eminence redounds to exchange-value and the signifier. Use-value and needs are only an effect of exchange-value’; use-value creates the illusion of an

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'objective reality' beyond exchange-value, and thus functions as an 'alibi' that is 'the crown and scepter of political economy.... [P]roduced by the system of exchange-value as its own ideology, use-value cannot be posited as an alternative to exchange-value', nor as the basis for a revolutionary 'liberation of needs'.40 In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard tightened the conceptual screws, concluding that Marx was so entangled in the logic of exchange-value that he universalised the categories of political economy into anthropological constants; he thus remained entrapped in the productivist horizon of bourgeois anthropology and viewed nature only as 'a dominated essence'.41

In his semiotic interrogation, Baudrillard got what he wanted, but only by twisting Saussure's theory as well as Marx's. Having imprisoned Marx's project within a single text, he (mis)read *Capital* as complete and completely self-contained. And the semiotic myopia resulting from his haste forcibly to mould the anatomy of the commodity by the structure of the sign caused him to overlook the obvious fact that both 'use-value' and 'exchange-value', are signs in their own right. Moreover, he does violence to Saussure's scheme by confusing the relation between the signifier and signified with that between the sign and referent. It is therefore worth re-charting both use-value and exchange-value as signs and according to the sign-referent structure in order to gain a corporeally rich appreciation of historical-materialist semiotics. Crucial to understanding the following schematic rendering is to remember that, for Saussure, the signifier is a 'sound image' and the signified 'the idea' called to mind by that sound image, while the sign consists of these two components and signifies a 'referent'; and, for Marx, the signs 'use-value' and 'exchange-value' are embedded within two different 'language systems'

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41 Baudrillard 1975, p. 55. Baudrillard, and several like-minded thinkers, wrongly insist that Marx's notion of use-value is without limits, treating nature as an object of consumption and thus sanctioning a destructive productivism. But – and this would be trivial were it not systematically ignored in historical and social theory – the category of use-value is simply a means of recognizing the obvious fact that humans are dependent on nature, that there is no human being without 'using' nature. To deny use-value or to insist, as does Baudrillard, that the concept of use-value does not escape the horizon of political economy is to deny the materiality of the world and the corporeality of *Homo sapiens*. To reduce the concept of use-value to a purely utilitarian attitude toward nature is to accept the capitalist construction of nature as raw material to be exploited for profit, and to overlook Marx's critique of capital's destructive utilitarianism. (And, given Marx's insistence that nature is our 'extended body', then such destructive productivism is tantamount to suicide.)
The transhistorical semiotics of human corporeality (abstractly conceived)

Signifier (Sound Image): ‘use-value’

Sign: Use-Value

Signified (Idea): qualitative value measured according to the qualities of needs

Referent: Product
(Produced by concrete labour and itself deeply rooted in a specific system of needs, ‘whether they spring from the stomach or the imagination’, – i.e. corporeally rooted and modified by, and supplemented with, socio-culturally defined wants)

The historically specific semiotics of capital

Signifier (Sound Image): ‘exchange-value’

Sign: Exchange-Value


Referent: Commodity
(Whose body, use-value, is a ‘simple prerequisite’)

– the transhistorical ‘language’ of human corporeality, abstractly conceived, and the historically specific ‘language’ of capital.

The differentiation of the two ‘language systems’ within which Marx operates makes clear that use-value and needs are not, as Baudrillard argues, just effects of exchange-value. Within the body’s language, use-values and needs, despite astonishing variety in their specific content, are concrete, transhistorical, and universal attributes of Homo sapiens. This dual language system enabled Marx to delineate the historical specificity of capitalist social form, to explain how capital, by privileging exchange-value, ‘decentres’ use-values and therewith the system of needs and embodied human beings, and to explain how it reduces use-values and needs to ‘simple prerequisites’ or, as Baudrillard would have it, ‘effects’ of exchange-value. Baudrillard’s analysis attributes to Marx the semiotics of capital. But Marx’s historical-materialist semiotics deconstructed the logic of capital; the sign ‘use-value’ enabled Marx to decentre
exchange-value from the privileged transhistorical (and ontological) position accorded it by political economy.

Understanding Marx’s ‘bilingual’ categorial pool also helps clarify how he used the transhistorically abstract dimension of such categories as labour and material wealth in order to establish the normative criteria for the critique of capitalist exploitation and immiseration. As the above sketch indicates, to define those categories only in historically specific terms is to translate them into the language of capital. Thus caught within the horizon of capitalism, the categories would lack the normative power to criticise economic exploitation and the corporeal depth crucial to defining both material wealth and immiseration. Though these matter are worthy of sustained discussion, here I shall only be able to indicate a direction for that discussion.

The corporeal roots of the categories use-value and concrete labour continue to serve a crucial function throughout Capital as the basis for a partial but effective set of normative criteria for the critique of capitalist social form. Though not mentioned by name, their normative value saturates the lengthy chapters on absolute and relative surplus-value. In explaining absolute surplus-value (the quantity of surplus labour time, the remainder when necessary labour time is subtracted from the length of the working day), Marx exposed how capital effects a ‘metamorphosis’ in wage-labouring human beings by reducing them to working bodies, ‘beast[s] of labour’ whose time away from work is limited only by human physiology, the minimum socially acceptable amount of leisure, and by successes in worker opposition. In explaining relative surplus-value (the increase of output per given quantity of time), he exposed how the need to maximise the instrumental efficiency of the labour process results in the design of jobs and technology that are violent attacks on workers’ bodies. In discussing the most effective enhancement of the organisation of work, for example, the intensification of the division of labour, Marx cited David Urquhart and Adam Smith depicting the increasingly efficient division of labour as ‘the assassination of a people’, and as making people ‘as stupid and ignorant as is possible for a human creature’; Marx himself described in excruciating detail how the capitalist labour-process deforms workers’ multi-dimensional bodily instruments, capacities, and talents, reducing them to little more than hands serving, and conforming to the rhythm

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42 Marx 1979, p. 97.
of, machines and resulting in the ‘crippling of mind and body’. Comparing capital’s constitution of labour to ‘butchering a whole animal for the sake of its hide’, to reducing the worker to ‘a mere fragment of his own body’, to a ‘hand’, he exposed the capitalist labour-process as a painful metonymic reduction performed directly on the bodies of workers.

This same logic also permeates ‘the entire modern science’ of technology – ‘the most solid form of wealth’ – and its products – ‘objectified knowledge-power [vergegenständlichte Wissenskraft]’. These positive formulations are often taken to imply a neutral view of science whose technological products need only be liberated from capitalist relations of production. But Marx insisted that the historically specific telos defining the nature of capitalist knowledge-power, and driving its accumulation, is the need to maximise technological efficiency, effected by ‘observ[ing] each production process in and for itself and resolv[ing] it into its constituent elements, without any consideration of the human hand’. Accepting as natural the socio-historical reduction of human beings to beasts of labour, the design and deployment of technology ‘under the command of capital’, turns productive forces into ‘destructive forces . . . [and] makes work itself unbearable’. Marx depicted the capitalist labour process and the technological science it spawns as the forced application of the quantitative logic of exchange-value and abstract labour onto human quality, onto concrete labour. In so doing, he exposed how capital inscribes its own exploitative logic on workers’ bodies with all the instrumentally rational precision of the torture machine in Kafka’s Penal Colony. With respect to the capitalist constitution of labour, then, and this is what Postone reconstructs so well, Marx’s analysis goes far beyond traditional Marxism’s focus only on emancipating the labourer. By tracing the exploitation of labour to its particularly capitalist constitution, Marx and Postone show that the emancipation of labour cannot be just a matter of replacing capitalist with communist bosses, but, rather, that it must be an emancipatory reconstitution of labour, a fundamental restructuring of work, and a redesigning of technology and its purpose.

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45 Marx 1971, pp. 381–2.
46 Marx 1971, p. 510.
49 Marx 1971, p. 510.
50 Marx 1971, p. 341.
‘Material wealth’ should likewise be constructed as a corporeally rooted, transhistorically abstract category and should provide the means to mount a critique of the capitalist production not only of value, but also of wealth. But this is where Postone’s failure fully to draw the methodological conclusions of his own analytical practice puts him on the verge of falling into the same trap that caught traditional Marxism. He correctly insists that ‘the difference between wealth [use-values] and [exchange] value is central to the Marxian critique of capitalism’ - which is another way of saying that the category of material wealth stands within, but also outside, pointing beyond, the capitalist production of value. With value designated as a specifically capitalist category, however, its opposite, material wealth, must – according to Postone’s categorial either/or – be a transcendental, ontological category. But, as such, material wealth would have to encompass all goods produced, once they are liberated from the value-form – even the high-priced, low-quality junk that floods department stores, especially in the holiday seasons. As such, that ‘most solid form of wealth’, science, would have to be considered neutral. The jobs and technology required to produce an ever-increasing quantity of material wealth must be fine as they are, needing only liberation from the capitalist valorisation process; and no brakes need be applied to the destructive productivism of ‘modern’ technology. When delineated as a transhistorically ontological category, in short, ‘real’ material wealth differs from capitalist wealth only in form, but not in content – the same products, just not exchanged as commodities.

These categorial consequences are diametrically opposed to Postone’s intention and his analytical practice. But, because his methodological discussion conflates ‘transhistorical’ with ‘ontological’ and establishes a categorial binary with no alternatives in between, he puts himself in a theoretical bind. Though his critique of capital’s exploitative constitution of labour must, and does, rely on (transhistorical and abstractly conceived, but nevertheless) normative notions of labour and material wealth, his own categorial binary prevents him from properly naming what he does. In his case against traditional Marxism, Postone showed that the transhistorically ontological deployment of categories robs them of much of their critical potential. But, by failing to acknowledge the transhistorical, albeit abstract, dimension of the categories of labour and material wealth, Postone inadvertently prevents them from

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51 Postone 1993, p. 194.
fully realising that critical potential. An analysis trapped in the historically specific cannot transcend the horizon of the capitalist valorisation process; nor can it treat labour and material wealth other than as effects of that process, and defined not according to a concrete system of embodied human needs, but according to a economic system of ‘ideal’ needs, that is what the economy needs to grow and prosper. The historically specific deployment of ‘material wealth’ is essential to the critique of the capitalist value-form, but its transhistorical(ly) abstract dimension provides a critical foundation for the development of concrete alternatives to the oppressive and destructive character of the jobs and technology that cripple minds and bodies and destroy the environment while producing ‘material wealth’, and to the often destructive character of capitalist ‘material wealth’ itself.

Precisely because he started from the corporeal roots of use-objects and the systems of needs that define their use, and because he incorporated those roots in the form of transcendentally abstract categories into his analysis of capital, Marx was able to transcend the horizon of political economy, expose the exploitative logic of the capitalist mode of production, and to provide, by way of contrast, concrete glimpses of labour and material wealth, science and technology, beyond capital. These corporeally based categories enabled him to establish the link between the process of disembodiment that the product of labour must undergo in order to emerge as a commodity and the process of disembodiment that concrete labour must undergo when engaged via the wage-labour contract as commodity-producing abstract labour. In so doing, he also showed that the capitalist constitution of labour, reinforced by technology designed and deployed to maximise surplus-value, is a systematic and painful attack on the vulnerable, but resilient minds and bodies of workers. By showing, through the transhistorical (transhistorically abstract) dimension of his categories, that labour and material wealth can be constituted other than in capitalist fashion, Marx was able to show how capitalism turns labour into torture and defines material wealth only in the quantitative terms of profit.

The telos of an emancipatory constitution of labour, in contrast, must be precisely the system of qualitative human needs and wants, and this necessarily entails a fundamental rethinking of the concept of material wealth. The normative basis for the critique of the exploitation and immiseration of labour is the question: does a given form of labour – including the design of jobs and the design and deployment of technology – result in the many-sided
cultivation, or in the deformation, of bodily capacities and talents? And a similarly normative question must be answered in the determination of what constitutes material wealth: does it satisfy and cultivate, or deform, embodied needs and wants? In this way, then, grasping Marx’s transhistorically abstract categories by their corporeal roots helps both to expose the corporeal depths of his concept of immiseration and to glimpse the corporeal horizon of his vision of freedom.

References

Peter Hudis

The Death of the Death of the Subject

The conversion of the subject into the predicate, and the predicate into the subject, the exchange of that which is determined for that which is determined is always the most immediate revolution.  

The movement born from the protest against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999 has placed new importance on reconstituting a Marxian critique of oppression and alienation that goes beyond targeting the personifications of capital. The way in which tens of thousands of workers, students, feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, and Third World activists came together in Seattle and at other protests since then reflects new opposition to capital’s incessant drive for self-expansion and universality. This is not to say that everyone in this emerging movement has reached a level of self-understanding adequate to the implications posed by the protests. Many still define the problem as one that hinges on ‘corporate greed’, private ownership, or the lack of democratic control of multinationals by the nation-state. That the problem lies deeper, in

the very nature of capital as a social relation, is by no means self-evident. Yet the depth and breadth of the protests unleashed by Seattle indicates that a movement has emerged with the potential to challenge capital’s very existence as the prevailing form of social mediation.

Given this situation, a work that, firstly, targets capital as an abstract form of domination rooted in value-creating labour; that, secondly, criticises those who focus instead on private property, unequal forms of distribution, and the ‘anarchy of the market’; and that, finally, presents Marx’s work as a critique of value-producing labour rather than as a call to ‘realise’ it through planning, such a book, should have much to say to today. Yet Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination* is not simply an effort to subject ‘Traditional Marxists’ to critique for mistaking the object of Marx’s critique – value-creating labour – for the principle of the new society. Nor does its originality lie in an effort to rescue Marx’s work from such distortions (others achieved that quite some time ago). Rather, its distinctive feature is the effort to ground a critique of ‘Traditional Marxism’ in the claim that the logic of Marx’s work shows that ‘the working class is integral to capitalism rather than the embodiment of its negation’. Since this claim grounds Postone’s overall approach and argument, I will subject it to critical investigation by exploring: firstly, his critique of ‘traditional Marxism’; secondly, his effort to subsume the worker as subject in Marx’s *Capital*; and finally, his overall view of the Hegel-Marx relation.

**The role of the ‘subject’ in ‘Traditional Marxism’**

Postone centres his critique of ‘traditional Marxism’ on its advocacy of a ‘metaphysics of labor’, that is, it attacks capitalism from the standpoint of ‘labour’ instead of developing a critique of the very nature of labour in capitalism. Labour is not, Postone rightly insists, the source of all material wealth; it is the source of all value. Labour takes on this role only in capitalism, where it has a dual character, as expressed in the split between concrete and abstract labour. Through the existence of abstract labour, ‘labour’ becomes a socially-mediating activity which dominates all social relations. Abstract labour is the substance of value and hence capital. Instead of criticising the historical specificity of value-creating labour, ‘Traditional Marxism’ conflates labour and value-creating labour and posits the latter affirmatively.

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2 Postone, p. 17.
As a result, the nature of value-creating labour ceases to be the object of critique. Postone writes,

> when ‘labor’ is the standpoint of the critique, the historical level of the development of production is taken to determine the relative adequacy of those existing relations, which are interpreted in terms of the existing mode of distribution. Industrial production is not the object of the historical critique, but is posited as the ‘progressive’ social dimension that, increasingly, ‘fettered’ by private property and the market, will serve as the basis of socialist society.3

Such a standpoint can neither account for the failure of ‘Soviet-type’ societies to avoid the social problems characteristic of traditional capitalism nor explain their evolution towards ‘free-market’ systems. By mistaking the object of Marx’s critique (value-creating labour) for the principle of a new society, ‘Traditional Marxism’ finds itself unable to explain the growing structural similarity between ‘private’ capitalism and the state capitalism which called itself ‘Communism’. The matter is of extreme importance. As long as ‘Marxism’ remains identified with the social formations which ruled in Marx’s name, and so long as ‘Marxist’ analyses fail to provide a convincing explanation of their development and collapse, it is extremely unlikely that large numbers of people will find Marxian ideas important enough to be re-examined in their own right.

Postone’s effort to distinguish between a standpoint that proceeds from ‘labour’ (understood as value-creating labour) and one that proceeds from the standpoint of the critique of that labour is of crucial importance in any effort to reconstitute a genuine Marxian analysis. However, Postone burdens his analysis with the argument that, by viewing the proletariat as the subject of revolution, traditional Marxism tends to conflate ‘labour’ with value-creating labour. He writes,

> any theory that posits the proletariat or the species as Subject implies that the activity constituting the Subject is to be fulfilled rather than overcome. Hence, the activity itself cannot be seen as alienated.4

Clearly, for Postone, there is no real difference between the workers and the mode of labour in which they are employed. To affirmatively promote the one is to affirmatively promote the other. What he calls ‘Ricardian Marxism’ –

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3 Postone 1993, p. 65.
4 Postone, p. 82.
the tendency to focus on the difference between the value of labour-power and the value of the total product rather than on the ‘peculiar social character’ of value-producing labour – is seen by him as integral to viewing the proletariat as subject.

This view is very problematic. He is, of course, right that Marx did not simply ‘take over’ Ricardo’s labour theory of value. Marx showed that, while Ricardo analysed the magnitude of value, he left unexamined the kind of labour which creates value, as if it were simply a natural property of ‘labour’. In contrast, Marx considered the distinction between concrete labour (which creates use-values) and abstract labour (which creates value) as his original contribution. But the question is: why did Ricardo not conceptualise the kind of labour which creates value? What stopped him from grasping the historical specificity of value-creating labour? The answer is that his theoretical categories did not extend to the subjectivity of the labourer. Ricardo ended replacing the labourer for labour and looked at the labourer as a thing, as a commodity: even though Ricardo sensed the discrepancy between the value of labour-power and that of the total product, he never inquired into the difference between labour as commodity and labour as activity. Ricardo viewed value-creating labour transhistorically by not taking account of the subjectivity of labourers.

Marx’s critique of Hegel reveals a similar phenomenon. Hegel was surely aware of value-creating labour, writing in his *First Philosophy of Spirit*, ‘[t]he more mechanised labour becomes, the less value it has, and the more the individual must toil. . . . [T]he value of labour decreases as much as the productivity of labour increases’.5 Hegel even defined ‘labour’ as ‘absolute negativity’. As Marx saw it, Hegel stood on the basis of political economy. To Hegel, humanity’s process of objectifying itself through the process of ‘labour’ is a process of alienation and, therefore, the transcendence of alienation implies the transcendence of objectivity. This indicates that Hegel posed value-producing labour transhistorically. The question is: why did he pose labour transhistorically? Why did he ‘stand on the basis of political economy’? The answer is that the subjectivity of the labourer was out of reach for him. By focusing on ‘labour’, but not on the subjectivity of the labourer who performs that labour, Hegel failed to identify the ‘negative element’ with a corporeal subject; the ‘Subject’ remained self-consciousness (what Marx called ‘the lie of his principle’). Thus, whereas Ricardo acted as if the labourer were the

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commodity, instead of labour-power, Hegel acted as if the generative force creating value were ‘labour’, instead of a particular kind of labour. For both, labour was viewed transhistorically precisely because they kept their distance from the workers’ ‘individual subjectivity’.

The situation may appear different when we come to Marxism, for, unlike Ricardo and Hegel, ‘Traditional’ Marxists did conceive of the proletariat as a subject of revolution, but, of course, this appearance is deceptive. Postone does a fine job attacking the tendency in many Marxists – Maurice Dobb, Ronald Meek, Helmut Reichelt, Paul Sweezy, et al. – to view value-creating labour as that which ‘comes into its own’ under socialism once the ‘fetters’ of private property are overcome. He does a much poorer job demonstrating a necessary connection between their position and viewing workers as subject. Most of these ‘Traditional Marxists’ actually placed little emphasis on the subjective dimension of proletarian struggle. It could even be argued that they viewed workers mainly as objects. How else can one explain why so many of them adopted a largely uncritical attitude toward ‘actually existing socialism’, even when those régimes were pursuing policies of forced labour and totalitarian social control over the workplace? The proletariat may often enough have been heralded as force, as an objective factor that could ‘bring down capitalism’, but that did not mean the actual subjectivity of the labourer, its reason, reclaimed the attention of much ‘Traditional Marxism’ – especially insofar as it impinged on its struggles for a different kind of labour.

One figure who may seem to have been caught red-handed, as far as the connection between transhistorical views of labour and that of worker as subject is concerned, is Georg Lukács. Lukács, as Postone notes, went as far as to equate proletarian class consciousness with Hegel’s identical subject-object. He, clearly, was also trapped in a transhistorical concept of labour, as seen in his contention that, instead of being specific to capitalism, ‘socially necessary labour time’ operates under socialism as well. Yet Postone’s contention that this limitation in Lukács flows from an endorsement of the concept of worker as subject does not hold up to close scrutiny. Despite Lukács’s over-emphasis on proletarian consciousness as representing the Hegelian identity of subject-object, or perhaps because of it, he ended up subsuming proletarian subjectivity. The problem that Lukács confronted in his theory of class consciousness was how to explain the apparent gap between present-day workers’ consciousness and the goal of a future socialist society if the worker’s consciousness is identical to Hegel’s subject-object. Lukács
tried to answer this by developing his famous theory of reification. In essence, this held that capitalism reproduces itself not only through the transformation of labour-power into a commodity, but also through the commodification of thought. By applying the notion of reification of thought to the entirety of society, Lukács sought to explain the apparent gap between present-day proletarian consciousness and the idea of a socialist society. Yet this opened up an even more seemingly insoluble dilemma. For, if even our thought is reified, how are we to free ourselves? Lukács’s answer is that the party would free us, by serving as the cunning of the proletariat. Lukács’s posing of an immediate identity between proletarian consciousness and Hegel’s identical subject-object drove him to pose the party as the form of mediation needed to overcome the gap between is and ought. It would, therefore, be more correct to say that the real subject for Lukács was not the proletariat but the party. This has ramifications that extend far beyond his position, since a great many Marxists after Marx were rooted in the fetish of the party.

Postone acknowledges that Lukács’s theory of reification served as the ground for theories of one-dimensionality in the Frankfurt school. While his critique of the Frankfurt school is of interest, it hardly supports his claim that there is a necessary connection between posing workers as subject and having a transhistorical view of labour. Pollock’s and Horkheimer’s projection of transhistorical concepts of labour coincided with an explicit rejection of the proletariat as subject. A different position was suggested by the early work of Herbert Marcuse (to whom Postone refers to only in passing). In 1941, Marcuse affirmed the integrality of proletarian subjectivity and Hegel’s dialectic in his *Reason and Revolution*. He argued that the key to Hegel, and his bridge to Marx, is found in Hegel’s notion of Reason as Subject of History. This notion, Marcuse argued, is critically appropriated by Marx in his projection of the proletariat as subject of revolution. The proletariat as the ‘realisation’ of philosophy represents to Marx the embodiment of Hegelian rationality in the realm of social reality. In 1960, however, Marcuse published a new preface to *Reason and Revolution* which pointed to a decisive shift in his conception of the Hegel-Marx relation. Marcuse argued that, because ‘those social groups, which dialectic theory identified as the forces of negation, are either defeated or reconciled with the system’, the ‘subject itself is apparently a constitutive part of the object . . .’.

Marcuse 1960, p. xiv.
necessarily includes the subject’. On this basis, he concluded, ‘the notion of Reason itself is the undialectical element in Hegel’s philosophy’. This is the unstated basis of Postone’s position that proletarian subjectivity has become so integrated into the objective structure of capital that any affirmation of its subjectivity ineluctably assumes the ‘naturalness’ of value-creating labour.

Postone’s contention that ‘transhistorical’ views of labour are tied to viewing workers as subjects becomes especially problematic in light of tendencies which he does not consider, such as the humanist interpretation of Marx. Long before Postone, Marxist humanists singled out the historical specificity of value-creating labour and projected it as the distinct stamp of bourgeois society. They also attacked the tendency among ‘Traditional’ Marxists to pose private property, the market, and forms of distribution as the _pons asini_ of a postcapitalist society. Marxist humanists undertook a rigorous analysis of ‘Soviet-type societies’ as state-capitalist on the basis of the theoretical categories in Marx’s _Capital_. All of this was achieved through an intense focus on the centrality of proletarian struggles for a new kind of labour at the point of production. The critique of the historical specificity of value-creating labour and the projection of the proletariat as subject of revolt was neither a theoretical inconsistency nor a matter of opposed determinations lying side by side. The critique of value-producing labour was achieved by affirming proletarian subjectivity.

As Raya Dunayevskaya wrote in _Marxism and Freedom_, back in 1958,

So hostile was Marx to labor under capitalism, that at first he called, not for the ‘emancipation’ of labor, but for its ‘abolition’. That is why, at first, he termed man’s function not ‘labor’, but ‘self-activity’. When he changed the expression ‘abolition of labor’ to ‘emancipation of labor’, it was only because the working class showed in its revolts how it can through alienated labor achieve emancipation. Marxism is wrongly considered to be ‘a new political economy.’ In truth, it is a critique of the very foundations of political economy. . . . What Marx did that was new was to [show] what type of labor creates value and hence surplus value, and the process by which this was done. What kept others from seeing it, is that they had kept a goodly distance from the factory. They remained in the marketplace, in the sphere of circulation. . . . Marx’s primary theory is a theory of what he first called ‘alienated labor’ and then ‘abstract’ or ‘value-producing’ labor. . . . Hence,
it is more correct to call the Marxist theory of capital not a labor theory of value but a value theory of labor.\textsuperscript{8} Postone takes no notice of the humanist interpretation of Marx’s theory of value. One can argue that he need not do so, since he makes no claim to present a comprehensive discussion of the Marxian tradition. However, the presence of the humanist interpretation of Marx’s value theory poses an important conceptual problem for Postone’s position. If it is true, as he repeatedly argues, that ‘any theory that posits the proletariat or the species as subject implies that the activity constituting the subject is to be fulfilled rather than overcome’, then it follows that theories based on class struggle and proletarian subjectivity must, of necessity, display an uncritical attitude toward ‘labour’ and an emphasis on the realm of distribution and private property as the determinants in overcoming capitalism. The existence of even a single body of thought which affirms proletarian subjectivity and class struggle without implying these characteristics of ‘Traditional Marxism’ calls into question Postone’s central premise, namely, ‘[T]he idea that the proletariat embodies a possible post-capitalist form of social life only makes sense, if capitalism is defined essentially in terms of private ownership of the means of production’.\textsuperscript{9}

This is not to deny that many have fallen into a transhistorical concept of labour, with all the deleterious characteristics cited by Postone, by holding to a certain notion of ‘class struggle’. As Arjun Appadurai said of anarcho-syndicalism:

\begin{quote}
The syndicalists accept the general socialist position that society is divided into two classes, the capitalist and the proletariat, whose claims are irreconcilable; that the modern state is a class state dominated by the few capitalists; that the institution of private capital is the root of all social evils and that the only remedy for them is to substitute collective capital in place of private capital.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

Clearly, in this conception, the ‘class struggle’ involves, not the negation of the value-form of mediation, but, rather, its realisation through the creation of ‘collective capital’. But it is not the concept of class struggle that is at issue here as much as a limited and narrow interpretation of it. The ‘anarcho-

\textsuperscript{8} Dunayevskaya 2000, pp. 61, 106, 138.
\textsuperscript{9} Postone 1993, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{10} Appadurai 1978, p. 124.
syndicalist’ concept of ‘class struggle’ as articulated by Appadurai is very far from the Marxian notion of class struggle. For Marx, the struggle of the proletariat does not simply involve a struggle over the distribution of value. It involves a struggle over the very existence of value.

By entering the factory, conceptually speaking, instead of just discussing ‘labour’ as a general social characteristic, Marx discerned a ‘silent civil war’ at the point of production, hinging on the alienation inherent in the very activity of labouring. What is alienated at the point of production is neither a pre-existing substance nor an abstract essence. What is alienated from me at the point of production is my capacity for conscious, purposeful activity. I am reduced to a cog in the machine, and I resist that. I become chained to the drive of capital for self-expansion. Human relations take on the form of relations between things because that is what they really are. My dissatisfaction with that situation, the resistance which I put up to it, is the one thing I can do to prove I am not totally absorbed into the object. I want freedom, not to revert to some pre-existing essence, but to learn how to appropriate the many social developments formed on the basis of my alienated activity. Yes, ‘overcoming alienation’, in other words, ‘entails the historical Subject’s realization of itself’,11 the realisation of my human capacities to be free, to be a subject, to be self-directed, rather than to be a mere means for the self-expansion of value. This does not imply that I want to posit my ‘labour’ as the principle of a new society. On the contrary, I want to get rid of it altogether. I want to be what I can become, a conscious, purposeful being at work, but by no means limited to work. I want it to determine all my human relationships, be it in working or loving, studying or playing. I demand that on the basis of who I am as a conscious, purposeful, human being.

This, it seems to me, is the focal point of ‘class struggle’ in the Marxian concept. It has often been passed over. The problem goes back to the formation of Marxism as an organised movement. Despite their voluble rhetoric about ‘class struggle’, the Marxists of the Second International based their outlook on the contrast between the ‘anarchy’ of the market and centralised planning. They paid scant attention to Marx’s point, articulated in his critique of Proudhon, that, if the ‘order’ of the factory were extended to the whole of society, there would be complete totalitarianism.12 Like the classical political economists, they treated the subjectivity of the worker as of little or no account,

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12 Marx 1975, p. 295.
transforming the dialectics of revolution into immutable objective ‘laws’ of history. By the time the Russian Revolution fell under the sway of Stalin, this iron-clad objectivism took on a new lease on life. The contrast of the ‘anarchy’ of the market and centralised planning became a veritable fetish. The disregard of the subjectivity of the labourer became reflected not just in the reproduction of the worst features of alienated labour, but in the overarching fetish that ‘The Party’ represents the ‘knowing’ of the proletariat. The move away from a dialectic of human subjectivity became the defining feature of post-Marx Marxism, taking in even those who fought Stalinism on a political level, such as Trotsky.

Far from placing too much emphasis on proletarian subjectivity, the problem of post-Marx Marxism, it seems to me, is that has undertheorised it. If Marxists had not so downplayed the subjective dimension, they would have been able to see that, while the class struggle initially focuses on the proceeds of labour, it ultimately centres on the very kind of labour the worker is forced to perform. Grasping that would also have placed Marxists in a better position to conceptualise the relation between class struggles and struggles against reified human relations by other social forces, such as women, youth and national minorities. Though Postone thinks his view that ‘the proletariat is an object and appendage of capital’ posits a critique of ‘Traditional Marxism’, we would have to conclude, on the contrary, that it reproduces some of the worst features of it.

**The presence of the subject in Marx’s Capital**

Any effort to properly evaluate Postone’s book needs to address his interpretation of Marx’s ‘mature’ theory, since that is its focus. Though it is not possible to provide a full treatment of this here, I will single out some aspects of Marx’s *Capital* which raise grounds for a very different interpretation from that offered by Postone.

First, Postone is correct to criticise those who view value-creating labour ‘transhistorically’. But his critique of ‘transhistorical’ concepts of labour is somewhat confusing, because the ‘mature’ Marx did have a ‘transhistorical’ view of labour, though it was not the same as that which Postone criticises...
in ‘Traditional’ Marxism. Marx discussed this in Capital: ‘labour is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of every form of that existence, or rather is common to all forms of society in which human beings live’.\(^{15}\)

Though Postone indirectly refers to this passage several times, he never quotes it. If he had, it would be clear to the reader that there are two different, opposed senses in which labour is ‘transhistorical’. One is the sense in which Marx discussed it above, where labour is ‘the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence’. The other is the false hypostatisation of value-creating labour as ‘transhistorical’, which is quite different from the above. By failing to clearly pose the relation between these two, distinct senses in which labour is ‘transhistorical’, Postone counterposes Marx’s Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 to Capital. Postone alleges the former suffered from a ‘transhistorical’ concept of labour along the lines of ‘Traditional’ Marxism. It is true that, in 1844, Marx had not yet created his concept of the two-fold nature of labour. In some places, he used the word ‘labour’ to refer to labour as conscious, purposeful activity, while, in other places, he used the same word to refer to alienated, value-producing labour. It is also true that, in 1844, Marx sometimes speaks of ‘labour’ as that which has existed throughout human history. But that does not mean that he projects a ‘transhistorical’ concept of value-producing labour. Rather, the 1844 Manuscripts contain the same ‘transhistorical’ concept of labour as found in Capital.

More is at issue here than a mere external relation between texts. A proper understanding of the two, distinct senses of labour as ‘transhistorical’ is crucial for an adequate understanding of the relation between the labour process and the valorisation process. Postone writes, ‘[A]s capitalism develops, however, the labor process comes to be intrinsically determined by the process of valorization’\(^{16}\). This is true. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the labour process is essentially annulled by or completely absorbed into the valorisation process. Even when the proportion of direct human relation at the point of production falls considerably, capital still confronts the ‘transhistorical’ presence of labour. It cannot be repeated often enough that Marx’s entire analysis of the value-form of mediation characteristic of capitalism rests on his view that what the labourers sell is not their ‘labour’, but only

\(^{15}\) Marx 1977, p. 290.
\(^{16}\) Postone 1993, p. 325.
their capacity to labour, their labour-power. Marx’s split in the category of labour between labour as activity vs. labour-power as commodity not only serves to explain the inherent duality of use-value vs. exchange-value which inheres in every commodity; it also points to the inherent tension between the drive for reification and the irreducible subjectivity of that which is not a thing, the human being. In other words, reification can never be total, because, if it were, capital would exhaust its supply of living labour and have no source of value left with which to reproduce the value of its accumulated capital. The inability of capital to completely reify the subject flows not from social and political aspects extraneous to the capital-relation, but from its very foundation. The split in the category of labour suggests that reification must be conceptualised in relation to the realm of resistance which resides within the capital-relation itself. It is often said that totalitarian political structures conceal tremendous tensions and contradictions at their base; I would argue that the same is true of capital, the most totalitarian economic formation ever known to humanity.

Marx did not subject capital to critique from the standpoint of ‘labour’. He criticised it from the standpoint of the labourer. This enabled him to break from any notion that value-creating labour is ‘natural’ and ‘transhistorical’, because it brought him face to face with the subjectivity of the labourer who resists the alienation inherent in her very activity of labouring under capitalism. The difference between a standpoint that proceeds transhistorically from ‘labour’ (that is, value-creating labour) and a standpoint that proceeds from the labourer is of decisive importance in grasping the dialectical structure and content of Marx’s *Capital*.

We can see this from the most abstract level of Marx’s *Capital* and the discussion of commodity fetishism in its first chapter. With commodity fetishism, the value-form of a product of labour assumes a ‘ghostly’ character, starts to ‘dance on its own initiative’ and becomes ‘an autonomous figure endowed with a life of its own’.17 We have reached the realm of the ‘non-sensuous sensuous’. This is no mere realm of illusion; mere demystification cannot debunk this topsy-turvy world in which human relations take on the form of relations between things, because ‘that is the way they really are’.18 It is hard to imagine a more total subsumption of human subjectivity by the dictates of the value-form. And yet it is here, at this most abstract level, that

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17 Marx 1977, p. 290.
18 Marx 1977, p. 165.
Marx posed the self-activity of the human subject as pivotal. Since the fetish is all-pervasive, the very Geist of capital, no amount of ‘enlightened critique’ can strip away the fetish. The only thing which can is a form of praxis which combines practical action with the subjectivity of purpose: ‘[T]he veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e., the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control’.\textsuperscript{19} The human subject does not get washed out in Marx’s tracing out of the logic of abstract labour and commodity fetishism. Instead, the absolute epitome of alienation (commodity fetishism) is counterposed to an absolutely opposed form of human praxis, the struggle for a new kind of labour by ‘freely associated men’.

It is not just the phrase, ‘freely associated men’ which is proof of the presence of human subjectivity in Chapter One. The development of the very content of the section on commodity fetishism is proof of it. Remarkably, there was no section on commodity fetishism in the 1867 (first) edition of Volume I of Capital. It was only between 1872 and 1875, in revising Capital for the French edition, that Marx created a section entitled ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret’. Marx introduced crucial changes to his discussion of commodity fetishism in the French edition, which he said had ‘a scientific value independent of the original’. One of the most important changes concerned his effort to answer the question of ‘whence arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, once it assumes the form of a commodity’.\textsuperscript{20} It is only with the French edition that Marx answered this to his satisfaction, by stating, ‘Clearly, from this form itself’. With this change, Marx makes it clear that what explains the mystery of the fetish is the very form assumed by the product of labour, the very nature of ‘the peculiar social character of the labour’ which produces commodities. This new formulation, as well as the new section on commodity fetishism as a whole, explicitly posed the abolition of fetishism as centring on the abolition of value-producing labour.

What intervened between the first German edition in 1867 and the French edition of 1872–5 which explains Marx’s reworking of the section on commodity fetishism? The Paris Commune. The changes introduced into the French edition reflected its impact. As Dunayevskaya wrote in Marxism and Freedom,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Marx 1977, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
The totality of the reorganization of society by the Communards shed new insight into the perversity of relations under capitalism. . . . This was so clearly the absolute opposite of the dialectic movement of labor under capitalism, forced into a value-form, that all fetishisms were stripped off of capitalist production.  

The activity of the Communards thereby allowed for a new leap in thought. Commodity fetishism cannot be penetrated by enlightened critique which assumes a privileged standpoint outside the value-form; nor can it be stripped away by pointing to a hidden essence obscured by the ‘illusion’ of fetishism. Instead, 

The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surround the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes as soon as we come to other forms of production.

The emergence a new form of association pointing to a transcendence of the value-form in 1871 provided the vantage point for penetrating the secret of the fetish. Marx’s reworking of the section on commodity fetishism after the Paris Commune reveals the impact of workers’ revolts on the creation of his central value-theoretical categories.

As Postone sees it, workers’ revolts never point beyond capital but are always, of necessity, implicated in it. Yet how can this can so in light of the development of the value-theoretical categories in Capital? Marx’s reworking of Capital under the impact of workers’ struggles such as the battle against slavery in the American Civil War, the fight for the eight-hour working day, and the Paris Commune poses the sharpest of challenges to Postone’s claim that

The universality represented by the proletariat ultimately is that of value . . . far from representing the negation of value, the proletariat essentially constitutes this abstract, homogeneous form of wealth.

In a word, although Postone accepts the conclusions that flowed from the impact of workers’ struggles on Marx’s thought (such as Marx’s contention that the value-form of mediation instead of property forms, market relations, and forms of distributions must be the main object of critique) he does so by

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21 Dunayevskaya 2000, p. 98.
22 Marx 1977, p. 169.
separating such conclusions from the process, the way in which Marx’s concepts took shape through an active dialectic between theory and practice.

The result in a one-sided reading which fails to do justice to Marx’s delineation of the dialectic of capital. Whereas Marx presented the struggles to shorten the working day as in advance of the declaration of ‘the inalienable rights of man’, Postone sees them as simply spurring capital to create new labour-saving devices. Whereas Marx said, ‘[w]hen the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species’,24 Postone says that co-operation simply means ‘workers are subsumed under, and incorporated into capital: they become a particular mode of its existence’.25 Whereas Marx called struggles against machinofacture ‘revolts against this particular form of the means of production as being the material basis of the capitalist mode of production’, Postone says ‘[a]t this stage of Marx’s exposition, the capitalist process of production does not yet embody of possibility of its own negation’.26 And, whereas Marx spoke of how ‘the revolt of the working class’ ‘bursts asunder’ the capitalist integument, Postone does not even bother discussing the crucial last parts of *Capital* in which this appears, on the ‘absolute general law of capitalist accumulation’. His argument that ‘the logical thrust of Marx’s presentation does not support the idea’ that workers’ struggles embody the negation of capital separates what Marx joined together: an analysis of abstract forms of domination and a view that never takes its fingers off the pulse of human relations.

**Hegel’s dialectic: logic of capital or dialectic of transcendence?**

This does not mean that Postone rejects the determinative importance of subjectivity. To Postone, the self-moving subject is not the worker, but capital. He centres his argument on the chapter ‘The General Formula of Capital’, where Marx writes of capital as ‘an automatic subject’, says ‘value is here the subject’, and calls value ‘the dominant subject of this process . . .’.27

Though it may appear that Postone has supplied textual evidence to support his claim that the logic of Marx’s analysis presents capital as the subject, the

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27 Marx 1977, p. 255.
appearance is, once again, deceptive. It is above all crucial to keep in mind the context of this section of Volume I. In ‘The General Formula of Capital’, Marx was discussing the process of circulation, as embodied in the movement from money to commodity to more money (M-C-M’). This movement creates, of necessity, the appearance that value ‘has the occult ability to add value to itself’. However, Marx later shows that this appearance is dispelled once we enter the labour process and encounter’s capital’s dependence on the living labourers. As Marx showed in the ensuing chapter ‘Contradictions in the General Formula’, value appears to self-expand on its own account so long as we restrict ourselves to the process of circulation. When we move to the labour process, however, we find that the appearance of value as self-moving subject encounters internal limits, flowing from the dual character of labour. Which is why Marx did not use the phrase ‘value as subject’ when he moved into the analysis of the production process of capital.

By conflating Marx’s discussion of value as ‘an automatic subject’ at a specific point in the analysis of capitalist circulation with value as the absolute subject in Marx’s analysis of capitalism as a whole, Postone contravenes his own argument against elevating the sphere of distribution above that of relations of production.

The development of Marx’s Capital further undermines Postone’s claim that Marx simply posed capital or ‘dead labour’ as the subject. Marx did not only revise the first chapter of Capital when he issued the French edition of Capital in 1872–5. He also revised Chapter Four, on ‘The General Formula of Capital’. In the French edition, Marx removed all three references to capital and value as subject. As we noted earlier, the French edition was written under the impact of the new stage of workers’ revolt reached with the Paris Commune. Unfortunately, we have yet to have an English-language edition of Capital that conveys all of the changes introduced by Marx into French edition.28

Postone’s argument that capital is the subject derives not just from his reading of Capital but from his interpretation of Hegel. As he sees it, Hegel’s concept of the Absolute Subject bears a striking similarity to the Marxian notion of capital, in that it represents a self-moving substance which ‘grounds itself’. Hegel’s Absolute, as a self-referential entity, expresses, in his view, the logic of capital as self-expanding value.

28 See Marx 1989, p. 124, for the way in which he revised the French edition of Chapter 4 in terms of the question of ‘capital as subject’. See also Anderson 1993.
Elsewhere, I have raised a number of objections to Postone’s reading of Hegel.29 I would add here that, even if one were to grant Postone’s argument that Hegel’s Logic represents the logic of capital, it does not necessarily follow that Hegel’s philosophy simply expresses the value-form. Capital, as Marx analysed it, is an inherently two-dimensional category, riven by an absolute contradiction between the drive to increase material productivity, on the one hand, and the drive to augment surplus-value, on the other. The former compels capital to constantly reduce the proportion of living labour at the point of production, while the latter makes capital dependent on such labour for its reproduction. The logic of capital presents us with a system imbued with such internal instability that capital intimates a realm beyond capital, wherein ‘human power is its own end’. Likewise, Hegel’s Logic is traversed by an internal duality: the absolute contradiction between the Theoretical and Practical Idea. The Absolute, Hegel says, ‘contains the highest contradiction within itself’.30 His tracing out of the logic of the concept does not lead to a space of restful abode in which all contradictions are annulled. On the contrary, the chapter on ‘The Absolute Idea’ in the Science of Logic ends by intimating a ‘new sphere’ which follows Logic, the realm of Spirit. Hegel says of this new sphere: ‘[t]he pure Idea, in which the determinateness or reality of the Notion is itself raised to the level of Notion, is an absolute liberation’.31 As Marx wrote in 1844, despite Hegel’s ‘estranged insight’, and despite the fact that he ‘stands on the basis of political economy’, the self-drive of his dialectic is such that it points to the transcendence of alienation in a new society:

> [T]he positive moments of the Hegelian dialectic [are]... Transcendence as objective movement, withdrawing externalisation into itself. This is the insight... of the appropriation of objective essence through the transcendence of its alienation... the actual appropriation of his objective essence through the destruction of the alienated determinations of the objective world...32

The clearest expression of Marx’s view that Hegel’s categories express not only the logic of capital but also a dialectic of liberation is contained in his use of ‘the negation of the negation’. In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx directly appropriated this Hegelian category, writing: ‘Communism is the position as

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30 Hegel 1929, p. 466.
31 Hegel 1929, p. 485.
32 Marx 1975, p. 341.
the “negation of the negation”.\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{Capital}, he returned to it anew in writing, ‘capitalist production process begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation’.\textsuperscript{34} Though it has become fashionable in some quarters to view Hegel’s dialectic as nothing but the expression of the logic of capital, that was neither what Marx concluded from his critique of Hegel nor, I argue, should we in light of the need to ground emancipatory struggles in a philosophy of liberation.\textsuperscript{35}

Postone, on the other hand, sees Hegel’s dialectic as completely confined within the value-form of mediation. This is clear from his very use of the word ‘mediation’, a key Hegelian category. Postone seems to view any socially mediating activity as necessarily alienating. He writes, ‘The function of labor as a socially mediating activity is what Marx terms abstract labor’.\textsuperscript{36} It is true that abstract labour is a socially mediating activity. It is also true that ‘Value is a category of mediation’.\textsuperscript{37} But is every mediation a category of value? Does labour become abstract labour by serving as ‘a socially mediating activity’? Marx spoke of labour as ‘the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature’. A ‘metabolic interaction’ implies some sort of mediation. Of course, the kind of mediation suggested by labour in this generic sense is radically different from the abstract labour characterising capitalism. Labour, in the sense in which Marx discussed it above, does not reduce the totality of social relations to the operation of a singular principle; it does not dissolve contingency and difference into a universal kind of activity. Rather, labour as ‘the metabolic interaction between man and nature’ mediates between discrete opposites, which retain their independence and contingency.

Postone, however, repeatedly equates the value-form of mediation with mediation itself. He conflates first- and second-order mediations. The root of the problem, I contend, lies in his tendency to read Hegelian categories exclusively in terms of the logic of capital. It is as if Postone thinks that ‘mediation’ in Hegel forever involves the exclusion of difference, the reduction of contingency to singularity, and the subsumption of particularity by abstract universality. He would do well to consider the implications of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza:

\textsuperscript{33} Marx 1975, p. 306.
\textsuperscript{34} Marx 1977, p. 292.
\textsuperscript{35} For more on the crucial movement from Hegel’s \textit{Science of Logic} to his \textit{Philosophy of Spirit}, and its implication for contemporary freedom struggles, see Dunayevskaya 1989a and 1989b.
\textsuperscript{36} Postone 1993, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{37} Postone 1993, p. 154.
Substance... without preceding dialectical mediation... is only the dark, shapeless abyss, so to speak, in which all determinate content is swallowed up as radically null and void, and which produces nothing out of itself that has a positive subsistence of its own.38

**Beyond capital**

Postone’s claim that the ‘logic’ of Marx’s analysis argues against posing the proletariat or humanity as subject is not supportable by Marx’s own texts. Unfortunately, this limitation can easily obscure the importance of other aspects of his book. It contains an especially rich discussion of the central contradiction of capitalism: the drive to increase material wealth vs. the drive to augment value. Postone shows that

> [A]lthough a change in socially general productivity does not change the total amount of value produced per abstract time unit, it does change the determination of this time unit. The continuous ‘redetermination’ of socially necessary labor time creates a ‘treadmill effect’: the drive of capital to accumulate constantly in order to exist. Becoming is the condition of its being.39

Because each new level of productivity is redetermined as a new base level, this dynamic tends to become ongoing and is marked by ever-increasing levels of productivity.40

Yet capital’s effort to reduce socially necessary labour time to a minimum constantly runs up against the fact that living labour remains its only source of value.

A growing disparity arises between developments in the productive power of labor (which are not necessarily bound to the direct labor of the workers), on the one hand, and the value frame within which such developments are expressed (which is bound to such labor), on the other. The disparity between the accumulation of historical time and the objectification of immediate labor time becomes more pronounced as scientific knowledge is increasingly

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40 Postone 1993, p. 293.
materialized in production... a growing disparity separates the conditions
for the production of material wealth from those for the generation of value.\textsuperscript{41}

The result is a ‘shearing pressure’ which renders the system unstable and internally contradictory.

Postone’s discussion of the double dimensionality of capital is of special importance in light of post-Seattle developments. It helps focus radical critique on the true problem, that is, the contradiction between the drive to increase material wealth vs. the drive to augment value, instead of on subsidiary issues such as ‘corporate greed’ or the lack of democratic control over corporate decisions. His discussion of how capital posits the material conditions for a higher form of society, through the achievement of vastly increased material productivity and the reduction of necessary labour time to a bare minimum, mitigates against romantic critiques of capitalism which look towards a nostalgic return to an idyllic past or which ignore the possibility of freely appropriating in the future that which is currently constituted in an alienating form.

Yet, by separating the contradiction of material form vs. value-form from the actual class struggles at the point of production and elsewhere, Postone leaves us with little sense of how to close the gap between is and ought, especially since, as he emphasises, there is no reason to presume any ‘automatic collapse’ of capitalism. He says that it has become superfluous to appeal to a living human agent to uproot the system, since capitalism is less and less dependent on human labour at the point of production and more dependent on ‘socially constituted knowledge and practices’ that do not involve the productive labourer. He fails to mention that such ‘knowledge and practices’ are more and more falling under the sway of commodified relations which characterise the traditional factory. This helps explain why many who are not directly involved in the production of surplus-value, from telephone operators to Boeing’s engineers, are showing increased labour militancy. This is also true of those with no direct relation to the production process, like the permanent army of the unemployed, which rose up in Los Angeles in 1992.

Though none of these have Postone’s ear, he does write, ‘overcoming the historical Subject’, that is, capital, ‘would allow people, for the first time, to become the subjects of their own liberation’.\textsuperscript{42} Even Postone, for all his hostility

\textsuperscript{41} Postone 1993, p. 297.
\textsuperscript{42} Postone 1993, p. 224.
to the notion of masses as subject, finds it necessary to speak of liberation in terms of becoming ‘subjects of our own liberation’. This is quite proper, for it is not possible to consistently posit a standpoint of liberation without affirming subjective self-development. Yet, by refusing to identify human subjects in the present which can help realise such a future possibility, it becomes hard to see how capital can actually be ‘overcome’. Simply positing ‘dead labor as the emancipatory alternative’ by pointing to the ‘shearing pressure’ can hardly suffice so long as the notion of an automatic collapse of capitalism is ruled out of consideration.

Thus, despite Postone’s efforts to trace out the ‘trajectory of capital’ in a way that presents the possibilities of the future as immanent in the forms of self-movement in the present, we are left with a sort of Kantian dualism between what is and what could be, short of an immanent principle that could reconcile them.

The originality of Postone’s book does not lie in its opposition to the notion of the proletariat as subject of revolt. That attitude was endemic to the ‘New Left’ and gained a wider following with the tidal wave of postmodernism. What is original with Postone is his effort to argue that Marx’s value-theoretical categories show that Marx did not consider the working class as subject. His book can be seen as an effort to ‘re-interpret’ Marx on the basis of a specific attitude toward the working class held by a large section of the generation of 1968; it can also be seen as an effort to account for the postmodernist notion of the ‘death of the subject’ without succumbing to its pessimism and nihilism.

Yet is precisely these attitudes, I would argue, which are becoming increasingly anachronistic. No one today is reaching for a ‘universal subject’, be it the proletariat or anyone else, before which all should genuflect. The notion of a singular subject, or reducing all social struggles to the proletariat, belongs to a historical period which is behind us and which will not return. But the present moment does not disclose a rejection of proletarian subjectivity per se. On the contrary, many of the protests since Seattle – be they campus protests against sweatshops or new strikes at the workplace – centre on conditions of labour and the struggles against alienation in the workplace. Quite unlike the 1960s ‘New Left’, the ‘Seattle generation’ has sought to forge a unity between workers and students that was unimaginable, at least in the US, for decades.

Just as much of the ‘Traditional Marxism’ criticised by Postone has an antiquated ring to it due to its exaggerated focus on property relations and
its posing of ‘proletarian labour’ as the principle of a new society, so too, in
light of the present, does Postone’s very critique of it. Seattle suggests that
we may be nearing the end of the long night of the denigration of the subject
in Western radicalism. It may not be too early for theory to take notice, by
proclaiming the death of death of the subject.

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Geoffrey Kay and James Mott

**Concept and Method in Postone’s**

*Time, Labor and Social Domination*

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**Concept**

The fact that the production of use-values, or goods, is carried on under the control of a capitalist and on his behalf does not alter the general character of that production.\(^1\)

In *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Moishe Postone aims at recovering the internal logic of the Marxian critique and ‘to interpret the fundamental categories of Marx’s critique of political economy in as logically coherent and systematically powerful way as possible’.\(^2\) The key to this recovery is the claim that ‘labor grounds its own social character in capitalism’,\(^3\) inflated into the single structuring principle which sustains capital. Since the self-grounding or self-mediation of labour in capitalism has not hitherto been recognised, its appearance in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is that of a revelation. Certainly, it is deployed to reveal the limitations of ‘Traditional Marxism’, defined as any account of Marx’s theory

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\(^1\) Marx 1976, p. 284.


\(^3\) Postone 1996, p. 151.

*Historical Materialism*, volume 12:3 (169–187)
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that is not illuminated by this category. According to Postone, labour – ‘historically specific rather than transhistorical’, as he interprets it – is the category Marx employed in his mature writings. The lines quoted above are not intended to demonstrate that Postone’s interpretation of Marx’s concept of labour is simply wrong, but rather to indicate that Marx’s writings are insufficiently univocal to support the type of uncompromising interpretation Postone makes of them. At one point Postone is on the verge of recognising this difficulty. ‘The definitions [Marx] provides of abstract labor in Capital, Chapter One,’ he writes, ‘are very problematic’. But, unlike some contributors to the value controversy which dates back to the early 1970s – and a body of literature that Postone scarcely acknowledges –, he does not explore the unresolved ambiguity which allows Marx’s writings to be cited in support of radically different interpretations of the theory of value. To the contrary, he builds this ambiguity into his own work, where the resulting inconsistencies put his already questionable notion of labour as self-grounding or self-mediating under intolerable strain.

Quotations from Capital cannot settle the ambiguity that Marx left unresolved in his theory of value and labour, but they are useful as illustrations of it. Take for instance, two sentences from the first section of Chapter One of Capital, quoted by Postone:

Socially necessary labor-time is the labor required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labor prevalent in that society.

4 According to Postone, ‘[t]he term “traditional Marxism” refers not to a specific historical tendency in Marxism but more generally to all theoretical approaches that analyze capitalism from the standpoint of labor and characterize that society essentially in terms of class relations, structured by private ownership of the means of production and a market regulated economy. Relations of domination are understood primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation’. Postone 1996, p. 7.
5 Postone 1996, p. 4.
6 As Postone puts it: ‘… [M]arx’s [mature] analysis does not refer to labor as it is generally and transhistorically conceived – a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating specific products in order to satisfy determinate human needs – but to a peculiar role that labor plays in capitalist society alone. As I shall elaborate, the historically specific character of this labor is intrinsically related to the form of social interdependence characteristic of capitalist society. It constitutes a historically specific, quasi-objective form of social mediation that, within the framework of Marx’s analysis, serves as the ultimate social ground of modernity’s basic features’, Postone 1996, pp. 4–5.
8 Postone 1996, p. 190.
What exclusively determines the value of any commodity is the amount of labor socially necessary, or the labor time socially necessary for its production.\footnote{Marx 1976, p. 129.}

In context, where they are separated by a few lines referring to the introduction of power-looms, these sentences are clearly intended as part of a single line of argument, which is how Postone interprets them: ‘the value of a single commodity is a function . . . of the amount of labor time socially necessary for its production’.\footnote{Postone 1996, p. 190.} What he fails to note, however, is the ambiguity surrounding the idea of socially necessary labour, which in the first sentence refers to the labour time required to produce a use-value (that is, concrete labour), and, in the second, to the labour time that determines the value of a commodity (that is, abstract labour). It could be argued, since these sentences appear before the distinction is made in the following section between concrete and abstract labour, that this inconsistency is not particularly significant. However, this hardly strengthens Postone’s case, since he cites them as if they meant essentially the same. Moreover, far from being resolved later in Capital, the ambiguity surrounding Marx’s conceptualisation of abstract and concrete labour is, if anything, deepened.

To take just one more quotation from the first chapter in Capital, this time from the final section on fetishism:

\begin{quote}
Men do not . . . bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogenous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it.\footnote{Marx 1976, pp. 166–7.}
\end{quote}

Two different interpretations of this passage are possible. Either the labour expended on products is already homogenous before exchange takes place (but this does not become evident until the products, and therefore the different types of labour which produce them, are equated in exchange), or different labours are actually equated by exchange and are categorically varied before their products are traded.\footnote{Supporting this alternative is the following: ‘It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a specific uniform objectivity as values which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility’, Marx 1976, p. 166.} In the first case, abstract labour is set alongside
concrete labour in the sphere of production; in the latter, it is set apart from it in the sphere of exchange. In *Time, Labor and Social Domination* both concepts of abstract labour are to be found. On the one hand, when he writes that ‘the magnitude of the value of a commodity is . . . a function of the socially necessary labor-time required for its production’;\(^{13}\) ‘value is constituted by (abstract) labor alone’;\(^{14}\) ‘the magnitude of value yielded is a function of (socially average) labor-time expended’,\(^{15}\) Postone treats abstract labour as productive activity. On the other hand, when he writes that ‘. . . commodity producing labor is both particular – as concrete labor, determinate activity that produces specific use-values – and socially general, as abstract labor, a means of acquiring the goods of others’, he treats it as a means of acquisition.\(^{16}\)

The most daring and, if it works, the definitive solution to a problem of ambiguity is one that dissolves the dilemma by developing a standpoint from which the conflict is disabled and, though he does not couch his argument in these terms, Postone’s concept of labour in capitalism is a solution of this type. Moreover, since it rests on solid foundations, namely, the fact that, where products are systematically produced as commodities, exchange is not something that simply happens after production takes place, his position appears sound as well as daring. But, while the argument that abstract labour as a means of acquisition affects the expenditure of labour in the sphere of production is clear cut, the conclusions that can be drawn from it fail to resolve the dilemma. Does abstract labour enter the being of concrete labour so as to give it a new character – as two elements combine in a chemical reaction to form a compound which is neither one nor the other? Or does it bear down upon concrete labour as a force which ‘shapes’ it to its purpose

\(^{13}\) Postone 1996, p. 193.
\(^{15}\) Postone 1996, p. 288.
\(^{16}\) Postone 1996, p. 151. Also: ‘In commodity-determined society, the objectifications of one’s labor are means by which goods produced by others are acquired: one labors in order to acquire other products. One’s product, then, serves someone else as a good, a use-value; it serves the producer as a means of acquiring the labor products of others. It is in this sense that a product is a commodity; it is simultaneously a use-value for another, and a means of exchange for the producer. This signifies that one’s labor has a dual function: on the one hand, it is a specific sort of labor that produces goods for others, yet, on the other hand, labor independent of its specific content, serves the producer as the means by which the products of others are acquired. Labor in other words, becomes a peculiar means of acquiring goods in commodity-determined society; the specificity of the producers’ labor is *abstracted* from the products they acquire with their labor. There is no intrinsic relation between the specific nature of the labor expended and the specific nature of the product acquired by means of that labor’ (Postone 1996, p. 149).
but leaves its general character as concrete labour unaltered – as a sculptor imposes the form of a statue on a lump of bronze but does not change the nature of the bronze qua bronze? One thing that is not possible is for abstract labour to do both. But, when he writes of ‘the unity of a “labor process” (the process of production of material wealth) as a process of creating value’, at one moment, and of ‘the transformation of matter [being] shaped by the transformation of form, as expressed by the category of capital’ at the next, Postone turns his back on the problem rather than solves it.

In the course of his work Postone frequently refers to labour in capitalism as ‘commodity-producing’ labour: but this shorthand can be seriously misleading because the impression it conveys that labour directly produces commodities is false. To be precise, it is false when abstract labour is understood, as Postone encourages us to understand it, as a means of acquisition, since the logic of this position is that labour does not become abstract, and products do not become objects of value, until exchange takes place. In the nature of things, labour cannot be actually abstracted in the process of production. It is potentially or ideally abstracted in so far as it is organised and oriented to exchange, but, within the labour process, it is necessarily and irreducibly concrete. The logic of the concept of abstract labour as a means of acquisition, which Postone advances without qualification, is that labour does not ‘create value’, but produces things that are intended as values and only become actual values when they are exchanged, or, in other words, that the activity of labour is potentially, not actually, abstract and that the products of this activity are ideal, not actual, commodities. Evidence of the importance Marx attached to the Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality is not hard to find, but it is not the interpretation of Marx that concerns us here. As far as this is concerned, it is unnecessary to go beyond the point already made, that there is sufficient ambiguity in Capital to provide support for readings that not only differ but are irreconcilable.

Since he bypasses this ambiguity, Postone has no need to look to the distinction between potentially abstract and actually abstract labour for its

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18 For instance, near the start of the 1857 Introduction, with a footnote to Aristotle’s Metaphysics: ‘A railway on which no trains run, which is not used up, not consumed, is a railway only *dunamei* [i.e. potentially], and not in reality’ (Marx 1973, p. 91). The potential for labour to become abstract is not strictly Aristotelian, if only because it does not arise from with the nature of labour as an activity or from the natural form of its products.
resolution. But it is important to note that, when arguing that ‘in the process of objectifying itself as concrete labor in particular use-values [commodity producing labor] also objectifies itself as abstract labor in social relations’, Postone effectively shuts this definition out. By bringing concrete and abstract labour into an immediate unity, that is positing labour as self-mediating, he closes off the space that the distinction between potentially abstract and actually abstract labour would occupy. It is here, as an alternative to the Aristotelian-inspired distinction, that Postone’s notion of ground and his idea of labour as self-grounding enters the picture.

Method

He must be a poor creature who cannot advance a good ground for everything. . . The good ground may affect something or may not . . . [ground is] not determined by objective principles of its own, nor is it an end or final cause. It is not active, not productive.

Postone often uses the concept of grounding – ‘absolute grounding’, ‘the ultimate ground’, ‘social ground’, ‘determinate grounds’, ‘essential ground’, ‘self-groundedness’. He says that he has no need for ontological grounds because he is substituting the historically specific nature of labour for Hegel’s Absolute. However, this substitution does not afford him adequate protection from the methodological pitfalls of the ‘grounding’ concept.

It is hard to understand why this concept, which has had such a troubled history, should be so important for Postone and yet not be defended in his book. The concept of grounding was originated by Leibniz as a companion concept to contradiction. Kant rejected its relevance to anything other than the chain of grounds and consequences to be found in mathematics, and

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20 Hegel 1975, p. 121.
27 Leibniz’s dictum that ‘nothing happens without a reason’ reflected the teleology of final causation, as in the case of something resulting from the purpose-driven activity relating to the desire of a rational agent. That everything could be grounded was set up as an abstract principle alongside the actual causes of phenomena and Leibniz left the idea in a state of confusion. McTaggart, in his commentary on Hegel’s
Hegel absorbed it into his concept of contradiction, being amusingly scathing about it in his *Logic of Essence*. When Marx turned to that same *Logic* for help in constructing the theory of abstract labour, he made no use of the discussion of Ground, but turned instead to the section of Hegel’s *Logic of Essence* which comes just before it – the ‘Logic of Reflection’. Moreover, unlike Postone, Marx did not apply Hegel’s logic to labour itself, but to commodities in exchange. There would seem to be two reasons for this: firstly, that the commodity contains a relation, and can be subjected to the logic of identity and difference, which provides the logical context of the ‘ground’ concept, whereas labour does not contain any such relation; and, secondly, that it is through the development of the commodity as different from itself (‘natural form’ and ‘value form’) that labour acquires its twofold character.

To present labour or, for that matter anything else, as grounded is to draw attention to the fact that it has a mediated aspect as well as its immediate presence. At the very least, the concept implies a distinction between a surface and a substratum, and, like Reflection, this involves a doubling of the phenomenon into its appearance plus whatever is posited as the ground of that appearance. In the early phase of grounding, at least, the content on each side of the doubling is the same, only the form differs. At this stage, therefore, in Hegel’s terms, to say with Postone that labour is self-grounded, is to say no more than that it is grounded because the same content is to be found on both the side of the ground and the side of the grounded. As Hegel pointed out, if the content is precisely the same on each side, the concept is tautological and useless; if not, the choice as to what to take as the ground, and what to

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28 The logic of ground leads into a denial of the actual mediations of labour: ‘Labor in capitalism is not mediated by social relations, but, rather, itself constitutes a social mediation’; (Postone 1996, p. 172); ‘[it is] an objective social mediation’ (Postone 1996, p. 191). Hegel located his concept of self-grounding close to the point where Essence becomes Appearance, that is where the phenomenon becomes immediate, as a single unit with nothing determined as conditioning it, so that the overt logical structure itself becomes the ground. Postone says that ‘the form of its [viz. labor's] appearance is . . . simply as “labor” ’, (Postone 1996, p. 168) but then uses the logic of grounding to demonstrate that such a form of appearance is the result of the self-grounding of labour.

29 ‘Everything has its Sufficient Ground: that is, the true essentiality of any thing is . . . predication of it . . . as having its being in an other, which, being its selfsame, is its essence . . . The ground and what is grounded are one and the same content: the difference between the two is the mere difference of form which separates simple self-relation, on the one hand, from mediation or derivativeness on the other’ (Hegel 1975, pp. 175–6).
leave ungrounded, is arbitrary. Hegel himself reserved the term self-grounding for an unconditioned set of independent conditions of existence forming a totality. If labour is to be taken as self-grounding in this sense, it would be a genuine unity and a single form, having integrated its conditions of existence into its own being. It would be the ‘labour’ of the ‘Traditional Marxism’ which Postone rejects with such force. In this case, its ground would be its own overt logical structure and it would no longer have the twofold character which is impressed upon it in capitalist society.

The difficulty the ‘grounding’ concept presents for Postone’s analysis is its incapacity to produce the difference between the ground and the grounded, or, to use Postone’s terms, the difference between labour as ground and labour as grounded. Nor is an attempt to overcome this difficulty by simply positing the ground and the grounded of any avail, since it leaves the movement from the one to the other dangling in mid air. In reality, the movement from labour to labour only takes place through the products of labour, after they enter the exchange relation. But, as he finally turns his back on his own definition of abstract labour in terms of acquisition, so Postone supplies the missing link by building it directly into the concept of labour (in capitalism) itself, endowing the activity of production with the immediate capacity to function as social mediation. Believing that ‘[t]he task confronting us, then, is to uncover a historically specific form of social reality “behind” abstract human labor as a category of essence’,30 rather than to trace the process through which concrete labour is posited abstractly, he peers at labour through the screen of abstract labour rather than analysing the historically specific social forms of capitalism as abstractions of human activity. The result is a concept of labour which is a collage made up of parts of both abstract and concrete labour that ‘shifts the primary focus of . . . critique away from considerations of property and the market’.31 The system of possessory rights and the institution of contract which comprise the social forms through which labour is actually brought into relation with capital have no real part to play for Postone as labour and capital are already together ab initio.32

30 Postone 1996, p. 146.
32 There is a degree of confusion surrounding this issue in Time, Labor and Social Domination, as Postone follows Marx in giving private property prominence in the definition of labour-power as a commodity, writing of workers who ‘do not own any means of production [being] compelled to sell their labor-power as the only commodity they own’ as the ‘pre-condition of capitalism’, (Postone 1996, p. 270) but gives it the
Although Postone does not openly confront the ambiguity in Marx about whether abstract labour is located close to concrete labour in the sphere of production or, at some distance from it, in the sphere of exchange, his concept of labour in capitalism as self-grounding comes down decisively in favour of the former and, in our view, the wrong alternative. There are two criticisms of it which Postone’s attempt to establish, and then bridge, the gap between labour as ground and labour grounded, does not counter. The first concerns the nature of activity. Locating abstract labour in the sphere of production necessarily conceives it as activity in some sense or other – a matter which Postone openly acknowledges when he speaks of ‘the abstract labors of commodity producers’;\(^{33}\) the ‘indeterminate expenditure of socially mediating activity’;\(^{34}\) and ‘abstract labor time expenditure’.\(^{35}\) But activity is the one thing which abstract labour, in the very nature of things, cannot be: above all, productive activity must be specific. It is possible to think of different concrete labours as the same type of thing (productive activity) but this generic abstraction is not the one that either Marx or Postone has in mind. It is also possible to point to the indifference of both workers and capitalists to the work that is actually performed, the former seeing it as a general means of acquiring subsistence, the latter as a general means of acquiring profit, but this does not alter the fact that work itself is always specific, no matter how routine and boring.

The second concerns the process of abstraction. Since this is an ongoing process that necessarily presupposes the non-abstract as its point of departure, it is compelled to preserve the concrete as a condition of its own existence. Postone does not deny the concreteness of labour: ‘In producing use-values, labor in capitalism can be regarded as an intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion – what Marx calls “concrete labor”’. But, in attributing to labour in capitalism the ‘function [of being] a socially mediating

cold shoulder in his critique of ‘traditional Marxism’: ‘Interpreting Marx’s analysis as a historically specifically critique of labor in capitalism leads to an understanding of capitalist society which is very different from that of traditional Marxist interpretations. It suggests, for example, that the social relations and forms of domination that characterise capitalism, in Marx’s analysis, cannot be understood sufficiently in terms of class relations, rooted in property relations and mediated by the market’, (Postone 1996, p. 6).

\(^{33}\) Postone 1996, p. 152.
\(^{34}\) Postone 1996, p. 169.
\(^{35}\) Postone 1996, p. 397.
activity – what [Marx] terms “abstract labor”, he not only destroys the integrity of labour but also undermines the process of abstraction itself. Since, on the one hand, abstraction discards the concrete by disregarding its particularities and, on the other hand, the preservation of the conditions of existence of abstraction requires the preservation of the concrete, it follows that abstraction can only be brought to bear directly on things like products which already have an established existence as concrete, and not on activities which, being unfinished, would disintegrate under its touch. And, even then, by operating within the relation between products as commodities, abstraction is not immediate and this further safeguards the ‘natural form’ of commodities. Thus, while abstraction reduces commodities to uniformity as values, it deposits these values outside them rather than within them; for instance, it makes commodity B the form of the value of commodity A.

Commodities are distinguishable from the products of labour in societies where exchange did not take place by being both use-values and exchange-values. But it does not follow from the possession of this distinctive quality that they are use-values and exchange-values at the same time. It is the commodity in the course of its career that has a two-fold history, not the commodity per se. There are three different episodes in this career: firstly, when the commodity emerges from the labour process as the property of its original owner; secondly, when it is traded on the market; and, thirdly, when it enters the possession of its final owner. Since these episodes are parts of a pre-ordained life it would be one-sided to say that, in the first, the commodity is a use-value; in the second, an exchange-value; and, in the third, a use-value again. What should be said is that, in the first, it is potentially both exchange-value and use-value; in the second, actually exchange-value and potentially use-value; and, in the third, actually use-value and no longer exchange-value at all. But this more complete specification of its cycle does not alter the point that the commodity changes its character during the course of its life.

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36 Postone 1996, p. 150.
37 'By means of the value-relation... the natural form of commodity B becomes the value-form of commodity A. In other words the physical body of commodity B becomes the mirror for the value of commodity A' (Marx 1976, p. 144).
38 Postone recognises this explicitly (Postone 1996, p. 168) but fails to see its implications for labour in capitalism which he insists is both abstract and concrete at the same time.
39 It should be noted that as durables, like cars, can be resold after they are used there are some commodities which can be potential exchange-values after they have entered the sphere of consumption. But this qualification can be ignored as it does not affect the point that commodities have a life-history which unfolds through time.
It acknowledges the fact that, until it enters the sphere of final consumption, the commodity does indeed have a double character, but it also shows that this double character changes with time and is not constant. As it is with commodities, so it is with the labour which produces them: here, the episodes are those of potential labour or labour-power; labouring activity; and objectified labour. In each of these episodes, the two-fold character of labour is present: the potential to labour is actually abstracted in the exchange of labour-power as a commodity; labouring activity is actually concrete but potentially abstract, while the objectifications of labour are objectifications of concrete labour. But, since these objectifications are those which appear in the first episode in the life of the commodity, they are potentially concrete as potential use-values and potentially abstract as potential exchange-values. But, again, as with the double character of the commodity, the configuration of the double character of labour varies through time.

Since both involve a relation of self to self, it is instructive to contrast Postone's account of labour in capitalism with Marx's 'general formula for capital'. In both instances, there is a single 'subject' comprising different elements – commodity-producing labour comprising abstract and concrete labour, in the former, and capital comprising commodities in their natural form and money in the latter. But where these elements are compacted together in the one case, they retain their separate identities in the other and are held together by the constantly recurring change from one form to the other. They are capital only in the circuit M-C-M', which is a 'movement' or 'process' which necessarily occurs in time. As Postone makes time a central issue of his work, it is surprising that he ignores it as a dimension of the nature of labour, but then, unlike the distinction in Aristotle between potentiality and actuality, which is ideally suited to take it into the reckoning, the notion of self-grounding, as Postone employs it in relation to labour, squeezes it out. Things are compressed; everything happens at once: 'commodity producing labor, in the process of objectifying itself as concrete labor in particular use-values, also objectifies itself as abstract labor in social relation';40 'labor in capitalism objectifies itself not only in material products...but in objectified social relations as well'.41 Not only does labour objectify itself in two different ways: it objectifies itself in two different ways simultaneously. For Postone, labour is actually concrete and actually abstract at the same time.

In the final analysis, the application of the notion of self-grounding to labour in capitalism collapses the diachronic into the synchronic and places the process of abstraction out of theoretical reach. In *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, abstraction appears not as a process which must continually recharge itself, but as a finished event. By making commodity-producing labour self-grounding, Postone assumes abstract labour to be present in a fixed form from the start, as though abstraction was an event that occurred in the immediate prehistory of capitalism, a sort of primal implosion which compacted what had previously been overtly separated social relations into coalition.42 In the process, he spoils his claim that there is a ‘dialectic of abstract and concrete labor’,43 by denying it the space to work itself out.

**The dual character of labour embodied in commodities**

It is not sufficient to reduce the commodity to ‘labour’: labour must be broken down into its twofold form...44

It is now appropriate to stand back from the issue of how concrete and abstract labour relate to one another in capitalist society and consider the dual nature of labour as such. When *Capital* is set against the writings of the British moralists and the classical political economists, it becomes clear that, far from being the first thinker to treat labour as double-sided, Marx was following a well-established tradition. The difference is that, where these earlier writers took the dual character of labour for granted, Marx broke it down into its components and, once and for all, disposed of the idea that there can ever be essential labour which is intrinsically concrete and abstract at the same time.

Consider two endlessly quoted passages – the first by John Locke:

> Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this nobody has any right to

...
but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say are properly his. Whatever he removes out of the state that nature has provided and left it in, he has mixed his labour with, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes his own property.\footnote{Locke 1933, Chapter 5.}

The second by Adam Smith:

> If among a nation of hunters... it usually costs twice the labour to kill a beaver as it does to kill a deer, one beaver should naturally exchange for or be worth two deer.\footnote{Smith 2000, Chapter 6.}

In both instances, what Marx was later to call concrete labour is performed – in the one case the producer ‘tills, plants, improves cultivates’, in the other, hunts – but, at the same time, a social result is effected as the improved land becomes private property and the deer becomes an object of value. In Postone’s terms, it can be said that the labours of Locke’s person and Smith’s hunter objectify themselves not only in material products, but in objectified social relations as well. Neither Locke nor Smith show any signs of appreciating that the labour they wrote of was historically specific; on the contrary, their deliberate setting of labour in the state of nature removes it from history. But it is not only concrete labour they have set in the rude state but private property and commodities as well, and it is precisely this latter naturalisation that allowed them to fuse concrete and abstract labour together: since private property and exchange-value are as natural as productive activity, the transformation of materials to meet needs and the establishment of private property naturally belong together as ‘labour’.

When *Capital* is read with the thoughts about labour of the classical political economists and their predecessors in mind – and the notes to Chapter One show they were firmly in Marx’s mind – it is not only the twofold character of the labour embodied in commodities which commands attention, but the fact that Marx, unlike the political economists, ‘distinguishes explicitly’ between labour as it appears in the value of commodities and labour as it appears in useful products.\footnote{‘[C]lassical political economy in fact nowhere distinguishes explicitly and with a clear awareness between labour as it appears in the value of a product, and the same labour as it appears in the product’s use value’, Marx 1976, p. 173.} The distinction between abstract and concrete labour cuts two ways: on the one hand, it establishes abstract labour apart from concrete labour, but, by virtue of this, on the other hand, it establishes concrete labour
apart from abstract labour. In other words, it reveals the ‘labour process independently of any specific social formation’. As Postone makes clear, it was only in the seventeenth century, when productive activities were shaken free of feudal specificities and commensurated as equivalents, that a general concept of labour was first formulated. But, since, as we have just seen, this general concept included the conditions of private property and exchange-value that brought it to light, the transhistorical nature of productive activity remained hidden from view. It was not until Marx definitively distinguished concrete from abstract labour that it finally saw the light of day. It would be absurd to suggest that Marx discovered the transhistorical nature of labour, since there are clearly precursors of the idea among earlier writers, but, without doubt, he was the first thinker to give it a sound theoretical basis.

Although Marx attributed the concrete/abstract labour distinction to his own work – ‘I was the first to point out and examine critically this twofold nature of the labour contained in commodities’ – he stopped short of claiming credit for this more dramatic achievement. Indeed, as there are clear signs in Capital that he had not broken completely free of the classical labour-embodied theory of value, which presupposes a unity of concrete and abstract labour, it is possible he was not fully aware of the implications of his critical examination of the two-fold nature of labour contained in commodities. It is, after all, just as difficult for new thought to shake off the past at a stroke as it is for a new form of society, and it is easy to slip from the proposition that the labour contained or embodied in commodities has a twofold character to the supposition that labour enters the commodity in a twofold fashion in a single process at the same time. But, conceding that Postone can find support for his concept of commodity-producing labour in Capital does not invalidate

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49 Marx 1976, p. 132.
50 For instance: ‘[The capitalist] production process according to Marx, is twofold in character: just as the commodity is a unity of use value and value, the process of producing commodities is the unity of a “labor process” (the process of producing material wealth) and a process of creating value’, (Postone 1996, pp. 278–9). The point here is not what Marx said or did not say on this subject, but the fact that it does not follow necessarily from the twofold character of the commodity that the process of producing commodities is twofold. It is perfectly consistent with the twofold nature of the commodity to argue that it becomes the embodiment of concrete and abstract labour in different ways at different times – the first in the process of production; the second in the process of exchange.
the claim that there is also a different concept of labour to be found in the work and with it ‘a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor’.\(^51\)

The issue cannot be resolved by counter-citing passages from *Capital* – as argued above, these merely illustrate it. Nor is it of much avail to have recourse to some outside authority, such as Hegel’s *Logic*, as arbiter, since this only recasts the problem in terms of the credentials of this authority. There is, of course, the possibility of trying to test the alternatives against each other by setting them a common problem, but, as the literature on the transformation of values into prices, which has attempted to do this, shows, it is not easy to agree the common problem in the first place.\(^52\) Though he does not pose the problem in the terms it is presented here, Postone opens two interrelated lines of enquiry which reveal some of its implications.

The first of these is political and concerns his sophisticated critique of the ‘Traditional-Marxist’ notion of the proletariat or the species as Subject. It is possible to question whether ‘Marx’s argument in *Capital* should be read as commentary on Hegel’,\(^53\) as this already takes a great deal for granted. But, at the same time, it is possible to endorse the political conclusions drawn from Postone’s criticism of the ‘“materialist” Ricardo-Hegel synthesis’\(^54\) that socialism involves the proletariat shaking itself free from the shackles of private property and ‘reappropriat[ing] . . . the wealth that in capitalism had been privately expropriated’.\(^55\) It is also possible to agree with Postone that this vision of socialism as ‘unmasking’ and the ‘closely . . . related notion that socialism entails the realization of the universalistic ideals of the bourgeois revolutions’\(^56\) are rooted in a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of transhistorical labour. But agreement breaks down over the tacit supposition that this vision of socialism follows necessarily from adopting transhistorical labour as the standpoint of criticism, since ‘Traditional Marxism’ is not compelled to accept labour as it actually exists as adequate for socialism. On the contrary, it can be as critical of labour as it exists as Postone is of labour in capitalism.

\(^{51}\) Postone 1996, p. 4.
\(^{52}\) Postone (p. 130 et seq.) raises the issue of the transformation problem but his reference to Sweezy 1942 for a ‘summary of [the] discussion’ about it only underlines his neglect of modern value theory.
\(^{53}\) Postone 1996, p. 81.
\(^{54}\) Postone 1996, p. 82.
\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Postone 1996, pp. 82–3.
The difference between Postone’s concept of labour in capitalism and that of labour as it actually exists in capitalism is this: that, where the former is a unity of concrete and abstract labour, the latter is concrete labour unaffected in its general character but shaped or moulded in detail by the process of abstraction. ‘traditional Marxism’, as Postone characterises it, may take industrial production . . . not . . . [as] the object of . . . historical critique, but . . . as the ‘progressive’ social dimension that, increasingly ‘fettered’ by private property and the market, will serve as the basis of socialist society.57

But there is nothing in the concept of transhistorical labour to prevent those who adopt it as the standpoint of criticism from endorsing the view of ‘industrial production . . . as the adequate materialization of the valorization process’,58 so long as this is read to mean the shaping of production to the ends of valorisation and not the unity of material production and valorisation. In other words, there is nothing in the adoption of transhistorical labour as the standpoint of critique that inevitably leads to the type of political position that Postone disparages. To reach this type of position, it is necessary not only to ignore the degradation of concrete labour but to treat private property as primarily distributional, and, far from criticising ‘traditional Marxism’ on this score, Postone appears to have accepted it without demur.

This leads directly to the second line of enquiry opened by Postone, which reveals some of the implications of the different concepts of labour. Do the theories of which these concepts are a part ‘grasp social reality adequately’?59 Since Time, Labor, and Social Domination rarely departs from a ‘high level of abstraction’, it would be more accurate to say that Postone indicates, rather than opens, this line of enquiry. In his work, analysis remains only a promise:

Because the approach I have outlined shifts the focus of the critique of capitalism away from an exclusive concern with the market and private property, it could serve as the basis for a critical theory of modern, capitalist society which would be more adequate to postliberal capitalism and could provide a basis for an analysis of ‘actually existing socialist’ societies.60

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57 Postone 1996, p. 65. Since, as the example of this position, Postone cites a work of Karl Kautsky published in 1906, it is hard to avoid the impression that ‘traditional Marxism’ is not simply a straw man but a superannuated straw man.
60 Postone 1996, p. 389. ‘Exclusive’ is italicised here because it conveys a misleading impression of an approach that counterposes the social forms of commodity and capital to private property and the market as the ‘real’ social relations of capitalism.
The question is whether it is a promise that can be met. To what extent can an approach which relegates private property and the market to the margins of its concerns adequately grasp ‘postliberal capitalism’ for instance, when this ‘stage’ is defined in market terms as ‘the partial or total suppression of the market by the interventionist state as the primary agent of distribution’?\(^6^1\) Apropos the Soviet Union, Postone writes of a ‘society that is regulated and dominated by the state’.\(^6^2\) But how adequately can this type of society be grasped by an approach which would appear to deny itself the possibility of developing a theory of the state by characterising ‘social domination [in terms of] the impersonal, abstract, and pervasive nature of a form of power with no real personal or concrete institutional locus’?\(^6^3\) The analytical failures of ‘traditional Marxism’, even if they were entirely due to its adoption of transhistorical labour as its standpoint of criticism, would not justify Postone’s concept of labour in capitalism, because it is hard to see how he can do any better. In fact, the introversion brought about by his notion of labour as self-grounding makes it hard to see how his approach can ever step down from the plane of high abstraction.

Since reference to *Capital* cannot be used to decide between transhistorical labour and labour in capitalism as the standpoint of critique; since there can be no agreed test of consistency such as the transformation problem; and, since the political and analytical implications, though important, cannot, in the nature of things, resolve the issue, only one possibility remains open – to find some absolute which can function as arbiter. At first sight, the search for such an arbiter seems futile as it appears to require rejection of the historical specificity on which Postone so rightly insists. But it is precisely the fact that capitalism, and, within it, labour, are historically specific as opposed to unique that makes it possible. Postone himself provides the touchstone we need – the labour process:

> [Marx’s] analysis of the commodity and capital – that is, the quasi-objective forms of social mediation constituted by labor in capitalism – should be understood as an analysis of this society’s [i.e. capitalism] fundamental social relations. These impersonal and abstract social forms do not simply veil what traditionally has been deemed the “real” social relations of capitalism, that is, class relations [rooted in private property and mediated by the market]; they are the real relations of capitalist society, structuring its dynamic trajectory and its form of production’, (Postone 1996, p. 6). It would be more accurate for Postone to have written of an approach which treats private property as distributional and the market as secondary.

\(^{61}\) Postone 1996, p. 10.
\(^{62}\) Postone 1996, p. 11.
\(^{63}\) Postone 1996, p. 386.
In its basic and abstract determinations, the labor process is the universal condition for the transformation of matter, the metabolic interaction of humans and nature and, hence, a universal condition of human existence.\textsuperscript{64}

As he is deeply committed to the view that Marx’s theory ‘provides no transhistorical theory of labor’,\textsuperscript{65} he immediately adds the qualification that ‘[t]his section of Capital [viz. the section on the ‘labor process’] is frequently taken out of context as presenting a transhistorically valid definition of the labor process’. But the qualification comes too late\textsuperscript{66} – the statement that the labour process is ‘a universal condition of human existence’ is unequivocal. Moreover, it has far greater importance than Postone credits it with, for not only does it represent a momentous discovery about the conditions of human existence, it also represents a discovery that could only be made in capitalist society, where labour was stripped out from the particular relations of direct dependence which hid its general character from view in earlier forms of society, and where thought (Hegel’s \textit{Logic}) was sufficiently developed to tear off its final veil – private property. In other words, the labour process is both transhistorical and historically specific, transhistorical in the sense that it is a condition of all forms of society; historically specific in the sense that consciousness of this belongs exclusively to capitalist society. On the one hand, the labour process can stand as the absolute we are searching for as arbiter between transhistorical labour and labour in capitalism; on the other hand, it is just as reflexive of capitalist society as Postone’s labour in capital. It is hardly necessary to add that, when the labour process as a ‘universal condition of human existence’ is established as arbiter, judgement comes down in favour of transhistorical labour as the standpoint of critique.

\textsuperscript{64} Postone 1996, p. 276.
\textsuperscript{65} Postone 1996, p. 388.
\textsuperscript{66} He justifies this qualification on the grounds that what is frequently overlooked is that Marx’s presentation subsequently entails a reversal: he goes on to show how the labor process in capitalism is structured in such a way that precisely those aspects that were initially presupposed as uniquely “human” – for example, purposiveness – become attributes of capital (Postone 1996, p. 279). He then observes that ‘Marx briefly takes note of the property relations involved’ in this reversal but fails to see their significance, namely that they make the purposiveness of labour the property of capital, not an attribute of capital – something over which capital has the power of disposal but remains outside it; not something which becomes an attribute of capital, part of it as one of its qualities. This assimilation of labour into capital, the corollary of the assimilation of abstraction into labour, is due to Postone’s neglect of private property and contract as the social form in which things which are and must remain naturally separate are brought together legally. It is only when the labour process is complete and the product is posited as commodity-capital, that the qualities of labour becomes ‘attributes’ of capital.
References


David McNally

The Dual Form of Labour in Capitalist Society and the Struggle over Meaning: Comments on Postone

The revival of anticapitalist protest and resistance may very well represent a new context for recoveries and extensions of critical Marxism. While periods of retreat and decomposition of working-class movements and the socialist Left have invariably produced excited obituaries proclaiming the obsolescence of Marx’s legacy, moments of radicalisation have stimulated rediscoveries of forgotten revolutionary dimensions of Marx’s own thought – one need think only of the recovery of the dialectical core of Marxism by the likes of Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci in the aftermath of the October Revolution, or the Marxist renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, any assessment of a major re-interpretation of Marx’s critical theory takes on heightened importance. We are not simply discussing the strengths and weaknesses of a brilliant theoretical paradigm, we are also debating a critical perspective for ‘storming the heavens’.

1 I would like to thank Sue Ferguson for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Historical Materialism, volume 12:3 (189–208)
© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2004
Also available online – www.brill.nl
Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination*\(^2\) deserves to be read and debated in these terms. Postone offers us one of the most comprehensive and stimulating re-readings of Marx’s thought in many years; his book helps to clear away many cobwebs of confusions. At the same time, I will argue, Postone muddies the water in crucial areas that directly concern prospects for anticapitalist social transformation. These shortcomings – having to do especially with the dialectics of labour, social mediation, meaning, and class struggle – will form the focus of my discussion. But, before proceeding to these, I wish to acknowledge Postone’s achievements.

**Critical achievements**

Postone’s re-reading of Marx performs the valuable service of cutting through a whole host of confusions that have plagued vulgar Marxisms. While these points have been made by previous commentators, this does not detract from the importance of Postone’s book in bringing them together in a particularly coherent account. Six specific critical achievements are worthy of note.

First, Postone effectively debunks views which define capitalism in terms of private ownership of the means of production and market allocation of goods – and which depict the socialist project in terms of freeing modern industrial production from these ‘fetters’. In contrast, he argues that the very relations, structures and inscribed logic of modern production are capitalist. Secondly, he maintains that Marx’s concept of value is a category of the productive process, and not simply one that pertains to the market.\(^3\) Indeed, he suggests that value relations structure crucial forms of experience of all members of capitalist society, particularly the experience of time. Thirdly, he delineates alienation and reification as central categories of Marx’s mature theory, concluding that the transcendence of capitalism crucially involves the abolition of alienated labour. Following from all of the above, he insists, fourthly, that the mere transfer of ownership of the means of production from a class of private owners to the state does not represent the overcoming of capitalism, but merely a change in its form.\(^4\) He thus argues, fifthly, that only a society based upon fundamentally different forms of social mediation – of relations among workers, the means of production, the natural environment

\(^{2}\) Postone 1996.
\(^{3}\) Postone 1996, p. 44.
\(^{4}\) Postone 1996, pp. 7, 40, 45.
and the products of labour – could be said to have departed from capitalism. Finally, he sets out an important critical response to the ‘pessimistic turn’ in the critical theory of the Frankfurt school (particularly in the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno) and of Jürgen Habermas’s ultimately liberal attempt to circumvent that turn by means of a theory of communicative action.

To have shed new light on these crucial issues is a considerable accomplishment. In the course of developing his arguments in these areas, Postone offers a series of powerful readings of Marxian texts that deserve careful consideration. Having said that, however, I intend to draw attention to some significant shortcomings in Postone’s interpretation of Marx, shortcomings which substantially undermine the critical thrust of his text. My assessment focuses on four interrelated problems: firstly, Postone’s flawed characterisation of capitalism as a system of ‘self-mediating labor’; secondly, his failure to grasp the dual character of labour in capitalist society; thirdly, the recurrent dualism in his treatment of labour and meaning; and, finally, his inability to derive the movement for socialism by means of immanent critique of capitalism and its theoretical categories.

Self-mediating labour?

Postone rightly emphasises that Marx’s theory pivots upon a critical analysis of the form of social mediation characteristic of capitalism. Curiously, however, he repeatedly refers to capitalism as a system of ‘self-mediating’ labour, one in which labour ‘mediates itself’. Not only is this description at odds with the dialectical categories he mobilises, it also extinguishes the critical charge of crucial Marxian concepts and detaches the case for socialism from the practical activity of the oppressed within capitalist society. Let us clarify the issues at stake by turning briefly to the concept of mediation in Hegel and Marx.

For Hegel, the question of mediation is at the heart of the problem of knowledge (and of ethical life), since an atomistic consciousness cannot know itself. The immediate self-certainty that individuals have, at the most, rudimentary level of self-awareness is ultimately dogmatic and cannot sustain scrutiny. Genuine self-knowledge requires that the individual self-consciousness break from its immediate (and flawed) self-certainty in order to discover its

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truth as a mediated self, one constituted in and through its social relations with others. The self-understanding generated in this dialectic of self and other moves from immediate self-certainty into a series of external oppositions between a self-contained consciousness (immediate being) and the mediations (other individuals, social institutions, the state, and so forth) that are experienced as standing over and against it in the form of limits, constraints and external determinations. Only when atomistic self-consciousness loses its immediate self-certainty and undertakes an arduous voyage of self-discovery in the sphere of otherness can self-consciousness begin to comprehend its being-for-itself as actualised in and through its being-for-others. The progress of knowledge thus entails the emergence of a human community organised in terms of mutual recognition of self and others (which are inseparable) in the complex of mediations that constitute social individuals. This establishes the inherent bond between reason and freedom: only in a truly ethical and free human community can the mediations that constitute us be recognised and claimed not as obstacles but as moments of self-mediation, at which point we arrive at ‘being or immediacy whose mediation is not outside of it but which is this mediation itself’. In a community that has not attained freedom, societal mediations have an alien ‘positivity’ over and against individuals who have not yet achieved true will. The human will, writes Hegel, is not truly a will ‘until it is this self-mediating activity, this return into itself’. Not until the self is self-actualising in and through its social determinations (mediations) have we arrived at ‘the concrete concept of freedom’. And this occurs only when history loses its external, thing-like character and becomes ‘a conscious, self-mediating process’.

Because self-mediation involves overcoming the antithesis between self and other, individual and society, it operates according to Hegel’s logic of true infinity. For Hegel, the genuinely infinite is not something outside the time of human history and experience, be it a God, or a realm of pure Forms. Genuine infinity – the universality which has been the project of philosophy and political life – lives only in and through the world of the finite. The true task of philosophy and political life is to transcend the mere externality of the infinite – as in religious depictions of a God utterly divorced from human historical time. It is only when finite, embodied, historical beings discover

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7 Hegel 1952, pp. 24–228.
8 Hegel 1977, p. 492.
the infinite within their world-building projects (spirit) that they arrive at true infinity. Genuine infinity is thus represented by the circle, by a movement that returns into itself – as a voyage of self-discovery in and through otherness. This is why ‘comprehended history’ is the form of absolute knowledge. Bad or false infinity, on the other hand, is represented by the straight line that goes on forever. In this state, the knowing subject never reaches a point of self-recognition in its mediations; the infinite remains something external and the individual moves endlessly from one unreconciled relation between self and other, particular and universal to another. Bad infinity entails, therefore, a sort of repetition-compulsion: human agents endlessly lose themselves in a world of otherness; each experience has essentially the same structure and results. There are no qualitative transformations that break the continuum and provide the grounds for self-development and self-return.

There can be little doubt that Marx found Hegel’s image of false infinity to be a powerful metaphor for crucial features of capitalism. But, whereas Hegel’s dialectic of self and other is grounded in the movement of consciousness, Marx foregrounds labour and language. Yet, Marx’s critical analysis demonstrates that capitalism systematically blocks human self-mediation, that it necessarily entails alienation and reification. Human objectifications do not ultimately reconnect with their authors in a self-mediating process. On the contrary, they are locked within a structure of ‘false infinity’ which involves a systematic loss of human meaning (reification). Let me briefly trace Marx’s argument in this regard.

As Postone recognises, capitalism is a system of alienated and reified social relations. Rather than human agents controlling their interrelations, they are controlled by them; these interrelations comprise an alien power over and against them. For this reason, capitalist social relations must express themselves in and through things – commodities and money. Indeed, this is what it means to operate within the framework of a system of commodity fetishism. As a result, we get a structure of social relations in which concrete acts of labour and their products acquire meaning only by endless reference to entities outside themselves.

Crucially, the value of commodities is constituted only via a (theoretically infinite) process of referral from one commodity to another. Since, in the first

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10 See McNally 2003.
11 See McNally 2001, Chapter 3.
instance, value is relative, the value of commodity A (the quantum of social necessary labour it embodies) can be determined only by comparison with that of commodities B, C, D . . . The value of a commodity is thus constituted in the first instance through a structure of difference – that is, by endless referral to every other commodity that is different from itself. This is the primary form of ‘the language of commodities’ which, as I have argued at length elsewhere, becomes the basis of the linguistic paradigms of poststructuralism and deconstructionism which uncritically reproduce the logic of infinite difference embedded in commodified social relations.12

The structure of commodity production and exchange is systematically antithetical to self-mediation; human subjects do not encounter forms of self-recognition (and self-mediation) here, they do not establish systems of meaning based upon a concrete unity of the being-for-self of the commodity as a product of specific acts of labour and its social meaning or value (its being-for-others). Mediation between particular and universal involves the intervention of an abstracted ‘third party’, a pseudo-mediator that forcibly holds together what is dis-integrated. In the case of the capitalist economy, the concrete particular is left behind – lost and forgotten – in the search for infinite exchangeability and abstract universality (a universal being-for-others that stands over and against its immediate being as a product of concrete acts of labour). This abstract universality is conferred by money.

Capitalist society ‘solves’ the problem of infinite deferral of meaning (value) through money, by designating one commodity (or its symbolic representative) as a universal equivalent which will be the measure of all others. Money represents the crystallisation of value in the form of a thing and/or a sign. As a result, the reference of commodities to money takes the form of a relation between appearance and essence; commodities find their value reflected back to them only through their translation into money (and price). Marx’s theory of money thus represents a concrete socio-historical form of the relationship Hegel describes in his doctrine of essence.

In his *Logic*, Hegel offers up a thoroughgoing critique of the standpoint of ‘reflection’ from which thought tries to locate an essence lurking behind (and independent of) phenomenal appearances. Because the relations among mere entities (beings) cannot provide a basis for universal truths, the doctrine of Being (and the standpoint of immediate entities) reverses itself into the doctrine

of Essence. Yet, the reflective outlook manages merely to counterpose abstract universals, or essences, to concrete phenomena. Hegel criticises this standpoint for mechanically dividing and then artificially connecting the two aspects of a dialectical relation. In the Doctrine of Essence, two sides of a relation are treated as independent entities external to one another, one inessential, the other essential. The concrete, phenomenal form of a thing is thus treated as inessential in relation to an Essence that lies outside itself: ‘[E]ssence is held to be something unaffected by, and subsisting in independence of, its definite phenomenal embodiment’.13

Something similar happens with commodities and money. Commodities are incapable of self-mediation because they embody an irreconcilable antagonism. On the one hand, they are concrete useful things (use-values) produced by specific acts of concrete labour. On the other hand, they are produced as commodities, as goods utterly bereft of specificity and capable, therefore, of exchange with all others. In entering into exchange, commodities undergo a metamorphosis: they leave behind their concrete form as specific goods capable of satisfying unique wants in order to become repositories of a single, abstract, commensurable (and hence interchangeable) substance – value. They move, in other words, from concrete particulars to abstract universals. But, rather than self-mediation, this movement involves simple alternation. Commodities are severed from their origins and forced through an abstracting process in which they become pure quanta of human labour in the abstract, labour abstracted from every element of its concrete, sensuous being. Commodities are thus embodiments of something intangible – human labour abstracted from all concrete acts of labour themselves. Yet, this movement from particularity (use-value) to universality (exchange-value/value) lacks genuine mediation. Rather than being dialectically related, these two sides of the commodity stand in simple opposition to one another. The antithesis between commodities and money merely expresses this absence of self-mediation.

Because the social meaning of commodities – value as expressed in money – is something radically separate from their being as use-values produced by unique and specific acts of labour, capitalism involves a systematic dislocation between sign (money) and referent (a specific commodity). Commodities do not refer back (or return) to the labour that produced them;

13 Hegel 1892, p. 212.
instead, they refer to the infinite abstraction (and abstract universality) of value with which they can never form a unity. Just as the standpoint of reflection finds an essence separate from phenomena, so the capitalist economy involves a structural dislocation between concrete being (use-value/concrete labour) and essence (value). Unable to achieve anything more than an abstract universality severed from concrete particularity, commodities are incapable of self-mediation. Since use-values refer merely to private, individual acts of production and consumption which lack social universality and exchangeability, the individual must acquire that separate essence (value) which manifests itself in the form of a thing (money). In bourgeois society, in other words, the social connection between people ‘appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing’. In the commodified society governed by access to money as repository of value, ‘the individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket’.14

Rather than a mere social convention, money is the necessary form of appearance of the alienated relations of commodified society. Commodities (and the abstract labour they embody) require an Other that reflects their value back to them; value appears as an essence over and against the mere beings, commodities and labourers, of the capitalist economy. The internal differentiation within the commodity can only be expressed through an ‘external opposition’ – by having money stand over and against commodities as their essence.15

This point is crucial. Self-mediation involves concrete universality – the living unity of universal and particular which is the token of human freedom. An abstract universal denuded of all determination and particularity represents a pseudo-solution to the antagonism of particular (use-value, concrete labour) and universal (value, abstract labour). Just as Hegel’s doctrine of the state involves the pseudo-solution of bringing in an alien ‘third party’ to overcome the antagonism between private will and general will, bourgeois and citizen, so money merely reproduces the antagonism between use-value and value, concrete and abstract labour – indeed, this is the symmetry between Hegel’s philosophy and classical political economy remarked upon by the young Marx. Money and the state represent, therefore, abstract universals that reproduce the very contradictions they are ostensibly meant to resolve. Far from accomplishing a ‘mediation’, a middle term such as this ‘is the

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15 Marx 1976, p. 199.
embodiment of a contradiction’. Indeed, capitalism is, in the first instance, crisis-prone precisely because commodities and money exist in an antithetical relation. On the one hand, commodities are merely a means to money (and the failure of their metamorphosis into money is a crisis); on the other hand, money, as the hoarder soon discovers, is only a means to commodities – and those commodities (particularly labour-power) are in turn merely a means to money, and so on. That this alternation continues ad infinitum – that, in Hegel’s words, the relationship ‘sets up with endless iteration the alternation between these two terms’ – marks capitalism as a system of false infinity, one lacking genuine self-mediation, that is, the return to self (self-recognition) of labourers in the sphere of their products. The universal form – money – does not become the ground for the self-expression of concrete labour; instead, it is an external (abstract) universal that negates concrete labour. Moreover, this relationship produces a runaway process of unregulated accumulation. The unmediated relation between commodities and money is, in other words, the foundation upon which capitalist crises arise: ‘In a crisis, the antithesis between commodities and their value-form, money, is raised to the level of an absolute contradiction’.

It should be clear from the above that Postone’s characterisation of capitalism as a system in which labour mediates itself is deeply flawed. Rather than a structure of self-mediating labour, capitalism is a structure of systematic abstraction, a structure of false infinity in which labour is systematically forgotten and effaced – and which, for that very reason, is prone to crises in the translation of commodities into money. As I show below, Postone’s error in this regard weighs heavily on his treatment of the working class in capitalist society and plays havoc with his account of the prospects for transcending capitalism.

**Beyond a one-dimensional theory of labour under capitalism**

Postone might well reply that the system of self-mediation to which he refers is that of self-mediating abstract labour. This would make some sense of the alternative formulations he offers with respect to social mediation under capitalism. At various points, for example, he refers to the ‘commodity form

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17 Marx 1976, p. 236. For more on this point see McNally 2003.
of social mediation’,18 to capital as ‘a self-mediating social mediation’,19 and
to value as a social mediator.20 Yet, to conflate labour, commodity, capital and
value in this fashion, as different ways of describing a single process of social
mediation, is indicative of the one-dimensional concept of labour under
capitalism that bedevils Time, Labor and Social Domination.

Postone goes to great lengths to differentiate Marx’s concept of labour-in-
general from labour-under-capitalism. This is a welcome corrective to
transhistorical perspectives and their fetishistic conflation of wage-labour
with labour-in-general. But Postone then errs in treating purely alienated,
instrumentalised labour as an accomplished brute fact of capitalism, rather
than a tendential drive. This results in a one-dimensional account of labour
in capitalist society, one which loses sight of the dual nature of commodity-
producing labour and the critical charge this concept carries.

Marx regularly insists that the same labour is simultaneously concrete and
abstract, that the capitalist labour process involves the simultaneous production
of use-values and values: ‘two different sorts of labor certainly are not stuck
in the commodity, but rather the same labor is determined differently and
even oppositionally’.21 And one manifestation of this oppositional determination
of labour – of its antagonistic dual structure – is class struggle. Capital’s drive
to fully subsume labour, to instrumentalise it, to strip it of all embodiment
and subjectivity, runs up against its dependence on concrete, living labour –
sentient, embodied, thinking, self-conscious labour. Abstract labour cannot
become a total, self-sufficient system; without its origin in concrete labour
(an origin it represses and denies), abstract labour could not exist. It is this
reality that vulgar bourgeois economics tries to efface by building its models
on interest-bearing capital – that ‘pure fetish form’, money that gives birth
to money and ‘no longer bears any mark of its origin’.22 Yet, Marx’s critical
examination of interest-bearing capital in the manuscripts published as Volume
III of Capital, thoroughly deconstructs this myth of self-birth capital. Marx
demonstrates the insurmountable dependence of capital on wage-labour. In
so doing, he undermines its pretensions to autonomy (unmediated self-
reproduction), and he grounds the inherent struggle between labour and
capital in the duality of the commodity and the labour that produces it.

19 Postone 1996, p. 263.
21 As quoted by Murray 1988, p. 150.
Moreover, this opposition between use-value and value, concrete labour and abstract labour, involves a clash between structures of meaning and life-projects. Because he tends to one-dimensionalise the abstracting logic of capital, its ultimately unrealisable drive to completely commodify and reify living labour, Postone misses this crucial point. An integral part of the problem here is Postone’s static distinction between two modes of critique of capitalism: ‘a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor on the one hand, and a critique of labor in capitalism on the other’. Marx’s critique of capital – whose starting point is a critical analysis of the commodity-form – develops a critique of labour in capitalism that grounds itself in the standpoint of the labouring class. But this standpoint – the position of the class that produces an alien world of wealth and power that dominates it – is not taken as a presupposition, but unfolded as a result of the critique of capital. To commence his critique from the standpoint of labour would, in scientific terms, have been an entirely dogmatic undertaking. But, in developing a critical anatomy of the commodity-form, Marx reveals the fundamental contradictions that render capitalism a barrier to the self-development of the labouring majority. The goals of capitalist production – surplus-value, capital – are demonstrated to be antagonistic to its essential presupposition – concrete labourers, bearers of labour-power. The very forms of labour in capitalism – alienated, commodity-producing wage-labour – are shown to constitute systematic obstacles to the life-activity of those whose labour is the origin of capital. The system is shown to be incapable of self-mediating structures: its results conflict with its origins, the contradiction at the heart of the commodity remains unreconciled.

But, because he tends to treat labour in capitalism as a thing – as thoroughly alienated, abstracted and instrumentalised (which is perhaps why he can conflate it with the commodity and capital) – Postone fails to grasp the power of an immanent critique grounded in the duality of labour in capitalism. He accepts the disembodiment and de-subjectification of labour, which are inherent in the logic of capital, as an established fact. This becomes especially clear when we look at his discussions of labour and meaning.

Postone argues that ‘labor itself does not impart meaning’; rather, it ‘acquires its meaning from the social relations in which it is embedded’. 23 Yet, this dualism of labour and meaning – a staple of bourgeois thought as I have

23 Postone 1996, pp. 240, 220–1. It is instructive that he makes the first of these cited remarks with respect to ‘concrete labour’.
argued elsewhere\textsuperscript{24} – de-dialecticises Marx’s concept of labour in capitalism. Indeed, it reduces labour to the technical process of producing things, while treating the structure of social relations as something external which is mapped on to the productive process. This differentiation of productive activity from external social relations is a leitmotif of bourgeois political economy, one that Marx critically dissected. In the course of his critical analysis, Marx argued that bourgeois economists ‘do indeed realize how production takes place within capitalist relations. But they do not understand how those relations are themselves produced’. They fail to grasp, in other words, that wage-labour simultaneously creates commodities, surplus-value, capital and the very conditions of wage-labour itself. They do not understand, in other words, that capitalist production is also the reproduction of capitalist social relations: ‘The social relations and therefore the social position of the agents of production in relation to each other, i.e. the relations of production, are themselves produced: they are also the constantly renewed result of the process’.\textsuperscript{25} In revealing this side of bourgeois production, Marx demonstrated that social relations and structures of social meaning are not externally related to labour (as the standpoint of reflection would have it). Instead, labour in capitalist society produces and reproduces the social meanings that are embedded in the prevailing social relations. At the same time, these relations and meanings are inherently antagonistic. In demonstrating this, Marx offers us an account of labour under capitalism which entails what V.N. Voloshinov called ‘a struggle over meaning’.

**Concrete labour, abstract labour and the struggle over meaning**

Above, I referred to Marx’s treatment of ‘the language of commodities’. A close reading of this discussion indicates that Marx saw capitalism as generating unique historical forms of experience and meaning. Indeed, Postone provides an illuminating discussion of one such structure – abstract time. However, he fails to tease out the contradiction between abstract and concrete time (which is always also spatial), once again neglecting the dual forms of experience in capitalist society.

As we have seen, capital drives to fully transform living labour into infinitely malleable, flexible segments of that pure quantum – human labour in the

\textsuperscript{24} McNally 2001, Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{25} Marx, ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’ in Marx 1976, p. 1065.
abstract. But this drive – like the pure fetish of money that breeds money out of itself – is, despite its social effectivity, ultimately unrealisable; it is part of the false infinity of capital which tries to efface its origin in concrete, living labour. This is so in significant part because, as Lukács noted, ‘for the worker labour-time is not merely the objective form of the commodity he has sold, i.e. his labour-power... In addition it is the determining form of his existence as subject, as human being’.26 For this reason, the circuit of capital, in which labour-power is a mere means to value augmentation, cannot constitute a concrete totality, however much it drives to totalise. As Michael Lebowitz has pointed out, the circuit of capital cannot comprise a self-positing totality, since it presupposes a circuit outside itself in which labourers consume and reproduce themselves. Without what Lebowitz has appropriately called ‘the circuit of wage-labour’, the reproduction of capital is not possible.27

Postone has an intimation of this. He writes, for instance, that

> although M-C-M’ describes the movement of the social totality, the circuit C-M-C remains of primary importance for the majority of people in capitalist society, who depend upon the sale of labor power in order to buy means of consumption.28

Postone’s recognition that the majority of people in capitalist society do not organise their lives in terms of the circuit of capital, that is they do not buy commodities (particularly labour-power) for purposes of accumulation, acknowledges that they follow a different circuit in which their exchange with capital (for wages) is a means to acquire the means of consumption. Yet, he does not take up the radical implications of this insight: that, just as wage-labourers are dependent on capital, so capital is dependent on the reproduction of labourers which takes place in and through a circuit it does not control. Not only does capital’s circuit not comprise the path of a self-reproducing totality, but the alternative circuit, that of wage-labour, has a goal and a

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27 Lebowitz 1992 argues persuasively that this circuit ought to have formed the basis of Marx’s unwritten book on wage-labour. This argument also converges nicely with Marxist-feminist insights into the sociobiological reproduction of labour-power (including future wage-labourers). On this, see Vogel 1983.
28 Postone 1996, p. 268. Note, however, the one-dimensionality even here. While the circuit of capital defines the tendential laws of motion of bourgeois society, it does not constitute the whole movement of the social totality; if it did, there would not be class struggle. It is true that, when examining the process from the side of capital, Marx treats workers’ consumption as a moment in the reproduction of capital – which it in part is – but this, as he regularly points out, is not the whole story.
dynamic antagonistic to capital. Whereas labour is, for capital, simply a means to value augmentation, capital is for labour merely the source of the universal equivalent necessary for the comforts of life. The telos of capital – accumulation as an end in itself – thus clashes with the telos of wage-labour: consumption as an end in itself, as a means to self-development. Indeed, there is a political economy of labour inscribed within the logic of this circuit, a political economy in which production serves as a means of finite life, not infinite accumulation – one whose first victory, not surprisingly, was in the struggle to shorten the working day and whose social form is anticipated in co-operative production. Voloshinov located a struggle over the sign at the heart of language, he was largely translating into the discourse of linguistics the very struggle over meaning that Marx traces in Capital. In so doing, however, Voloshinov made explicit a dimension of Marx’s critical theory that has gone unrecorded within most Marxisms (thereby assisting its vulgar forms). Voloshinov’s insistence that ‘sign becomes an arena of the class struggle’ implicitly recognises that the class struggle is not just about the distribution of the fruits of labour, it is also about the very meaning of our life-activity. Thing and sign, labour and meaning are not separate spheres of being. Contra Aristotle, labour (the production of goods) and praxis (the creation of meanings) are not inherently distinct. Their severance – a product of the division of mental and manual labour – is bound up with the divisions of labour in class society. Moreover, these separations are always partial. As Gramsci insisted, ‘[t]here is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: homo faber cannot be separated from homo sapiens’. As I have argued above, capital never manages to entirely instrumentalise labour, to liquidate its

29 Marx 1974, p. 79. See also Lebowitz 1992, Chapter 4 and McNally 1993, Chapter 5.
30 Voloshinov 1973, p. 23. For a fuller discussion, including an evaluation of the strengths and shortcomings of Voloshinov’s account, see McNally 1997 and 2000, Chapter 4.
qualities of sentient, desiring, thinking being. And working-class struggles are never merely technical-economic conflicts, however much bourgeois legality and professional trade unionism may aspire to treat them so (a perspective which Postone tends to reproduce theoretically).

Class struggles from the standpoint of labour entail, in some small part, resistance to the commodity form of labour and the forms of social meaning associated with it. It is at this point in the analysis that the critique of labour in capitalism converges with a critique of capital from the standpoint of labour. Those social interests that constitute the standpoint of labour are inherently antagonistic to the capitalist form of labour. This is not to say that labourers inevitably recognise capital as a fundamental barrier to the realisation of their life-projects. It is to insist, however, that, by means of immanent critique, Marx shows the logic of this recognition (which is simultaneously a self-recognition).

Bodies, spaces and the circuit of capital

One of the premises of Marx’s critique is the embodied nature of human life. Each time I have described the unrealisability of capital’s drive to thoroughly abstract and instrumentalise human labour, it has been with this premise in mind. After all, Marx’s insistence on embodiment points to the irreducibility of concrete space and time. One of the reasons Postone misses the dual nature of labour in capitalist society has to do with his inattention to embodiment, to the question of finite bodies and spaces. For, despite his highly insightful discussion of abstract time, Postone neglects its articulation with concrete time, with the lived time of finite, embodied humans.

Concrete time is, by nature, spatialised; it refers to the lived space-time that Bakhtin conceptualises, with respect to literature, with the term ‘chronotope’. As much as capital aspires to annihilate space by time, it is in fact bounded by and dependent upon concrete space and concrete labour. Value requires spatialisation – a passage through concrete labouring bodies, actual use-values, specific technologies and sites of production, distribution and consumption. These are the irreducibly material (finite, spatial, concretely

32 But note: this convergence is derived from the critique of capital, not dogmatically presupposed.
33 This is not a premise derived from the critique of capital, but from the critique of idealism (as set out in Part One of the German Ideology in particular).
34 Bakhtin 1981.
temporal) life processes without which capital cannot reproduce itself. Capital’s self-reproduction is thus inherently self-undermining; it seeks to annihilate the very material presuppositions of its own reproduction. Its false infinity regularly runs up against finitude – and this is a central feature of its crises.35

Nature and fixed capital both constitute limits to capital. Natural limits are expressed in terms of human environmental crisis, while fixed capital limits manifest themselves in crises of profitability.36 But it is labourers who, as producers of the capital relation, possess the capacities to overturn capital. And, because of the logic of their life projects – expressed in the circuit of wage-labour and its associated meanings – they have an interest in doing so. Indeed, Marx’s demonstration of this is central to his immanent (that is, non-dogmatic) derivation of the movement for socialism. However, having proceeded on the basis of a one-dimensional account of labour in capitalist society, having systematically neglected the dimensions of space, embodiment, concrete time and concrete labour, Postone cannot ground an anticapitalist and postcapitalist alternative in the immanent logic of capital. He thus falters with respect to the question of agency.

**Contradictions of working-class experience in capitalism**

Two of Postone’s formulations illustrate what is at stake. He tells us at one point that ‘Both the proletariat and the capitalist class are bound to capital, but the former is more so’.37 Then, turning to ‘the dialectic of transformation and reconstitution’ of society, he informs us that the determinate negation of capitalism is possible only ‘if people appropriate what had been constituted historically as capital’.38 The inadequacy of the latter formulation – with its vaguely populist injunction for ‘people’ to so act – follows decisively from the former proposition.

I say this with no intent of reinstating a theory of the working class as spontaneously, automatically or inevitably anticapitalist. Such positions are merely the mirror image of those which depict the working class as totally integrated into capitalism (a point at which, ironically, Postone rejoins the

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35 These issues have figured centrally in the work of David Harvey (especially 1982 and 2000). See also McNally 2003.
36 I provide a brief outline of the dynamics of the latter in McNally 1999 and of both dynamics in McNally 2003.
37 Postone 1996, p. 357.
pessimistic political conclusion of mainstream critical theory). Theories of the working class as inevitably revolutionary or as totally integrated are equally one-dimensional. The first perspective trivialises the integrative tendencies of working-class experience in capitalism, while the second absolutises them. Each fails to grasp the contradictory unity of the integrative and disintegrative tendencies of working-class experience within capitalism. Because of his one-dimensional theory of labour in capitalism as thoroughly instrumentalised and reified, Postone can theorise the working class as more integrated into capitalism than the capitalist class.

It is not that Postone is entirely wrong when he writes that

the class struggle viewed from the workers’ perspective involves constituting, maintaining and improving their position and situation as members of a working class.39

This formulation contains a vitally important partial truth. The circuit of wage-labour does centrally involve the exchange of labour-power for variable capital (wages); a failure to complete this exchange directly threatens workers’ life projects. An adaptation to the circuit of capital is inscribed within the life experience of all workers (and comprises part of the experiential basis of working-class reformism). But, to leave the analysis here, as Postone does, is to flatten out working-class experience and to abstract from the tensions and contradictions it embodies. For, as I have argued, working-class struggles also entail a counter-logic to that of capital. This is manifest in the political economy of labour with its push to subordinate production to human ends, however partial that subordination. Struggles to limit the working day, establish standards of health and safety, create minimum wages, defend workers’ autonomy on the job, guarantee job security, provide social benefits to the entire working class, to overturn water privatisation – contain a non-capitalist logic, a logic outside that of capital, even if capitalists are often capable of adjusting to them.

Central to Marx’s argument for the working class as the agency of socialist transformation is his recognition that the political economy of labour cannot be realised within the framework of wage-labour/capital relations. Even when labour movements win concessions from capital, the logic of capital is to undermine and overturn all such concessions, however much capitalists may accept them as socially necessary at given moments in time. Indeed, if the

era of marauding neoliberalism has made anything apparent, it is the

tenuousness of all capitalist concessions to the political economy of labour.\footnote{This point need not entail any romanticism about the bureaucratic Keynesian
welfare state. It simply entails recognition of both a different context for world capitalism
and a changed balance of class forces.}

But, having set out from his one-dimensional theory of labour in capitalism
(and the flawed notion of self-mediating labour that accompanies it), Postone
cannot illuminate those tensions within working-class experience that constitute
the possible grounds of a transformative project. Thus, while he offers us
capitalism with internal contradictions, he can provide no coherent account
of the contradictory experience of those human agents within capitalism
whose life projects constitute the starting point for any project to transcend
the system. It is as if he imagines that crises in the reproduction of capitalism
do not simultaneously involve crises of working-class self-reproduction, crises
that might be \textit{experienced} as such. In short, Postone cannot ground an
anticapitalist dynamic (however partial and contradictory) within the lived
experience of actual social groups. As a result, his theory cannot fulfil Marx’s
dialectical injunction to ‘find the new world through the critique of the old’.\footnote{Marx 1973, p. 207.}

As a consequence, he gestures to a vague hope that ‘people’ might come to
see the irrationality of a system based on value production. For this reason,
Postone’s argument does not represent the advance on mainstream critical
theory to which he aspires. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, he offers us an
analysis of an increasingly irrational social system bereft of an account of the
agency through which that irrationality might be repaired.

In making this criticism, I am not faulting Postone for failing to treat the
complex problems of working-class experience, struggle, consciousness and
organisation that figured so centrally in the writings of Gramsci and the early
Lukács. Since that is not his object of study, this would be to offer an entirely
external criticism. Instead, I am mobilising an internal critique, one which
locates a glaring practical-political deficit that emanates from a flawed theory
of labour and social mediation under capitalism. My objection is not that
Postone fails to work through the problems of working-class consciousness
and self-organisation; it is that, within his undialectical account of labour,
these questions cannot meaningfully be raised. Since the working class is, in
his view, a more intrinsic part of capitalism than the capitalist class, all
discussions of the contradictions within working-class experience that might be the starting point for an anticapitalist project are rendered empty.

For all its insights, then, Postone fails to provide a genuinely dialectical interpretation of Marx’s theory of capitalism. His book demonstrates, by default, that an adequate reconstruction of Marx’s theory is not possible without renewing its account of the dual nature of labour in capitalist society. It is that revolutionary insight, derived from the immanent critique of bourgeois political economy, which grounds the Marxian theories of class conflict and the struggle over meaning in capitalism. More than this, this insight allows us to discern the grounds of the movement for socialism in the self-development of modern society.

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Karen Miller

The Question of Time in Postone’s
Time, Labor and Social Domination

Although the idea of time was fundamental in his thinking, Karl Marx did not explicitly articulate a concept of time in his writings. Nonetheless, his ideas concerning the subject have inspired a number of important studies by Marxist writers who, since the 1960s, have been investigating the socially constructed nature of time. This has involved exploring the notion of the ‘everyday’, the revolutionary and political implications of the construction of time as well as the relationship between the structural elements and the human experience of time.¹ Marx’s ideas about time as expressed in his writings, however, remained largely unexamined until Moishe Postone’s Time, Labor and Social Domination, published in 1993.²

Significantly, Postone has made time a central element of his ‘reinterpretation’ of Marx’s ‘mature’ critical theory. By placing considerations of temporality at the centre of Marx’s analysis, he lays the foundation for an analysis of modern capitalist society as a ‘directionally dynamic society structured by a

² The subject of time in Marx’s writings has also been examined, although not in detail, in Gould 1978, McCarthy 1988 and Booth 1991.
historically unique form of social mediation that, though socially constituted, has an abstract, impersonal, quasi-objective character. In suggesting that Marxian theory should be understood as a critical theory specific to capitalist society, rather than as a universally applicable theory, Postone bases his argument on an analysis of the historical specificity of capitalism 'by means of categories that grasp its specific forms of labor, wealth and time'. In particular, he subjects 'traditional-Marxist' views of labour to critique, then presents his reconstruction of Marx's theory through an analysis of the commodity, and finally considers the directional, dynamic nature of the trajectory of capitalist development through a reconstruction of Marx's theory of capital.

In Part One of his book, Postone criticises 'traditional Marxism', a term he applies to a diverse range of theoretical approaches that analyse capitalism from the 'standpoint of labour' and consequently characterise capitalist society as structured by private ownership of the means of production and a market-regulated economy; that understands relations of domination primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation; and that focus on the mode of distribution, rather than production. He argues that, at the core of all forms of traditional Marxism, is a transhistorical conception of labour, according to which labour is understood:

in terms of a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating specific products in order to satisfy determinate human needs. Labor, so understood, is considered to lie at the heart of all social life: it constitutes the social world and is the source of all social wealth. This approach attributes to social labor transhistorically what Marx analyzed as historically specific features of labor in capitalism.

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1 Postone 1993, p. 5.
2 Ibid.
3 Postone 1993, p. 7. Postone includes thinkers as diverse as Paul Sweezy, Ernest Mandel, Maurice Dobb, Rudolf Hilferding, Joan Robinson, Helmut Reichelt, and Georg Lukács (see his Chapter Two entitled 'Presuppositions of traditional Marxism', pp. 43–83). In so doing, he has opened himself to various criticisms. For example, Martin Jay writes that 'the intellectual historian will want to know why Marx was so easily and consistently misunderstood by the multifarious figures Postone lumps together under the rubric of “traditional Marxism”; this is not a trivial issue' (Jay 1993, p. 186). Similarly, Joseph Fracchia notes that 'the sweeping character of his category “traditional Marxism” might be disturbing. It is easy, for example, to be skeptical about what might seem to be making fellow travellers out of Marxisms as diverse as the reductionist Soviet version and the innovative Western theoretical tradition' (Fracchia 1995, p. 357).
4 Postone 1993, pp. 7–8.
He suggests that, so conceived, labour underlies a uniform, evolutionary dialectic that drives the history of all societies. It is an approach, he argues, that no longer grasps social reality adequately, particularly in the light of the growing importance of scientific knowledge and advanced technology in the process of production.\(^7\)

In Part Two, through a consideration of the *Grundrisse*, Postone demonstrates that Marx’s mature theory developed categories that are historically specific. He argues that Marx established the historical specificity of the commodity by exposing its dual nature as a product of concrete and abstract labour, and by regarding value as an historically specific form of wealth that presupposes an historically specific form of labour. He then notes that value does not refer to wealth in general, but ‘should be examined as a form of wealth whose specificity is related to its temporal determination’\(^8\) in that value is measured by ‘abstract time’, which, in turn, is an historically specific, socially constructed, concept. Postone further argues that the forms of social mediation and domination constructed in capitalism are historically specific, and therefore distinguishable from non-capitalist societies, which are characterised by ‘manifest social relations’ through which ‘the social distribution of labor and its products is effected’.\(^9\) He suggests that the mediation of social relations by abstract labour creates a ‘determinate sort of social whole – a totality’ through which social relations are established through commodity exchange, which, in turn, creates an ‘abstract’, or ‘quasi-objective’ form of capitalist domination.\(^10\)

Finally, in Part Three, Postone considers how capital consists of a quasi-autonomous developmental logic which constitutes social structures that exert an impersonal compulsion on people, and that expropriate and usurp the human attributes of ‘agency’.\(^11\) He argues that this form of social domination ‘induces a rapid historical development in the productive power and knowledge of humanity’,\(^12\) generating an historical dynamic and ‘trajectory’ of development that is beyond the control of individuals.\(^13\) Postone describes the movement of historical time that this dynamic generates as a ‘treadmill effect’, consisting

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\(^7\) Postone 1993, p. 10.
\(^8\) Postone 1993, p. 123.
\(^9\) Postone 1993, p. 149.
\(^12\) Postone 1993, p. 30.
\(^13\) Postone 1993, p. 31.
of dialectical movement of ‘transformation and reconstitution’ which intensifies capital’s fundamental contradiction, eventually rendering it obsolete. He argues that, through the development of technological capacity, value becomes increasingly inadequate as a measure of the material wealth produced, thus giving rise to the immanent possibility of a new social form, one in which human relations are not mediated by abstract labour. Postone contends that his interpretation of Marx’s critical theory provides a basis for analysing the nature of the dynamic of modern society which has become increasingly dominated by state and bureaucratic institutions; for understanding current global social and economic transformations; and for recovering Marx’s notion of socialism as a postcapitalist form of social life, where the historically specific role of labour in capitalism could be superseded by another form of social mediation.  

Reviewers of Postone’s book have, in general, reacted positively, describing it as a ‘complex, dense, richly argued and rewarding monograph’; a ‘skilful reconstruction of Marx’s critique’; the ‘fruit of long years of research and lengthy meditation’ that is ‘well worth waiting for’; and a ‘timely study’ which contains valuable resources for a renewed discussion of Marx in the face of the demise of Eastern European Communism, the consequent global socio-economic restructuring and the continued unresolved nature of the crises of capitalism. They generally concede that, even for those who hold other perspectives, Postone’s argument ‘opens fresh departure points for the ongoing debate over Marx and Marxism’. In relation to the subject of time, Postone’s discussion of temporality is regarded as ‘especially novel and incisive’.

While Postone’s analysis undoubtedly enhances our understanding of Marx’s concept of time, certain aspects of the argument are controversial, including his claim that it ‘delineates Marx’s final break with... notions of the philosophy of history’. Moreover, particular elements of his understanding of time are open to question, not the least of which are his rejection of the
transhistoricity of time in favour of its historical specificity, his emphasis on deterministic forces over human agency as a force underlying the construction of time, and his analysis of the nature of the relationship between abstract and concrete time. This article addresses some of these concerns by outlining Postone’s reconstitution of Marx’s concept of historical time, then by noting how his ideas relate to questions of transhistoricity and historical specificity, human agency and deterministic forces, and abstract and concrete time.

**Postone’s interpretation of Marx’s understanding of time**

Just as Postone stresses the historical specificity of labour in capitalism, so too does he emphasise the historical specificity of its temporal aspects. In endorsing the notion that historical time, as a directional, dynamic ‘whole’, is historically specific to capitalism, he asserts that, although there is a logic of history, it is immanent only to capitalism, not to human history as a whole. History, he argues, is not a moving force in every human society, nor is there a general directional dynamic of history. In articulating this position, Postone:

> seeks to explain the existence of the sort of ongoing directional dynamic that defines modern society. . . . This analysis implies that any theory that posits an immanent logic to history as such – whether dialectical or evolutionary – without grounding this logic in a determinate process of social constitution . . . projects as the history of humanity the qualities specific to capitalism. This projection necessarily obscures the actual social basis of a directional dynamic of history. The historical process is thereby transformed from the object of social analysis into its quasi-metaphysical presupposition.  

Further, he suggests that the movement of history in capitalism is constituted by two forms of time, which he refers to as ‘abstract time’ and ‘historical time’, the latter of which is a specific form of ‘concrete time’. According to Postone, time in capitalism:

> is not simply a linear succession of presents but is a complex dialectic of two forms of constituted time. It involves the accumulation of the past in a form that entails the ongoing reconstitution of the fundamental features of capitalism as an apparently necessary present, marked by the domination

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22 Postone 1993, p. 305.
23 Postone 1993, pp. 305-6.
of abstract, homogenous, constant time, of time as present – even as it is hurtled forward by another form of time, which is concrete, heterogeneous and directional. This latter movement of time is ‘historical time’.24

Postone establishes the basis of this view of historical time in his discussion of the contradiction inherent in the commodity-form, which is a product of both concrete and abstract labour. He argues that, while concrete labour produces use-values, which constitute ‘material wealth’, abstract labour produces ‘value’ which is a form of wealth that is historically specific to capitalism. Postone contends that it is this twofold character of labour that creates the historical dynamic that constitutes historical time as a dialectic between ‘concrete time’ and ‘abstract time’. He suggests, for example, that a distinction can be made between the use-value dimension of the forms ‘(concrete labor, material wealth, concrete time)’ and the ‘value dimension of the forms (abstract labor, value, abstract time)’.25 Further, he understands the interrelationship between these two non-identical dimensions as ‘not simply a static opposition; rather the two moments of labor in capitalism, as productive activity and as a socially mediating activity, are mutually determining in a way that gives rise to an immanent dialectical dynamic’.26

Postone argues that concrete and abstract labour, and hence material wealth and value, are distinguished by the way in which they are measured, that is, by two different forms of time. The measure of material wealth, he argues:

> can have a temporal aspect, but in the absence of the form of temporal necessity associated with the value dimension, this temporality is a substantive function of production – the amount of time actually required to produce a particular product. This time is a function of objectification and not a norm for expenditure. The changes in this concrete time of production which occur with the development of productivity are changes reflecting the historical movement of time.27

Thus, material wealth is measured ‘either in terms of changes in the quantity of goods produced per unit time, for example, or in terms of changes in the amount of time required to produce a particular product’.28 In contrast, value ‘is measured not in terms of the particular objectifications of various labors,'29

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26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
but in terms of what they all have in common, regardless of their specificity – the expenditure of labor', which is ‘abstract time’. Thus, the measure of value becomes ‘socially necessary’, expressing a general temporal norm to which producers must conform: ‘[A]s a category of the totality, socially necessary labor time expresses a quasi-objective social necessity with which the producers are confronted. . . . The social totality constituted by labor as an objective general mediation has a temporal character, wherein time becomes necessity’.30

Postone, then, makes a clear distinction between two forms of time, concrete time and abstract time. Concrete time, he argues, refers to ‘various sorts of time that are functions of events: they are referred to, and understood through, natural cycles and the periodicities of human life as well as particular tasks or processes’.31 Abstract time refers to ‘uniform, continuous, homogeneous, “empty” time’, which is independent of events and processes. With abstract time, motion and events occur within time as an independent framework, where time is a mathematical time, divisible into ‘equal constant, nonqualitative units’.32 He demonstrates the way in which concrete time, which characterised precapitalist societies, came to be superseded by abstract time as a dominant form of time with the development of capitalism.

Postone argues that the modes of time reckoning associated with concrete time are based on repetitive natural events such as days, lunar cycles or seasons, or on temporal units that vary in length, and that these modes were dominant in the ancient world and medieval Europe. He suggests that abstract time, which divided time into even, commensurable, interchangeable segments, originated around the fourteenth century in Europe and gradually superseded concrete time, thus transforming the social significance of time so that, by the seventeenth century, it ‘was well on its way to becoming socially hegemonic’.35

In explaining the emergence of abstract time, Postone refutes technological-determinist arguments that suggest that it was the development of the mechanical clock that effected the change in the constitution of time, arguing, instead, that the transition was due to a change in sociocultural processes. The mechanical clock, he suggests, ‘does not, in and of itself, necessarily give

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31 Postone 1993, p. 201.
33 Ibid.
rise to abstract time’. 34 He supports his argument by reference to historical examples which demonstrate that many precapitalist societies marked variable hours even when they possessed the technical ability to mark equal hours. 35 In short, Postone contends this was because equal hours were not significant in terms of the organisation of social life. 36

Postone then demonstrates how constant hours became meaningful in the organisation of social time. He argues that, although the monasteries emphasised time discipline and time keeping, the mechanical clock originated in the urban centres, which, by the end of the thirteenth century, had developed a greater need for time regulation. Postone suggests, however, that this need was related more specifically to the desire to regulate labour, which was achieved initially through the use of work bells in the emerging cloth-making trade, the first industry to develop an early form of the capital/wage-labour relationship. 37 Thus, he argues that ‘the emergence of such a new form of time was related to the development of the commodity form of social relations’. 38

In examining this social context, Postone notes that mechanical clocks spread rapidly in Western Europe throughout the fourteenth century. He suggests that, while, initially, abstract time did not impinge on rural life or the majority of the urban populace, affecting only merchants and the small number of wage-earners, it came to exert a more widespread form of domination – the ‘tyranny of time in capitalist society’ – as the commodity-form gradually became the dominant structuring form of social life over the following centuries. 39

In arguing that the forms of concrete time that dominated precapitalist society were superseded by abstract time as capitalist society developed, Postone nonetheless stresses that the ‘opposition between abstract and concrete time overlaps, but is not fully identical, with the opposition between time in

35 Postone gives the example of China, which, after the second century BC, used one system of constant hours devised by the Babylonians, and, moreover, devised a sophisticated water-clock between 1088 and 1094 AD which measured constant hours and was used for astronomical calculations. Yet, Postone argues, these measures were not significant in the organisation of social life. Similarly, the Japanese retained variable hours after the mechanical clock was adopted from the Europeans in the sixteenth century, and even modified the mechanical clock to read variable hours (Postone 1993, pp. 204–6).
36 Postone 1993, pp. 203–7.
38 Postone 1993, p. 211.
capitalist society and time in pre-capitalist societies'. Indeed, he points out that, not only does the opposition between concrete and abstract time that he refers to relate to two forms of time, rather than two modes of time measurement, but capitalist society also constitutes a particular form of concrete time as well as abstract time.

Postone argues that the opposition between the two forms of concrete and abstract time in capitalism generates an historical dynamic that is based on the interaction of the two dimensions of the commodity. This interaction involves a 'substantive redetermination of an abstract temporal constant' where the 'abstract temporal measure of value remains constant, yet it has a changing, if hidden, social content'. In short, as productivity increases, the time unit becomes 'denser' in terms of the amount of goods produced, yet this density is not manifested in the value sphere, as the abstract temporal unit and the total value produced remain constant. Postone points to the paradoxical nature of this situation, where the 'abstract time frame remains constant despite being re-determined substantively'.

Postone suggests that such a paradox is resolved by reference, not only to a framework of abstract time, but also to a form of concrete time as a superordinate frame of reference. He explains that 'changes in productivity move the determination of socially necessary labor time along an axis of abstract time', but 'although the social labor hour is thereby re-determined, it is not moved along that axis'. Rather, it remains fixed in abstract temporal terms so that each new level of productivity is re-determined 'back' as the base level, yielding the same rate of value. Postone goes on to argue however, that, because a new level of productivity has been achieved, the 'position' of that abstract temporal unit changes:

The entire abstract temporal axis, or frame of reference, is moved with each socially general increase in productivity; both the social labor hour and the base level of productivity are moved 'forward in time'.

He contends that this movement of time can be understood as a sort of concrete time, so that 'a feature of capitalism is a mode of (concrete) time that

40 Postone 1993, p. 216.
41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Postone 1993, p. 293.
expresses the motion of (abstract) time.' Further, he argues that this intrinsic dynamic of capital, with its ‘treadmill pattern’, entails a ‘flow of history’, and thus ‘can be considered historical time, as constituted in capitalist society’.

Postone’s interpretation of historical time, then, is one which expresses ‘the movement of time, as opposed to the movement in time’, giving rise to a process of social development and transformation that is directional, and whose flow is a function of social practice. He writes that historical time in capitalism can be considered as a form of concrete time that is socially constituted and expresses an ongoing qualitative transformation of work and production, of social life more generally, and of forms of consciousness, values and needs. Unlike the ‘flow’ of abstract time, this movement of time is not equable, but changes and can even accelerate.

Postone does not consider in any detail the changes in the nature of historical time; however, they are implicit in his discussion on the trajectory of capitalist development, whereby the importance of abstract time diminishes to the point where, in a postcapitalist society, it has no significant role in determining the meaning of time.

Postone argues that value, which is the determining form of wealth and social relations in capitalist society, is becoming increasingly anachronistic, owing to the wealth-creating potential of the productive forces to which it gives rise. Thus, he suggests that there is a growing contradiction between value and material wealth, although it does not appear to be so, and that it is a process intrinsic to the expansion of relative surplus-value. Postone writes that with the accumulation of historical time, a growing disparity separates the conditions for the production of material wealth from those for the generation of value . . . [whereby] the social necessity for the expenditure of direct human labor in production gradually is diminished.

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Postone does, however, recognise the importance of considering such changes, suggesting that ‘the development of the capital form could . . . serve as the starting point for a sociohistorical examination of changing conceptions of time in the West since the seventeenth century’ (Postone 1993, p. 294, in footnote 9).
51 Postone 1993, p. 298.
Postone suggests that, with manufacture, the ‘process of production remains bound to individual human labor’\(^ {52}\), but, with the development of large-scale industrial production, human labour is superseded as the primary social source of material wealth.\(^ {53}\) ‘With the development of this mode of production, living labor gradually ceases to be the active, regulating force of production’.\(^ {54}\) However, although the development of large-scale industry means that development becomes independent of the immediate producers, the expenditure of direct labour time is still an essential and necessary element of capitalist production.\(^ {55}\)

The dialectical dynamic involved in the trajectory by which machines gradually displace living labour points to the possibility whereby the alienated interaction between past and present could be overcome. Such a process would involve the abolition of value, establishing a society based on material wealth, ‘in which increased productivity would result in a corresponding increase in social wealth’.\(^ {56}\) This would also involve the ‘the abolition of proletarian labor – through both the transformation of the nature of much work in industrial capitalism, and the abolition of a system in which people are tied for much of their adult lives to such work – while maintaining a high level of productivity. It would allow for a form of production based directly on the appropriation of historical time’.\(^ {57}\)

Postone suggests that the trajectory of capitalist development as presented by Marx can be seen in terms of a dialectical development of the social division of time from socially necessary, through socially necessary and superfluous, to the possibility of socially necessary and disposable:

The dialectic of objectified present time and objectified historical time can be summarized as follows: in capitalism, objectified historical time is accumulated in alienated form, reinforcing the present, and, as such, it dominates the living. Yet, it also allows for people’s liberation from the present by undermining its necessary moment, thereby making possible the future – the appropriation of history such that the older relations are reversed and transcended. Instead of a social form structured by the present, by abstract labor time, there can be a social form based upon the full utilization

\(^{52}\) Postone 1993, p. 331.
\(^{53}\) Postone 1993, pp. 336–9.
\(^{54}\) Postone 1993, p. 342.
\(^{55}\) Postone 1993, p. 347.
\(^{56}\) Postone 1993, p. 314.
\(^{57}\) Postone 1993, p. 363.
of a history alienated no longer, both for the society in general and for the individual.58

He points out that this would mean that work would be varied as well as ‘fuller and richer for the individuals’, 59 and that wages would become a ‘form of socially general distribution’, 60 simply remuneration for labour-time expenditure. Postone sees that the productive potential of advanced capitalist production means that ‘extra time’ for the many potentially emerges, reducing socially necessary labour time and transforming the structure of labour and the relationship of work to social life. 61 Indeed, the possibility exists for society to transform the social meaning of time, according to which there would still be an ‘economy of time’ but the form of wealth would not be temporal; rather, people would control the economy of time for their own benefit. 62

Postone’s interpretation of Marx’s concept of time is both complex and controversial. His detailed exposition of the nature of historical time in capitalism is original, while his emphasis on its historical specificity, whereby there is no ‘immanent logic’ to history as a whole but only to capitalism, has far-reaching implications for historical understanding. Moreover, the prominence Postone gives to an immanent capitalist logic driving the historical process, which places deterministic forces above those of human agency as underlying the dynamics of historical time, also has important implications for the interpretation of history. Perhaps his identification of two types of time, concrete and abstract, which are inextricably linked to concrete and abstract labour, as well as to wealth and value, is Postone’s most innovative contribution to an understanding of Marx’s concept of historical time. The questions that arise from these aspects of Postone’s analysis are the focus of the following sections.

**Is historical time transhistorical or historically specific?**

Postone’s position on the transhistorical and historically specific elements of historical time, a position which rejects the validity of any transhistorical elements, and acknowledges only those that are historically specific, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of his overall analysis. It also the most problematic

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60 Postone 1993, p. 365.
61 Postone 1993, p. 375.
with regard to the question of historical interpretation, in that it implies that Marx’s ideas are only applicable to capitalist society, thus rendering them irrelevant to understanding historical time and change in non-capitalist societies, and how one social form gives rise to another, including the rise of capitalism.

Significantly, the nature of Postone’s critique of time bears some similarities – as well as some important differences – with Marx’s own critique of Hegel’s concept of time which revolved, in part, around the transhistorical and historically specific nature of time. Marx subjected Hegel to critique, who posited the ‘eternal’ or ‘absolute’ realm as transhistorical and the material world of ‘time’ as historically specific, for privileging the eternal, or transhistorical aspects of Time (as Concept) over its historically specific manifestation. Marx challenged the transhistorical notion of the eternal or absolute by making time – as manifested through material, human productive activity – the locus of true reality. For Marx, the ‘essence’ of time was not its absolute or abstract nature, but its relative or concrete nature; that is, time was manifested through human activity, and did not exist outside or beyond it. Marx saw this essence of time as fundamental to all human societies, although the ‘form’ in which it was manifested – through customs, social practices, beliefs, and perceptions – changed. Subsequent interpretations of Marx that are based on his critique of Hegel have thus considered Marx’s notion of the essence of time as transhistorical, and its particular forms as historically specific.63

In criticising such ‘traditional’ interpretations, Postone retains the notion of the essence or the ‘whole’ but rejects the idea that this essence is transhistorical, instead making it historically specific to capitalism. He does so in much the same way as Marx rejects the notion that the essence was absolute and eternal, instead making it historically specific to human society. Thus, just as Marx rejects the ‘eternal’ as a primary determining, transhistorical, factor in historical understanding, Postone rejects ‘historical time’ as a transhistorical feature in understanding historical change. Postone’s notion of the essence of capitalism as an historically specific form of labour as both concrete and abstract labour is, like Marx’s notion of essence, contradictory, but because it lacks the ontological basis that Marx provides in his early works, this contradiction is problematic.64

64 See Gould 1978 for a discussion of the ontological aspects of Marx’s idea of time.
Postone does not actually deny the transhistorical nature of labour; indeed, at one point he writes that:

> In its basic and abstract determinations, the labor process is the universal condition for the transformation of matter, the metabolic interaction... of humans and nature and, hence, a universal condition of human existence. ⁶⁵

Nor does he refute the notion that transhistorical categories such as concrete labour, use-value and material wealth exist in both non-capitalist and capitalist societies; he merely renders them groundless. Somewhat disingenuously, then, he uses transhistorical categories to expose the historically specific nature of historical time while, simultaneously, he denies them any validity for understanding the movement of history.⁶⁶ For example, he notes two modes of dialectical interaction that exist in some form in various societies: first, the way that people, by acting on external nature and changing it, change their own nature (which are forms of concrete labour); and, secondly, the way that social practice and social structure constitute a particular form of social life. He argues, however, that a directional dynamic is not intrinsic to these dialectical modes, but only become so when they are embedded within a third dialectical interaction constituted through the ‘twofold character of labor’ that is specific to capitalist society.⁶⁷ Early social formations, he argues, ‘possess dynamic elements and point beyond themselves only to the degree that their forms of surplus production possess elements of the commodity form. However, the commodity becomes a totalizing social form, a determination of the mode of existence, only with capitalist society’.⁶⁸ Generally, then, Postone regards transhistorical concepts as invalid to an effective understanding of Marx’s ideas as a self-reflexive, critical theory.

One of the difficulties that arise from Postone’s denial of the validity of transhistorical concepts is his inability to explain effectively how capitalism, and, specifically, how capitalism’s historical time, arose. Postone argues that abstract time is an historically specific concept, arising simultaneously with capitalism. While this is true to a certain extent, it is also clear – as is implied in Postone’s own acknowledgment that some precapitalist societies such as China measured time, in some circumstances, in constant hours – that certain formulations of abstract time were also present in ancient and medieval

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²⁵ Postone 1993, p. 279.
²⁶ Fracchia 1995, p. 368.
²⁷ Postone 1993, p. 305.
societies, as were other forms of abstraction such as a transcendent, monotheistic God. Yet, Postone does not acknowledge these abstract forms of thought which point to evident continuities between precapitalist and capitalist societies, regarding them as invalid because they are not dominant and hence determining. Thus, because he emphasises only the discontinuity apparent in the appearance of abstract time, and relatedly also of wage-labour, he fails to address or explain how abstract time, abstract labour, and value as historically specific forms came into being.

Postone’s seeming lack of concern with the question of historical explanation, together with his rejection of transhistoricity and the associated notion of ‘an immanent logic of human history’, allies him, in some respects, to the postmodern position. Yet, because he posits an ‘essence’ to capitalist society, he distinguishes himself from it, denying that his view implies a relativism where history is ‘the result of the intersections of a variety of social processes with their own temporalities’. Rather, he argues that historical time is the historically specific form of a global process, ‘mediated by a world market that becomes increasingly integrated in the course of capitalist development’, and which entails ‘the constitution of world history’:

To the degree that one can speak of a notion of human history in Marx’s mature works, then, it is not in terms of a single transhistorical principle; rather, it refers to a movement, initially contingent, from various histories to History – to a necessary, increasingly global, directional dynamic.

However, Postone does not explain or even address this movement from ‘histories’ to History, from precapitalist ‘times’ to capitalist ‘historical time’. Indeed, his rejection of the validity of transhistorical concepts precludes this possibility. He can only conclude that precapitalist development can be understood as logically necessary only when viewed from the present, retrospectively, whereby

the emergence of capitalism can be seen as an ever-less random development with the rise and full unfolding of the commodity form – but not as the

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70 As Kay and Mott put it in relation to the notion of abstract labour, but which equally applies to the notion of abstract time, (see their piece in this issue).
71 Postone 1993, p. 258.
73 Postone 1993, p. 258.
Thus, an acknowledgement of the transhistorical aspects of time tends to project onto history in general the conditions of capitalist society, a projection which, in his view, is unjustifiable. In short, Postone implies that Marx’s ideas are only valid for an understanding of capitalist society.

In some respects, however, Postone’s emphasis on the epistemological aspects of Marx’s ideas are valid, in that, clearly, a self-reflexive element is present in Marx’s ideas. Indeed, if we are to follow Marx’s own injunctions, his ideas about historical time should be understood as a product of the historically specific conditions under which they were formulated. Moreover, the Marxist historian must recognise that, on the one hand, ideas are always based in historically specific conditions and, as such, historical understanding always occurs through the lens of the historian’s present standpoint, and that, on the other hand, there are continuities between our own and past societies that justify, and indeed enable, a retrospective understanding of the historical process as a whole.

However, acknowledging the historically specific elements of Marx’s concept of historical time does not necessarily preclude an acknowledgment of the transhistorical elements. Fracchia articulates this argument, suggesting that historical understanding requires a consideration of transhistoricity:

In his methodological reflections on the nature of Marx’s categories, Postone establishes an either/or situation: either categories are transhistorical and ontological, the consequence of which is a teleologically driven theory of inevitable historical evolution; or they are determinate and historically specific as, in Postone’s view, Marx constructed them. Wanting understandably to avoid the former, Postone goes on to the opposite extreme. But the major consequence for historical theory of his categorial imperative is either to relegate it to the status of untenable universalizing or to render it impossible. I would argue, however, that the lack of historical theory results in a degree of historical shortsightedness whose consequences become visible at the unfolding of an immanent principle of necessity. Nonetheless, the history of the capitalist social formation does have an immanent, as opposed to a retrospective, logic.75

75 Ibid.
76 Indeed, as Kay and Mott point out, the labour process is both transhistorical and historically specific, transhistorical in the sense that it is a condition of all forms of society; historically specific, in the sense that consciousness of this belongs exclusively to capitalist society (see their article in this issue).
margins of his analysis; and I would argue that these problems can be corrected only by ‘transhistorical’ reflection.\textsuperscript{77}

Fracchia contends that Marx ‘rejected the mutually exclusive choice of either transhistorical, ontological categories or historically specific categories’ and that he developed instead ‘a transhistorically abstract categories as a necessary prelude to the construction of historically specific categories’.\textsuperscript{78}

To support his argument, Fracchia draws on The German Ideology, where Marx and Engels suggest that:

When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men. Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, our difficulties begin only when we set about the observation and the arrangement – the real depiction – of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or of the present.\textsuperscript{79}

Fracchia claims that Marx sees transhistorical reflection as necessary to determine the ‘prerequisites’ of history. However, he points out that Marx also cautions that the highly abstract character of transhistorical reflections ‘prevent them from providing a “recipe or grid” for the historically specific understanding of any particular social form’. Fracchia writes:

\begin{quote}
[A]t this level of transhistorical reflection, the categories, like the prerequisites, are abstract enough to be common to all societies and thus able to serve as guides to approach the analysis of a given social form; yet the abstract character of these assumptions and categories prevents them from grasping any social form in its historical specificity.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

Thus, Fracchia notes that, while transhistorical reflections are useful for differentiating between social forms, they are without value if considered

\textsuperscript{77} Fracchia 1995, p. 368.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Marx and Engels 1978, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{80} Fracchia 1995, p. 369.
independently of concrete analyses. In short, historical understanding must involve both transhistorical and historically specific elements.

This position, then, suggests that Marx offers an explanation of historical change that applies to history as a whole in the form of a dialectical force that manifests historical time through human productive activity, while, at the same time, recognising that capitalism constitutes an historically specific temporal logic, or form of historical time. Further, it enables the historian to trace continuities both within, and between, societies with reference to the transhistorical elements of historical time, and, in so doing, to give expression to history as a whole, while noting that the whole consists of many interrelated parts. This continuity is found not in an overriding temporal structure, but in the human experience of time as expressed through creative activity.

Despite the difficulties inherent in Postone's approach to the transhistorical aspects of historical time, his critique performs an important function by challenging assumptions about time in much the same way as the postmodern critique does. It presents new ways of exploring the historically specific features of time that are more inaccessible when operating under the assumption that time has transhistorical features, and prompts a questioning of the assumptions themselves. In particular, Postone’s critique opens up new, useful ways of thinking about the forces that underlie the constitution of capitalist historical time and the relationship between concrete and abstract time in the capitalist process, issues which are the focus of the remainder of this article.

**Do human agents or deterministic forces construct time?**

The issue concerning the transhistorical and historically specific features of time is integrally related to another issue; that is, the extent to which human agency and deterministic forces underlie the construction of time. Indeed, an acknowledgement of the validity of transhistorical elements of time can imply an acknowledgement of the central, determining role for human agency, if human productive activity is seen as constituting the transhistorical elements of time. Thus, Postone’s rejection of the validity of transhistorical categories implies a denial of human agency as a primary historical force and a recognition of objective laws of capitalist development as the main determinant of historical time.

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81 Ibid.
One of the consequences of his position on this issue is that Postone is prevented from adequately theorising or explaining historical change. According to Bob Jessop, ‘although Postone provides an interesting account of the contradictions within capitalism, he hardly considers how they might be materially abolished and what social forces might accomplish this’. Postone does not provide us (any more than does Marx himself) with an account of alternative, postliberal, collective forms of social organization outside the sphere of immediate production. We are left to imagine how workers might become collective commodity owners. This ‘political deficit’ is one that Marx bequeathed to his followers and that remains unfulfilled.

Again, Martin Jay points out that ‘showing that structural conditions for change exist is a far cry from explaining the motor of the change itself’. Ironically, these are similar criticisms to the one that Postone levels at Jacques Derrida in his review of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. Postone suggests that, for Derrida, ‘fundamental change can occur only as the result of a completely unexpected rupture; it is not a possibility immanent in the present’. In contrast, Postone suggests that it is the ‘accumulation of past time that undermines the necessity of the present and makes possible a different future. Here the future is made possible by the appropriation of the past’. However, Postone does not regard an understanding of the transhistorical elements of historical time to be necessary to explain fully the ‘motor’ or forces of history, an understanding which involves the idea that time, as it is manifested at the level of people’s activity, their experiences, and their lives, fundamentally shapes the structures of time of a particular society, including capitalism.

Postone’s views on the fundamental forces underlying the constitution of historical time in capitalism are evident in his comments on the subject of historical process, whereby he argues that capital – not labour – ‘is the self-...
His position suggests that deterministic forces of capitalist logic are more fundamental to the construction of historical time than human agency. Indeed, Postone argues that:

Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism, yet he does not identify it with any social grouping, such as the proletariat, or with humanity. Rather, Marx analyzes it in terms of the structure of social relations constituted by forms of objectifying practice and grasped by the category of capital (and hence, value).\(^89\)

Thus, Postone suggests that it is the ‘quasi-objective structures grasped by the categories of Marx’s critique of political economy’ that constitute the historical Subject,\(^90\) and that Marx accords capital – as an alienated, quasi-independent social form which exerts a mode of abstract compulsion and constraint on people and which is thus ‘independent of individual will’\(^91\) – the ‘attribute of agency’\(^92\). He argues, for example, that Marx shows ‘how the labor process in capitalism is structured in such a way that precisely those aspects that initially were presupposed as uniquely “human” – for example, purposiveness – become attributes of capital’\(^93\). Postone’s view, then, is that historical time as a dynamic directional totality is constituted primarily by objective structures determined by an impersonal capitalist logic. This is increasingly the case with the development of large-scale industry, and the shift to the predominance of relative surplus-value production, when ‘living labor gradually ceases to be the active, regulating force of production’\(^94\).

The consequence of this position is that Postone sees human agency – in the form of class activity – as a secondary element in the constitution of historical time. He acknowledges that ‘class relations of exploitation are an important element of the dynamic development of the social formation of the whole’, but sees that ‘those relations do not, in and of themselves, give rise to that dynamic development’\(^95\). Rather, he suggests that class relations are constituted by, and embedded in, forms of quasi-objective social mediation,

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\(^88\) Postone 1993, p. 75.
\(^89\) Ibid. See pp. 75–80 for a fuller discussion.
\(^90\) Postone 1993, p. 78.
\(^91\) Postone 1993, p. 76.
\(^92\) Postone 1993, p. 269.
\(^93\) Postone 1993, p. 279.
\(^94\) Postone 1993, p. 342.
\(^95\) Postone 1993, p. 316. For the full discussion of class conflict, particularly in relation to the length of the workday, see pp. 316–23.
on both the level of highly politicised social action and on an ‘everyday’ level. Postone contends that ‘class conflict becomes an important factor in the spatial and temporal development of capital, that is, in the distribution and flow of capital, which becomes increasingly global, and in the dialectical dynamic of the capital form’. However, he notes that, while class conflict becomes a driving element in the historical development of capitalist society, ‘it neither creates the totality nor gives rise to its trajectory . . . because it is structured by, and embedded in, the social forms of commodity and capital’. For Postone, then, human agency plays a significant role in shaping historical time, but it is not a primary force underlying its constitution.

Postone argues, though, that historical time is constituted by a complex relationship between objective, impersonal forces of capital and the will of people to shape their world:

Marx’s analysis can be understood as a very powerful and sophisticated attempt to show that, with the development of the commodity as a total social form, people already ‘make’ the world around them. This indicates retrospectively that people earlier also constituted their world; the form in which people make the world under capitalism, however, is very different from earlier forms of social constitution. The modern, capitalist world, according to Marx, is constituted by labor, and this process of social constitution is such that people are controlled by what they make.

However, Postone’s statement, as does his ‘historically specific’ position in general, begs the question, how did people in non-capitalist society make their world? In other words, what is the motor of history, or the fundamental force underlying the construction of time in non-capitalist societies? Postone seems to be suggesting that human agency is a force underlying the constitution of non-capitalist time to a much greater extent than the construction of capitalist time. He writes, for example, that in precapitalist social formations, ‘the social distribution of labor and its products is effected by a wide variety of customs,’

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96 Postone 1993, p. 316.
98 Ibid.
99 On this point, Postone acknowledges his similarity to G.A. Cohen, who also argues that class struggles do not constitute the trajectory of historical development, but must be understood with reference to that trajectory. However, he also distances himself from Cohen’s ‘transhistorical’ presuppositions which see history as teleological and linear, claiming them to be ‘very dubious historically’ (Postone 1993, pp. 319–20, footnote 27).
100 Postone 1993, pp. 383–4.
traditional ties, overt relations of power, or, conceivably, conscious decisions'.\textsuperscript{101} As the previous section pointed out, Postone sees that, while labour in these circumstances may have a dialectical character, it does not constitute a dynamic totality. He seems to be suggesting, then, that non-capitalist societies as a whole are static in that they have no historical time, and that any movement of time occurs on an individual level, not on the level of a particular society as a whole.

Jay takes issue with Postone in this regard, pointing to the existence and influence of commodities, money and abstract philosophy in earlier societies, as well as other sources of abstraction ‘which may also dominate the human subject to them’.\textsuperscript{102} Jay notes, for instance, that monotheism provides a ‘salient instance of abstraction’, while language also ‘necessarily employs abstract signifiers to signify an infinity of different phenomena’.\textsuperscript{103} He argues that these examples suggest that precapitalist social relations were less overt and transparent than Postone avers.\textsuperscript{104} Jay implies that, in non-capitalist societies, deterministic, objective forces as well as human agency influence the construction of time and shape the temporal logic of a particular social form.

While Postone appears to exclude the possibility that such structural forces exist in precapitalist society, he nonetheless admits that a form of necessity and universality would operate in a future, postcapitalist society. He suggests, for example, that Marx’s ‘analysis points toward the possibility that another dominant form of universality might be constituted’,\textsuperscript{105} a possibility that stems from Marx’s notion that ‘the existence of surplus production – more than is necessary to satisfy producers’ immediate needs – is a condition of all “historical” forms of social life’.\textsuperscript{106} Postone appeals to this transhistorical element as a form of necessity that would operate in a future society:

\begin{center}
Just as one must distinguish between an economy of time and the domination of time, in Marx’s mature theory, one must also, in considering the relation between labor and social necessity, distinguish between transhistorical social necessity and historically determinate social necessity.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{101} Postone 1993, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{102} Jay 1993, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Jay 1993, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{105} Postone 1993, p. 368.
\textsuperscript{106} Postone 1993, p. 374.
\textsuperscript{107} Postone 1993, p. 380.
He argues that, while capitalist society is bound to both forms of necessity, a postcapitalist society would contain only a transhistorical form of social necessity that is ‘rooted in human life itself’. As outlined earlier, he then goes on to discuss the way time would be constructed in postcapitalist society. Thus, when contemplating the forces underlying non-capitalist society, Postone cannot avoid resorting to the notion of human agency as a transhistorical element underlying the construction of time, despite his denunciation of its validity as a means of understanding historical time in capitalist society. Needless to say, he does not examine the influence of human agency in any depth.

Indeed, whether it is consequent to his position on human agency or due the ‘preliminary’ nature of his analysis, Postone does not consider the particular social and historical temporal forms that human agency gives rise to. He writes: ‘I shall not be able to consider other important dimensions . . . such as the processes by which a class is constituted socially, politically and culturally on a more concrete level, or, relatedly, the question of collective social and political action’. As a result, Postone leaves himself open to the charge by Robert Antonio ‘that he poses an ahistorical, capital logic’, a problem which ‘would not arise if he mediated his conceptual analysis with illustrations from actually existing capitalism’. He is also criticised on this point by George McCarthy.

McCarthy’s analysis of Marx’s concept of time bears certain similarities to Postone’s in that it emphasises that time is an expression of the Concept as capital, and that, consequently, logic determines the ground of history. He writes, for example, that the ‘Concept, though grounded in the historical, for Marx, moves according to its own logic constantly adjusted and informed by history’. At the same time, McCarthy suggests that one of the weaknesses in Postone’s analysis is his failure to justify ‘the relationships between Marx’s economic categories and the social reality’. He argues that Postone’s approach fails to explain the relationships between ideas and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, thus creating a conflict between the perspective that emphasises

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110 Antonio 1996, p. 159. Similarly, Kay and Mott question Postone’s claim that his analysis ‘grasps social reality adequately’, expressing doubt over whether a postcapitalist liberal society as outlined by Postone could be understood by an approach which emphasises impersonal and abstract forms of power over personal or concrete forms, (see their article in this issue).
that Marx begins with an actual historical entity, and that, as held by Postone, which suggests that Marx begins with an ‘abstract universal category that is historically specific’.\textsuperscript{112} McCarthy suggests, however, that if we understand the commodity to be both an historical category, and a theoretical abstraction, both moments are true. In this way, he claims to demonstrate, unlike Postone, that this logic has a material dimension in that capitalist society expresses this logic through the commodity-form.\textsuperscript{113} McCarthy concludes that how ‘the contradictions are worked out in the social reality is an historical question, which can only wait for the intervention of social action on the structures of political economy’.\textsuperscript{114} It is, nonetheless, a question that, like Postone, he does not address.

\textbf{What is the relationship between abstract and concrete time?}

If Postone rejects the idea of transhistoricity and that of human agency, he utilises the concepts of ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ time, whereby abstract time is ‘independent of events’ while concrete time is a ‘function of events’. His identification of the co-existence of abstract and concrete time, which constitutes an historically specific form of concrete time in capitalism, is a valuable contribution to understanding Marx’s concept of historical time. Postone’s perception of the role of abstract time as an historically specific construct is useful, and is well supported by his depiction of its emergence in the fourteenth century and its rise to dominance by the seventeenth century. Furthermore, his argument that there are different ‘forms’ of concrete time, of which capitalist historical time is one, is sound. Indeed, Marx clearly does understand historical time as a function of events, expressed through historical processes, an understanding which derived from the influence of ancient Greek philosophy and romantic idealism on his thought, and which distinguished him from the Enlightenment thinkers, who tended to see historical time as abstract, existing independently of events.\textsuperscript{115}

However, Postone does not examine in sufficient detail the nature of the relationship between abstract and concrete time. In particular, there are four important areas which he fails to develop: how concrete time underpins the

\textsuperscript{112} McCarthy 1988, p. 113. McCarthy is basing his critique on Postone’s position as outlined in Postone and Reinecke 1974/5.

\textsuperscript{113} McCarthy 1988, p. 113.

\textsuperscript{114} McCarthy 1988, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{115} See Miller 2001, pp. 36–51.
categories of use-value and concrete labour; how other features of concrete
time are part of the nature of historical time; the changes in the ‘form’ of
contemporary time itself; and its implications for historical understanding.

First, while Postone argues that concrete time underlies the categories of
use-value and concrete labour, he does not effectively demonstrate how it
does so. Rather, he contradicts this position when he discusses the temporal
dimension of material wealth, which is created by the production of use-
values by concrete labour, in terms of abstract time, not concrete time. For
example, he writes that the temporal measure of material wealth is ‘the amount
of time actually required to produce a particular product’. Thus, while he
sees this measure as individual to the specific product, it is nonetheless
measured by an evenly divisible concept of time.

Postone’s positing of abstract time as underlying the measure of both use-
value and exchange-value, and both concrete labour and abstract labour, is
problematic. Indeed, unlike abstract time, which measures abstract labour
and the magnitude of exchange-values, the temporal aspect underlying concrete
labour and the production of use-values needs to be understood in qualitative,
rather than quantitative, terms. As such, a form of relative or concrete time
emanates through the actual productive activity involved in creating a particular
product, manifesting itself in the use-value of the product, both in terms of
the concrete labour that underpins its production and in terms of the
commodity’s own life-span. Consideration of the temporality of the commodity-
form itself is important to an understanding of the nature of concrete time,
as well as the complexities of the temporal process in both the production
and circulation spheres.

Secondly, Postone does not consider certain features which are inherent in
contemporary time and which manifest themselves through the production and
circulation processes. Although he notes that an increased ‘density’ or
‘accumulation’ of time occurs and that acceleration is also evident, he considers
these features in relation to historical time as a whole and not on the level
of specific processes. Thus, while his description of the movement of historical
time in terms of two ‘frames of reference’ constituted by abstract and concrete
time is innovative and useful, it does not fully describe the nature of capitalist
historical time. Postone needs to examine the way in which concrete time is
expressed through methods of producing relative surplus-value, which involves

a consideration of certain features of concrete time such as multiplicity, discontinuity, fragmentation and acceleration. Moreover, he should analyse how these features of concrete time are evident in circulation processes as well as production processes. This problem is exacerbated by Postone’s neglect of Marx’s ideas about time as expressed in Capital, Volume II, a major theme of which is the way concrete time – and its accompanying features of multiplicity, discontinuity and fragmentation – emanate through the circulation and reproduction of capital.

Thirdly, Postone tends to deal only with historical time as a ‘whole’, resulting in what is, essentially, a synchronic analysis of capitalist society. In so doing, Postone notes that his investigation of the dynamic relationship of productivity and value presupposes fully developed capitalism; this relation is the core of a pattern that only fully comes into its own with the emergence of relative surplus-value as a dominant form.¹¹⁷

Thus, while he does discuss the trajectory of capitalism in terms of the increasing significance of technological productivity and a corresponding decrease in the importance of labour, he does not link these changes with changes in the nature of time. Postone tends to see the relationship between abstract and concrete time as static, changing only when historical time itself is rendered obsolete with the eventual transition from capitalism to a future, postcapitalist society. Ironically, then, Postone’s ahistoricity in this regard means that he poses a ‘transhistorical’ concept of capitalist historical time, in that he overlooks the way that material changes within capitalism itself change the nature of historical time. Clearly, while there are constant, unchanging or ‘essential’ features of capitalist historical time, there are also significant, historically specific changes in its nature, particularly in terms of the relationship between concrete and abstract time.

Finally, Postone fails to emphasise the implications of the co-existence of abstract and concrete time for the question of historical understanding. While, as he argues, capitalism does produce a specific form of historical time which can be understood as being constituted by two forms of time, historical time should also be seen as a complex, multi-layered and continually changing process with features which extend beyond capitalist society. Again, while

¹¹⁷ Postone 1993, p. 287.
he rightly acknowledges that capitalist historical time is a product of ‘modern’ society, he needs to consider in more detail the shifts that have occurred in historical time within modern society itself, shifts which reflect changes in the material conditions of society, particularly its methods of producing surplus-value. In this way, Postone would render his analysis more relevant to the study of history.

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, Postone has made a significant, albeit controversial, contribution to understanding Marx’s concept of historical time by emphasising its epistemological aspects and historical specificity. In arguing that historical time as a dynamic, directional totality is historically specific to capitalism, and is constituted by abstract and concrete time, he suggests that the historical process inherent in this temporal logic does not characterise human history as a whole, but merely capitalist society. In so doing, he opens up possibilities for reassessing the assumptions about transhistoricity and historical specificity that, too often, remain unquestioned in the Marxist literature.

Yet, Postone’s rejection of the transhistorical elements of historical time is problematic, in that it implies that Marx’s concept of time has little to offer the historian who wishes to understand historical time in non-capitalist societies, or how change occurs between different social forms. Again, it poses problems for historical explanation, inasmuch as it fails to address or explain how capitalist historical time as a totality came into being, or what existed prior to capitalism. As has been noted, Marx’s comments in *The German Ideology* support the idea that an understanding of historical time requires a consideration of both transhistoricity and historical specificity. Indeed, time can be understood as transhistorical, insofar as it is manifested through human productive activity, and as historically specific insofar as the forms in which this time is manifested, including that of capitalist historical time, changes.

Postone also emphasises determinism as a primary historical force at the expense of a regard for the role of human agency. In fact, he claims that, while a complex relationship between objective forces of capital and human will shape historical time, human agency plays a secondary role in this process. In all of this, he does not address the forces that underlie the construction of time in non-capitalist societies, although he implies that human agency plays a greater role in those societies than in capitalist society, even though it does
not give rise to historical time as a ‘whole’, a characteristic which is specific to capitalism. In making this argument, Postone disregards the deterministic, abstract forces that operate in precapitalist societies, while acknowledging their necessary existence in a future, postcapitalist society. Similarly, in not considering the particular temporal forms to which human agency gives rise, his analysis is divorced from concrete, empirical realities.

Finally, while he acknowledges the significance of abstract and concrete time, he fails to probe fully their respective meanings. He does not analyse how concrete time is implicated in the categories of use-value and concrete labour, or consider how it is involved in the actual methods of the production of relative surplus-value or through circulation processes. Above all, Postone’s synchronic analysis of capitalist society as a ‘whole’ precludes him from analysing changes in historical time itself, particularly in regard to the changes in the nature of the relationship between abstract and concrete time, and from noting its implications for historical understanding.

In recognising the importance of time, and in analysing its central role in Marx’s theory, Postone has made an important contribution to the understanding of Marx’s concept of time, by raising issues worthy of ongoing discussion and research. However, a thorough analysis of Marx’s concept of time as he expressed it throughout the three volumes of Capital – the real culmination of his ‘mature’ theory – is necessary before the complexity and depth of Marx’s understanding of the question of time and its relationship to the historical process can be fully appreciated. Such an analysis would indicate that Marx did not, as Postone claims, dispense with notions of the philosophy of history, but, rather, went further than any thinker before or since in developing one.

References


Michael Neary

**Travels in Moishe Postone’s Social Universe: A Contribution to a Critique of Political Cosmology**

Society is a formal universe and not a natural world

**Introduction**

In his book, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, Moishe Postone claims to make a fundamental re-interpretation of modern society through a reconceptualisation of the mature social theory of Karl Marx as developed in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. Postone’s main point is that capital is not merely a form of economic exploitation imposed on society, but is itself a particular form of society, the origin of which can be derived from a single structuring principle: the commodity-form. Postone casts his argument in cosmological terms. Capital is a dynamic and totalising ‘social universe’, whose expansive logic is derived from the unstable substance out of which it is constructed: value. The involves Postone in an investigation of this social substance by examining the temporal and spatial aspects of the ‘social universe’. The former is explicit in his re-invention of Marx’s

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1 Kay and Mott 1981, p. 79.
Marx’s social universe is based on value, which he clearly considered in cosmological terms: ‘All the phenomena of the universe, whether produced by the hand of man or indeed the universal laws of physics, are not to be conceived of as acts of creation but solely as a reordering of matter. Composition and separation are the only elements found by the human mind whenever it analyzes the notion of reproduction; and so it is with the reproduction of value’ (Marx 1976, p. 133).

The inspiration for my argument comes from the connection that has already been established by Kay and Mott 1982 between the work of Marx and Einstein. In this paper, I intend to critically investigate these ambitious claims. This will involve an overview of what I take to be the essential points of Postone’s case. I will then set this against other critical accounts of orthodox Marxism that claim to be rethinking Marx using the same device: abstract labour as a form of social mediation. This will include a review of the work of Simon Clarke’s Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology; a critique of Clarke from within autonomist Marxism by Massimo de Angelis and a critique of both Clarke and autonomist Marxism through the work of Werner Bonefeld. The reason for setting the debate up within the parameters of a critical political cosmology is based on Postone’s own formulations, but also with the aim of rediscovering some of the cosmological underpinnings of Marx’s own work that did not disappear after the completion of his critique of Democritus’s atomic theory for his doctoral dissertation. My political cosmology extends to making a connection between Einstein’s theory of gravity and Marx’s law of value, in order that I might explore the ways in which it is possible to extend Marx’s critique of society beyond the limits of political economy.

My conclusion is that Postone does present us with the framework in which is possible to make a genuine advance in Marxist social theory. However, by failing to develop his critical political cosmology beyond a contrived version of Newton’s theory of time Postone is, in fact, still trapped in a pre-twentieth-
century time warp unable to escape the gravitational pull and perspectivism of bourgeois materialism.

**Travels in the social universe**

Postone's travels into the deep structure of social space and time are powered by his attachment to the commodity-form which, he argues, provides the framework for the dominant form of social relations in capital and is, therefore, the structuring principle of his 'social universe'. He provides an exposition of his case through an investigation of the social practice from which the commodity is derived: *labour in capitalism*. It is the concept and reality of *labour in capitalism* that, Postone argues, distinguishes him from other forms of Marxism that are preoccupied with a critique of capital from the standpoint of labour. Postone suggests that the orthodox-Marxist account treats labour as a fetishised category in which the capacities of labour, including its emancipatory potential, are regarded as being intrinsic to the category itself, rather than an object of critical enquiry within which the capacities of labour are derived from the social context within which it is embedded. Postone maintains that, as labour is derived from the social relations of capital, it is not the unproblematic subject of revolution, but is, in fact, integral to capitalist production. Therefore, an analysis of orthodox Marxism, based on the affirmation of labour is, in reality, also an affirmation of that which it claims to want to abolish: capitalist society. The theoretical limitations of orthodox Marxism, he claims, have become increasingly obvious through the transformations within twentieth-century capitalism, which include what he refers to as the emergence of postliberal institutions (the interventionist state), developments in science and technology and the rise of non-class based social identities and new social movement politics. However, none of this denies the necessity for a negative critique of capitalist society which, he argues, must be based not on the affirmation of labour but on a critique of labour in capitalism.

Postone argues, in opposition to orthodox Marxism, that it is only in capital that labour is the constitution of all social life. In non-capitalist social arrangements, labour is constituted by social relations: it is given social status by reference to the society of which it forms a part through custom, tradition and practice. In capitalism, however, labour constitutes the social relation that constitutes society. Labour in capitalism does not only exist as the link between man and nature, but has another function in providing the social
context for that process of mediation. The main point is that labour in capital has two social dimensions: it exists as direct mediation between man and nature (a truism of little conceptual significance), and the social context within which that mediation is grounded. Postone reminds us that it is the discovery of this duality that Marx regards as his most important theoretical contribution. In this arrangement, it does indeed appear as if the direct mediation (concrete-material) aspect of the dimension exists without reference to anything other than itself, and the substance of the social context (abstract-social dimension) is not discernible to bourgeois social theory. In fact, the duality of labour presents social scientists with a dimension that they are conceptually unable to deal with and which forms the basis of commodity fetishism. This does not mean that there are two types of labour, but, rather, that labour in capitalism is constituted by two forms of labour: concrete and abstract, both of which are socially constituted.

Labour, then, is the basis of all social life in capitalist society, but labour in capitalism is itself constituted as a form of value. Therefore, it is value, not labour, that is the foundation of all social life. Value is the category of social totality. In order to explain this, Postone unravels the particular form of interdependence that this peculiar arrangement presupposes. The two dimensions of labour are the result of the unique form of social interdependence, that is within capitalist society workers do not consume what they produce but, rather, work in order that they may consume what has been produced by others. Workers, therefore, are involved in two forms of labour: the production of use-values and the production of exchange-value. The quality of the use-value is specific to the kind of work they are engaged in, while exchange-value is abstracted from any specific content or, rather, its content is the social relation that it constitutes. This is a real process of abstraction and not simply a conceptual event in which

Labor grounds its own social character in capitalism by virtue of its historically specific function as a social mediating activity. . . . Labor in capitalism becomes its own social ground.\(^4\)

It is this process of abstract social mediation that Marx refers to as abstract labour which, as the ground of it own social relation, constitutes a unique form of social totality. Abstract labour is the social substance in which matter moves and is constituted as commodities. In such a situation, labour is not

\(^4\) Postone 1993, p. 151.
recognised, validated or rendered equivalent as a result of any intrinsic capacity or social need, but only to the extent that it forms a part of this social generality, as an individuated moment of a qualitatively homogeneous, general social mediation constituting a social totality. Postone argues that, in this process, labour materialises itself twice, in the first instance as labour and in the second instance as the apparently quasi-objective and independent structures that constitute and enforce this process of generalised social mediation (in other words, money and the state) against the workers who constituted them. In this arrangement, then, human powers are constituted in an alienated form, as subject and object; as consciousness and personality, and workers are dominated by their own labour. Domination, then, is not simply by other people but by abstract social structures that people constitute.

Postone reminds us that this is an historical as well as a logical process. Indeed, he finds the historical dynamic for this process within the relation between the concrete and abstract character of the commodity-form examined as a non-identical unity. The existence of the commodity presupposes the expansive logic of capital, understood as value in motion. Motion is derived from the increases in productivity that are required to maintain expansion. In the drive for surplus-value, the abstract social dimension of labour in capitalism formally rearranges the concrete organisation of work so that the maximum amount of human energy can be extracted (absolute surplus-value). This results in, among other things, the social division of work (the organisation of the working day) which includes the invention of machine-time (the clock). When the limit of this process has been reached, the abstract social dimension of labour in capitalism can only increase the production of surplus-value by enhancing the general productivity of labour (relative surplus-value). Through large-scale industry, the worker becomes a part of the machine and is forced to change her nature and become something other than human. In this process, the concrete material character of labour is no longer recognisable or feasible as an independent form of existence and is completely overwhelmed by the abstract-social dimension. Marx refers to this as the process of real subsumption. This does not simply revolutionise the organisation of work in the factory, but becomes the organising principle of society. As Postone maintains, Marx argues that this marks a qualitative change in history; only then does capital become totalising and the process intrinsically capitalist, and only then does

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5 Postone 1993, p. 152.
labour become the constituent source of its own domination. It is at this point that the logic of production escapes human control, the machine (large-scale industry) has taken over and human powers are constituted in an alien form, workers become a particular mode of existence which accumulates the constituted powers of humanity in an alienated form. The duality of labour has materialised at the level of society.

In such a situation, a critique can not be derived ontologically, or normatively, or metaphysically, or romantically, from the standpoint of labour, because labour as such does not exist. To the extent that workers exist as forms of commodified labour, they are an integral aspect of capitalist expansion and have no privileged position with which to invent an alternative to capital. Postone concedes that the workers' movement has done much to dignify and democratise capitalist society, but it does not contain within it the counter-principle to society. The proletariat does not represent a non-capitalist future, rather, it is the necessary basis of the present situation under which labour suffers. Labour, as we have seen, is endemic to capital and the source of its own domination. Class conflict is a driving force of historical development in capitalism only because it is structured by and embedded in the social forms of the commodity and of capital. Labour's antagonistic relations with capital are not based on a clash of interest between capitalists and workers, but, rather, represent the antagonistic movements of an already determined totality. The social relations are not given, they are (in)determinate, and thus, conflict is endemic and not an extrinsic feature of the relation. Classes are not entities, but structurings of social practices organised antagonistically, impelling the development of the basic contradictions of capitalist society that appear as reconstituted forms of control (such as postliberal institutions). The point, then, is not to affirm labour but to abolish the social relation out of which this antagonism is derived.

In order to uncover the basis of negation, Postone goes back to the structuring principle from which he began. The logic of emancipation is discovered within the non-contradictory unity of the commodity. The non-identity of the two dimensions of capital is the basis of the fundamental contradiction that underlies its dynamic development. Postone's critical standpoint is the possible overcoming of this contradiction. While this totality is essentially contradictory, the non-identity has not been completely assimilated; use-value and value are not identical and so, as a result, there exists the possibility of the future separation of these two dimensions. This deconstructive process is supported
by the intrinsically anachronistic quality of value which he establishes by
drawing out another consequential duality within the commodity-form in
the distinction between value and material wealth. While workers are an
essential attribute of the production of value, they are not required for the
production of material wealth, leading to further tension between the two
dimensions. As a result of the contradiction, value is a political category
because it points to the historical negation of value itself, or to put it otherwise,
the possibility of a new form of social mediation is generated in the
contradiction between value and material wealth. The production of value
does two things: it increases the productive power and knowledge of humanity,
but it does so in an alienated form. Emancipation is the re-appropriation
of this knowledge and power in a non-alienated form, enabling an entirely new
structure for social labour that involves the abolition of the social relation
based on two forms of labour. Antagonistic subjectivity is not intrinsic to
labour, but is historically generated as a result of the possibility of this other
society, based on the real evidence of material wealth and the consequences
for the planet as capital dematerialises everything in its cosmic ambition to
escape the planet and its inhabitants.

At this point in Postone’s journey through deep space and time, it is useful
to review some of its more significant moments. Postone is concentrating
on the fundamental core structures of capitalism and not attempting to
provide an analysis through its nineteenth-century forms. Out of this, Postone
develops a level of dimensionality, not evident in orthodox Marxism, which
is more concerned with questions of exploitation and proportionality. Through
his exposition of dimensionality, the process of abstraction is given a
multidimensional quality as the expansion of social mediation and unified
field of social being. This provides the basis, not only for a social theory of
time, but also for a social theory of space within which social forms, including
forms of human life, are constituted and set in motion. In this process of
reconfiguration, human life is both central and subordinate, determined and
determining. The powers of human energy are produced in both an alienated
form, as the power of humanity, and as powers that can be appropriated by
the labour that produced them.6

6 Other work that deals with the issue of human life as a form a value includes
Abstract labour paradigm

Progress can be made in assessing the full significance of what Postone has achieved by comparing it to other works in Marxist social theory within which abstract labour is treated as the object of critical enquiry. It is disappointing that Postone’s work takes no account of these critical debates within Marxism. In this section of the paper, I will look at a brand of work defined by Michael De Vroey as the ‘abstract labour paradigm’ (one based on an approach that interprets Marx’s labour theory of value as a value theory of labour). The strength of this approach, exemplified by the work of Simon Clarke, is that it deals with labour as a form of value. The limit of the abstract labour paradigm is that it avoids the question of the form of labour. This limitation has been identified by Massimo De Angelis who provides a critique of Clarke from within the autonomist tradition and who I criticise, in turn, for failing to avoid the autonomist inclination to locate pure subjectivity within the working class itself. Following on from that, I will discuss another critique of the work of Simon Clarke, written by Werner Bonefeld against the autonomist tradition, but from within the abstract labour paradigm. The strength of Bonefeld’s work is that it presents labour (human practice) as the constitution of the social world. However, Bonefeld’s work fails to account for the constitution of labour, other than as something to be recovered, reinventing pure subjectivity as that which is denied.

An important contribution to this debate is the work of Simon Clarke. In the book *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, Clarke’s aim is to challenge both orthodox and Western Marxism and liberal social theory, including critical theory, through an exposition of Marx’s critical project within which alienated labour is the object of critical enquiry. Clarke exposes not only the limits of orthodox Marxism but also those of liberal intellectual developments: the modern sociology and economics that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century are depicted as an attempt to preclude and avoid working-class articulations of struggle. Even though class struggle is central to Clarke’s work, he is clear that he is not writing from the perspective of labour, or even simply, a critique of exploitation. Clarke argues that Marx’s critique of alienated labour defines ‘a quite different project from that of simply reinterpreting of political economy from a different class viewpoint’. Clarke emphasises that Marx’s critique begins, not from the standpoint of labour,
but from social labour in which the attribution of that labour to an individual only appears in the attribution of a value to a commodity. It is only in the alienated social form of commodity production that the labourer’s own activity, as part of social labour, confronts the labourer in the form of a quality (value) of a thing (the commodity), which can thereby be appropriated as private property.\footnote{Clarke 1991, pp. 96–7.} Clarke argues that, for Marx, the relationship between labour and the world of things is mediated by social labour:

> The relationship between labour and its social forms is not an immediate one. It is a relationship that is mediated by the particular social relationships within which the expenditure of labour-power and appropriation of the products of labour takes place in a particular society.\footnote{Clarke 1991, p. 99.}

So, ‘through the theory of value labour is connected with its alienated forms’,\footnote{Clarke 1991, p. 98.} in a process by which labour has been dehumanised by being reduced to the ‘single quality of duration’.\footnote{Clarke 1991, p. 101.}

What Clarke reveals is that value is not based on the thing itself, or based on the function of that thing, but is derived out of the social relations of a particular form of production and exchange. This recovery of Marx as a theory of social form, against base-superstructure models, has been very important and led to advances in theorisation of the capitalist state and of money-capital. The most important point is that Clarke theorises the way in which structures of social power – money and the state – are alienated forms of the power of social labour. However, while Clarke is pre-occupied with providing a sociohistorical account of the forms that value takes, he does not extend this account to his analysis of labour, which he presents in naturalistic and even normative terms. Clarke presents labour-power, not as a form of humanity, but as a commodity that labour sells. Labour and labour-power exist as two distinct concepts because they describe distinct objects, corresponding to distinct social relations, the relationship between which is only established through particular social relations of production. Labour, in fact, exists non-historically and, even tautologically. For Clarke, labour becomes a category of potentiality which is denied in capitalist society. However, Clarke’s definition of labour goes beyond Marx’s formulation. Marx defines labour not as capacity, but, rather, in a more limited fashion: as a link between man and nature or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Clarke 1991, pp. 96–7.}
  \item \footnote{Clarke 1991, p. 99.}
  \item \footnote{Clarke 1991, p. 98.}
  \item \footnote{Clarke 1991, p. 101.}
\end{itemize}
as ‘purposive productive activity’. It is only when labour becomes labour-power that Marx refers to labour as the capacity or potential to labour. In fact, the way in which Clarke formulates the gap between labour and labour-power means that the problem of labour is restricted to the problem of separation (alienation) of labour from the means of production and, as a result, the theoretical power of Marx’s later formulations about the constitutive nature of the subjectivity of labour – in particular the concept of real subsumption, through which labour suffers a qualitative change of its nature – is avoided altogether. Indeed, in Clarke’s version of contemporary capitalism, workers are still struggling to avoid becoming really subsumed.13

Clarke may be arguing that capitalism is a particular form of society, but he is not arguing at the level of society. Clarke does accept that capital produces new human productive and intellectual capacities in an alienated form; however, this point is not developed and he returns to a rather limited conception that all of this will lead to the development of new social collectivities, in the form of working-class organisations, which contest the power of capital and provide the foundation on which a new society can be built.14 In later work, Clarke abandons labour as an object of enquiry. For Clarke, it is money, as the supreme form of social being, rather than labour as the source of value, that is the centrally important aspect of Marx’s social theory. While, for Clarke, the link between money and labour is assured, and while money is indeed a central issue for Marxist social science, the concept and reality of labour as an object for critical theoretical enquiry disappears.

The general theoretical limitation of Clarke’s work has been outlined by Michael De Vroey, who refers to this approach as the ‘abstract labour paradigm’. De Vroey argues that this paradigm is based on I.I. Rubin’s work Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value, which is identified by its particular critique of David Ricardo’s embodied-labour theory of value. De Vroey maintains that the important point about the abstract labour school is that it is based on a social, rather than technical, paradigm of value in which the commodity is both a physical product and a social relationship: ‘The first aspect always supports the second one, but it is the latter which plays the leading role in the dynamic of capitalist society’.15 In the abstract-labour account of the labour theory of

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value, the relation between production and circulation is crucial with money as a central factor. Value, in this context, refers to the social properties of commodities and is a validation of private labour through the exchange of commodities for money. De Vroey argues that, in the abstract-labour paradigm, the concept of ‘private labour’ is given a central role, designating the specific way in which labour in a decentralised economy is allocated: ‘Private labour becomes validated (i.e. reckoned as a fraction of social labour . . .) only in so far as its products are sold’.16 The important point is that, as the socialisation does not occur in the process of production (‘since in the absence of a sale no creation of value occurs’17), this theory cannot be considered a theory of production. However, it is not a circulation theory either, because ‘once the sale takes place, the magnitude of value depends on the average conditions of production, prevailing at the precise moment of exchange’.18 His conclusion is that ‘exchange creates value, but production determines its magnitude’.19 De Vroey does not develop this critique, but he does say that the abstract-labour account deserves more attention, although, at the moment, it cannot be considered a fully constructed theory.

While De Vroey does not refer specifically to Clarke’s work, an attempt has been made to develop a critique of Clarke’s interpretation of Marx’s theory of value through De Vroey’s analysis of the abstract-labour paradigm. De Angelis claims that the weakness with the abstract-labour paradigm is that it ‘represents class struggle outside of abstract labour’.20 De Angelis wants to argue that ‘abstract labour is the basic kernel upon which capitalist society is built’.21 In proposing this view, De Angelis hopes to be able to define the forms that abstract labour takes as a ‘life-process’ and ‘the mode of existence of labour’, which Marx defines as ‘human labour power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure’.22 For De Angelis, this is experienced as exhaustion and emptiness of meaning, in which every aspect of life is increasingly subordinated to capitalist work, within which, as De Angelis has it, capital attempts to transform the multidimensionality of life into the one-dimensionality of work, or, in Marx’s own formulation, to convert the worker

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
into ‘a crippled monstrosity’. De Angelis asserts that the dynamic character of capitalist society is the working-class struggle to overcome this process, based on ‘the multidimensionality of the needs and aspirations of its people’, within which working-class autonomy expresses itself. To the extent that labour is able to establish patterns of self-valorisation, it is also beyond the law of value.

De Angelis draws our attention to the point made by De Vroey that the process of abstraction occurs during exchange, in the social validation of the product of labour, which, under capitalism, occurs through money. This, argues De Angelis, is the basis of Clarke’s preoccupation with the money-form of capitalist social relations. The shortcoming of this formulation is that abstract labour is not, therefore, regarded as a social relation of struggle and that ‘the social aspect of the capitalist relation is limited to the market’ in a process through which labour becomes abstract by taking the form of money; in other words, the concern is with form, but with the form of value rather than with the form of labour.

While De Angelis recognises the significance that Clarke gives to class struggle, he argues that Clarke situates the site of class struggle not in the manner in which labour is constituted, as abstract labour, but, rather, in-and-against the institutional forms that abstract labour has constituted itself (money and the state). In Clarke’s formulation, money appears to have escaped class struggle to dominate workers as an independent institutional form. For De Angelis, the process of abstraction is more than simply the separation of labour from its own interests and the reconstruction of the power of labour in a form of a thing; it is, rather, the construction of a particular form of social existence.

The political point of De Angelis’s analysis is not only to show the limits of the abstract-labour paradigm, but to show how man has been dehumanised by the reduction of all life to work. De Angelis contrasts the dehumanisation of life-processes with the multidimensionality of human activity denied by the imposition of capitalist work, which can be recovered with the abolition of capitalist social relations. However, it is by no means clear what the logic of resistance is, in De Angelis’s account, other than to positively affirm the capacities and qualities of labour. Nor is it clear how human life acquired its multidimensional properties, other than through a romantic invocation of

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23 Marx 1971, p. 481.
what it is to be human. Once again, Marx’s negative critique is turned into a positive affirmation.

Werner Bonefeld has attempted to develop a critique of Simon Clarke in a non-autonomist direction. Bonefeld has contributed a great deal to the development of Marxist social theory and, in particular, by his recognition of the way in which social categories are constituted through human practice, but there is a reluctance in his work to engage with the problem of the constitution of labour: the substance of the forms that labour takes. Bonefeld acknowledges the importance of Clarke’s work and the advances he has made over structure-centred approaches, but argues that Clarke has failed to develop his work to its ‘radical conclusions’. According to Bonefeld, while Clarke argues that the starting point for the analysis of class struggle has to be Marx’s analysis of the contradictions inherent in the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, on the basis of which the class struggle develops, Clarke nevertheless does not raise the issue of the constitution of social existence and the constitution of categories. His focus falls on the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production. ... [Clarke] seems to propose that capital is in contradiction merely with itself, and that the class struggle is not only a consequence of this but, the means through which the contradiction develops ... to differentiate between the movement of class antagonism and its constitution.

The basis of Bonefeld’s critique is Clarke’s failure to account for the categorical constitution of social existence.

Bonefeld’s starting point is that capitalist social relations are ‘a perverted social practice’ within which class struggle exists inside the concept of capital, rather than as the means through which the self-contradictory world of capital develops, as it is for Clarke. This means that the fundamental contradiction of capital is its dependence on labour, from which capital cannot autonomise itself:

The power of capital exists only in and through labour, this latter being the substance of value. Were one to deny labour’s constitutive existence within the concept of capital, one would be forced to define capital as a power which exists independently of its social existence. In other words one would

26 Bonefeld 1995, p. 204.
28 Bonefeld 1995, p. 204.
conceive of capital not as a self-constituting power, but also as a thing, as a constituted form.29

The way in which Bonefeld wants to avoid the presumptive methodology of political economy, its tendency to work with undertheorised presuppositions, or abstractions that correspond to the fetishised world of capitalist society, is to emphasise the notion of ‘labour’, which, as a constituting power, ‘exists against itself in the form of the perverted world of capital’.30 For Bonefeld, human activity is the constituting power. In his account, living labour is the substance of value and exploitation, the means of not only producing value but of extorting surplus-value. Bonefeld recognises the theoretical problem of managing to invoke the real practical power of human practice without any ‘romantic invocation of the immediacy of the revolutionary subject’,31 and the fact that subjectivist endorsement of labour’s immediacy ‘tends to externalize structure from subject, so leading to a voluntarist conception which is the other side of determinism’.32

Bonefeld’s solution is to argue that class struggle does not simply occur in structures that have been created independently of labour, but that all categories are categories of class struggle, because they have all been constituted by labour (human practice). Capital exists only in and through labour, which is reconstituted in capitalist social relations in the perverted form as alienated labour. However, in spite of Bonefeld’s attempt to open some critical distance between himself and the work of Clarke, alienated labour is, for Bonefeld, as it is for Clarke, not a mode of human existence, but, rather, an expression of the way in which

human content subsists in and through commodities in a mode of being denied . . . human relations take the form of relations between the products or between things.33

Again, the focus is not on the form that labour takes as a mode of human existence, but, rather, on the form that value takes. The focus of Bonefeld’s work is ‘in the sphere of exchange where the social constitution of value exists in the mode of being denied’.34 The logic of Bonefeld’s argument, following the abstract-labour paradigm, is that abstract labour exists only as money:

29 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
Labour as the substance of value manifests itself only in money. It is in
and through money that the particular individual concrete labour asserts
itself as social, abstract, labour.35

The basic point of my critique is that, while Bonefeld recognises Marxism
as a theory of social constitution and that labour plays a decisive role in
that process of constitution, it is not at all clear what it is that constitutes
labour. This lack of interest in the substance of labour is compounded by his
pre-occupation with the separation of labour from the means of production
and the ongoing process of primitive accumulation, or the way in which
labour’s ‘purposive productive capacity’ is transformed into commodity
labour.36 While it is true that this is an ongoing struggle, Bonefeld gives no
consideration to the historical development of primitive accumulation through
formal and real subsumption and the implications that this has for the historical-
logical form that abstract labour takes. While Bonefeld does say that ‘labour
takes on the existence as an alien being’,37 the point is not developed. Rather,
capital is technologised and dehistoricised as a ‘perennial pumping machine
of surplus labour for the capitalist’.38

In the end, Bonefeld fails to solve the problem he has set for himself. Rather
than escaping the logic of the presupposition, he has reasserted it through
the romantic and rhetorical version of what he regards as the substance of
labour as the ‘living, form-giving fire’, all of which is presupposed in the
expression ‘in the form of being denied’.39 In the end, all of this is reinforced
by his Kantian conclusion: that ‘humanity is not a resource but a purpose’.40
The irony is that the logic for a more developed critique of labour, that is
against labour, lies within Bonefeld’s work but, like Clarke, he fails to develop
it to its logical conclusion.

The limits of Postone

Although Postone does not engage with the most recent debates within the
abstract-labour paradigm, he does provide a more fully developed theory of
value by concentrating on the form of labour as well as the form of value,
and, more interestingly, through his recovery of the immaterial dimension of value, understood as the production of abstraction, he provides a dimensionality that is not observable through social science or orthodox Marxism. However, having made this advance, he fails to unleash the full power of Marx’s mature social theory. His failure to do this is due to his inability to connect his re-invention of Marx’s theory of time with the possibility of a Marxist theory of space, or, more correctly, a theory of space-time, that his own work implies.

In order to uncover the fuller significance of the work and its limitations, it is necessary to return to its cosmological derivations and to now open up the discussion in terms of a theory of critical political cosmology by reference to Postone’s theory of time.

A central feature of Postone’s exposition of Marx’s mature social theory is the temporal dimension of value, which he elucidates through Marx’s concept of socially necessary labour time, whence he exposes the dynamic and historical tendency of capitalist society. However, Postone points out that the redetermination of the labour hour – the standard by which value is attributed to labour – leads to a paradox where time is both constant and non-constant. Postone maintains that this can not be explained with the Newtonian theory of absolute and linear time, but, rather, that “it implies another sort of time as a superordinate frame of reference.” The paradox is explained by what Postone refers to as the relation between ‘abstract independent time’ and ‘historical time’. Abstract independent time represents clock time and is constant. The redetermination of the standard of time through the workings of socially necessary labour time, within which time-units go through a process of densification, is non-constant. This non-constant redetermination of the standard of time is not reflected in abstract independent time. Postone introduces the notion of historical time, as another sort of concrete time.

Historical time is a reflection of the relationship between the redetermination of the standard of time (the non-constant variable) and the abstract independent time (the constant variable). Through the redetermination of the standard of time, the position of each new time unit is changed. It is, as a result of this change in position, that the constant and non-constant variables are moved forward. It is this forward motion that constitutes historical time. Postone is clear that this is not a movement in time, but rather a movement or flow of time in space. While this multidimensional temporal arrangement has some plausibility, there is no attempt to theorise the relationship between time and

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space. The movement of time is the movement of time in space.\textsuperscript{42} The result is that an important dimension is ignored and Postone’s universe becomes rather lop-sided. This is a surprising development, given that his analysis of the way in which abstract labour mediates and constitutes the social formations of capitalist society implies an approach which is critically concerned with the way in which social space is constituted and moves. This non-development of a spatial dimensionality is reflected in the last section of the book, which discusses the basis for the constitution of emancipated social arrangements through the framework of disposable time and alienated labour time. This framework for an emancipated future is derived from Marx’s discussion of the contradictory nature of social time in the \textit{Grundrisse}. Marx did not follow the logic implied in his own theory of time and, as a resident of Newton’s universe, was still using absolute measures of time. Postone, following Marx (in turn, following Newton), also abandons the logic implied in his own analysis and ends up by describing the emancipated future as a very non-dialectical ‘parallel form of universality’. The introduction of the concept of the parallel into a discussion about dialectics is a theoretical dead-end.

Any account that raises unexplained paradoxes in Newton’s theory of time must make reference to Einstein. And, yet, Postone does not make the move. Einstein dealt with the paradoxical nature of time in his special theory of relativity. In this formulation, both time and space (space-time) are, in fact, the result of the relationship between two frames of reference. These two frames are the speed of light, which is constant at all times, and the speed at which an object is travelling. The faster an object is travelling, the slower time will run. There is no absolute time, time only exists at the time at which it is being measured, and, as a consequence, there is no absolute space. This is not to say that everything is relative, as time is measured against the absolute measure of the speed of light. But, while this explanation works for objects travelling at constant speed and in a straight line, a more developed account was required for accelerating objects with changing velocities. This problem was addressed by Einstein’s theory of gravity, which became his general theory of relativity and was encapsulated in the equation $e = mc^2$.

In a discussion about the relationship between political theory and the natural sciences, Kay and Mott point out the link between the way in which advances and failures in the natural world are recorded as political theory.

\textsuperscript{42} Postone 1996, p. 295.
They argue that the concept of natural equivalence in political economy, in which equal exchange was based on the apparent equivalence of labour, was the counterpart to Newton’s symmetrical space, providing the principle through which all movements in society were made comprehensible. Kay and Mott suggest that, by challenging the principle of natural equivalence of labour, Marx moved beyond the concept of symmetrical space and anticipated relative or curved space. Space, for Marx, was non-symmetrical, depending on whether the commodity took the relative or the equivalent form of value. Space was neither homogeneous nor isomorphic, nor empty nor endless, as it had been for Newton, but was directionally orientated, and, rather than having a set of mysterious forces acting at a distance across space from one object to another, force, object and space-time were united in a single concrete formulation whose structural principle was discontinuity. There is no empty space across which objects interact with each other, since objects are directly structured into each other. Kay and Mott argue that Marx was anticipating Einstein’s theory of relativity and, had Marx written Capital only forty years later, the theory of relativity would have provided a more adequate language for his thought, which was well in advance of the science of the day. This is a dramatic juxtaposition which they do not develop. Writing within the abstract-labour paradigm, their focus is on consequences of the exchange relation – that is, on proportionality rather than dimensionality – and is restricted to Einstein’s special theory of relativity. While this enables them to make a very useful intervention in order to bring out the full significance of the connection, it is necessary to examine the relationship between Marx’s law of value and Einstein’s theory of gravity through his equation $e = mc^2$ and his general theory of relativity.

**M-C-M’ meets $e = mc^2$**

Both Einstein and Marx revolutionised the way in which we understand the basic laws of the physical and social universe, both radically disrupted common-sense notions of time and space and neither left us with a finished work, yet both force us to reconsider the nature of the physical and social world. A review of the work of Einstein reveals striking similarities between the way in which Marx formulated his labour theory of value and Einstein’s

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41 Kay and Mott 1982, p. 76.
44 Ibid.
theory of gravity. Marx maintained that the law of value that he elaborated was like the law of gravity. However, the law of gravity to which he was alluding was Newton’s law. What Marx could not know was that his elaboration of the law of value was, in fact, in advance of the science of the day and that it anticipated the revolutionary ways in which Einstein’s theories of relativity and gravity recomposed our notions about the relationship between time, space, matter, mass and energy. While the links between Marx’s critique of political economy and Einstein’s theory of special relativity have been made elsewhere, a connection between Einstein’s law of gravity and Marx’s law of value has yet to be made.

A full exposition of the relation between the work of Marx and Einstein is beyond the limits of this paper. However, some connection can be made here to establish some basic points. Einstein’s universe is a four-dimensional space-time continuum. Within this continuum, gravity is not a force acting between bodies through empty space, but is itself a totalising energy field created by the densification of matter, which is itself the product of congealed quantities of speed and mass. The energy fields, which are, in fact, distortions of the space-time continuum, create trajectories along which the densified matter moves and accelerates to maintain itself in a solid state. The denser the matter, the greater the distortion and the stronger its gravitational effect. The logic of the process, described by the equation $e = mc^2$, is for the process itself to overwhelm the material world in the form of black holes. The power of Einstein’s universe is, then, not an external force, as it had been for Newton, but is locked up in a material form within the objects that constitute the universe. What his logic also implied was that this power could be released in the form of nuclear energy and/or the nuclear bomb.

Marx’s universe is a five-dimensional space-time continuum. Although not normally conceived in this manner, the commodity-form is a peculiar relationship between space-matter-energy-speed. The denser the space-time unit, or socially necessary labour time, the greater the distortion of social space. In order to maintain its integrity, congealed forms of matter (human energy) must accelerate and increase their productivity. The logic of Marx’s social universe, described in the formula $M-C-M’$, is that the production of

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45 For a more developed account of the relationship between the work of Einstein and Marx see Neary and Rikowski 2002.
46 Hawking’s 1993.
immateriality (abstraction) will overwhelm the material world, either in the form of environmental destruction or as the nuclear bomb. Postone recognises the overwhelming logic of the production of immateriality: Material wealth is constituted by (concrete) labor and nature, but value is a function of (abstract) labor alone. As self-valorising value, capital consumes material nature to produce material wealth... and then moves on... characterized by a movement towards boundless expansion.... The dream implied by the capital form is one of utter boundlessness, a fantasy of freedom as the complete liberation from matter, from nature. This ‘dream of capital’ is becoming the nightmare of that from which it strives to free itself – the planet and its inhabitants. (Postone 1993, p. 383.)

The future?
Postone’s work is a serious contribution to Marx’s social theory. It makes an advance within the abstract-labour paradigm by dealing with both the form of value and the form of labour. By drawing out the distinction between value and material wealth, Postone defines a quality of dimensionality that is absent from orthodox Marxism. This enables Postone to describe labour as a unique configuration of the spatial and temporal aspects of the ‘social universe’ of capital and to provide a logic within which the logic of immateriality overwhelms the logic of the concrete world. But, at the end of this ambitious journey, his project collapses. His failure to connect a theory of space that his argument implies with his reinvention of Marx’s theory of time means that both are undermined. Postone’s vision of the future is based on the limitations of Marx’s work that were imposed on Marx, not by the logic of Marx’s own work but by what was known about the real world that Marx was living in. Postone’s work is pointing in the right direction, but, in the end, the abstract logic that powers his space machine does not provide enough critical energy to escape the gravity of bourgeois materialism and provide a fully developed theory of the future.
References


Marcel Stoetzler

Postone’s Marx: A Theorist of Modern Society, Its Social Movements and Its Imprisonment by Abstract Labour

In the first section of this essay, I will outline some of the basic arguments of Moishe Postone’s book, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, focusing on the pivotal concepts abstract labour, class, value and time. After outlining *abstract labour* – the most basic category in Postone’s conception – I will explore Postone’s concept of *class*. The discussion of the concept of *value* refers back to that of abstract labour. The concept of *time* will take the most of this section because it seems to me to be Postone’s most original contribution. Its implications for the concept of *history* are pivotal to what I will develop in the third part of this essay. In the second section, I will contrast the presentation of Postone’s conception with a discussion of some of the criticisms raised by reviewers of the book. In the third part, I will explore the relevance of the concepts of *time* and *history* for understanding the historical dynamic specific to modern bourgeois society and the logic of social movements in this society.

1 This essay owes a lot to comments by Lars Stubbe, Hamburg and Christine Achinger, Nottingham, on earlier drafts, and the latter’s unpublished presentation on Postone (Achinger 1999).

*Historical Materialism*, volume 12:3 (261–283)
© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2004
Also available online – www.brill.nl
Moishe Postone’s readings of abstract labour, class, value and time

Mediation by abstract labour as the ‘social mediation in capitalism’ is the focal point of Moishe Postone’s ‘reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory’. Postone states that Marx’s theory of capitalism is a critical theory of the nature of modernity itself, namely of modern society as a directionally dynamic society based on a unique form of social mediation that is abstract and impersonal. It aims to show that labour in capitalist society plays a historically unique role in mediating social relations. The real abstraction of life under capital is also the source of the typically modern intellectual reflections of abstraction:

The peculiar nature of social mediation in capitalism gives rise to an antinomy – so characteristic of modern Western worldviews – between a ‘secularized’, ‘thingly’ concrete dimension and a purely abstract dimension, whereby the socially constituted character of both dimensions, as well as their intrinsic relation, is veiled.

In commodity-determined society, the same labour appears twice, as concrete useful labour and as abstract value-creating labour. Abstract human labour is considered the ‘social substance’ common to all particular forms of productive activity. This overall commonality appears to be the ‘expenditure of human energy in (any) physiological form’, that is a transhistorical, physiological residue. But, as Marx stresses, the objectivity of values is ‘purely social’. Being the core structure of a historically specific social formation, that of the capitalist mode of production, abstract labour is not a transhistorical substance, but a historically and socially determined one. The statement that, in any society, humans interact with nature is a truism of little explanatory power. The point is how interaction constitutes society: ‘[L]abor as such does not constitute society per se; labor in capitalism, however, does constitute that society’. Concrete labour is understood hereby as any intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion; abstract labour is the function of such labours.

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2 Postone 1993, p. 4.
3 Postone 1993, p. 16.
5 All the following is, of course, based on the concept of the commodity-form in Marx 1976, Chapter One.
7 Ibid. Wording by I.I. Rubin.
9 Commensurability, the ability of two quantities to be measured by the same scale, implies that they are of the same (abstract) essence (value). Without the assumption of this essential identity, different products could not be exchanged as equivalents of equal value.

12 Postone 1993, p. 357.

as *socially mediating* activities as specific to the capitalist mode of production, a mediation based on the assumed commensurability of all labour activities. In non-capitalist societies, labouring activities are social by virtue of the matrix of personal, qualitatively particular social relations, in which they are embedded. Exploitation and domination are *extrinsic* to non-capitalist forms of labour (such as serf labour), while they are *integral* to commodity-determined labour.

In traditional social formations, such as feudalism, labour is *bonded*, or ‘fettered’, as protagonists and apologists of bourgeois revolutions complained. In the capitalist mode of production, as opposed to that, (abstract) labour is *the bond*: it performs objective constraints that are ‘apparently nonsocial’.

‘The working class . . . is the necessary basis of the present (society) under which it suffers’. Postone bases his discussion of the concept of class on the example for class struggle given by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, the limitation of the working day. Being the legal result of class struggle based on the constitution of the workers as a collective force, it ‘set the stage’ historically for the replacement of the production of absolute by relative surplus-value and formal by real subsumption. Since this replacement keeps repeating itself, ‘ongoing conflicts’ about the rate of exploitation are ‘intrinsic aspects of everyday life in capitalist society’. In this sense, class conflict is ‘a driving element’ of the historical development of capitalism, which includes its totalisation as well as those moments that facilitate its abolition.

‘Class’ is a relational category: a class is a class only in relation to other classes. Classes as they occur in the first volume of *Capital* ‘are not discrete entities but structurings of social practice and consciousness . . . organized antagonistically’. According to Postone, Marx’s argument does not imply that other social strata or groupings – religion, ethnicity, nationality, or gender – play no important roles historically and politically. The category of class, so Postone claims, must not be subjected to ‘sociological reduction’, that is it must not be reduced in the manner of conventional sociology to...
concrete, ‘positive’ classes as social strata. In the latter sense, class belongs to the overt, concrete, direct social relations ‘such as kinship relations or relations of personal or direct domination’. Capitalist society, however, is characteristically structured by a social interrelatedness that cannot be explained in such terms. There is an abstract and a concrete side to ‘class’, in the same way as there is to ‘commodity’.

Marx does not relate ideas to the social ‘situatedness’ of the social actors in the same sense as (Mannheimian) ‘sociology of knowledge’, but he relates the ideas themselves to (class) positioning. For example, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx argues that the thought of the petty-bourgeois party presupposes ‘a world of free and equal commodity producers and owners’, ‘a world in which all are petty bourgeois’. This does not imply that such a world is a reality for the people who hold this ideology. The ‘proletarian position’ was the demand for the ‘social republic’. The same persons who held the proletarian position took petty-bourgeois ‘artisanal’ positions after their defeat. The small peasants, for example, do not form a class at all in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: their merely local interconnection and ‘mode of life, interest, and their culture’ might be termed ‘stratum’ but not class, as the category ‘small peasant’ is not a structuring element of the social totality.

Postone underlines that ‘while class analysis remains basic to the Marxian critical project’, the concept of class needs to be developed closely from the more basic categories commodity and value. In turn, the ‘analysis of value, surplus value, and capital as social forms cannot be fully grasped in terms of class categories’. Whenever class is not rigorously developed in this way, it runs risk of ‘a serious sociological reduction of the Marxian critique’. Postone’s brief remarks on this issue can be supported by reference to other authors, such as George Comninel. Comninel describes two central elements of bourgeois-liberal thought, the notion of progress in historical stages and a concept of class struggle based on a concept of class which Marx subsequently abandoned. The French ‘restoration’ historians Thierry and Mignet developed a bourgeois theory of class struggle (drawing on Machiavelli and Hobbes) that knew two essential classes in the context of the French Revolution: ‘the idle and decadent descendants of the feudal order of Germanic conquerors,

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17 Postone 1993, p. 323.
20 Ibid.
and the productive, innovative, and virtuously “active” elements who sprang from the indigenous people".21 Class, in this conception, was based on rank, privilege and political position as well as on how one secured one’s living, which, still today, are the most widespread determinations of class in the context of sociology. Progress, in this conception, consists in the triumph of the active and creative element of society, the Third Estate that is supposed to become the totality of productive society, *la nation*. Allowing the active a free hand (‘Liberty, Equality, Property and Bentham’, in Marx’s ingenious formula from *Capital*)22 results in progress and harmony as described by the science of political economy. The realisation of commercial or ‘civil’ society means the end of history and of class struggle.23 Important elements of this bourgeois line of thinking underlie the ideologies of working-class movements, too. Comninel suggests that Marx himself ‘seriously underestimated the originality of his own method of social analysis’24 and reproduced at times – against himself – liberal conceptions, in particular in *The German Ideology*. A closer discussion of this trajectory would show that the liberal ideology of sailing with the infallible winds of progress – the productive classes outdoing the idle classes – is being perpetuated in the hegemonic forms of Marxism: in Postone’s terms, ‘Traditional Marxism’, or more specifically, ‘standpoint of labour’ theory. This insight, which is implied in Postone’s analysis,25 is a crucial contribution to explaining some discriminatory practices and ideologies within the labour movement, such as socialist antisemitism.26 The latter arise whenever and to the extent that the labour movement is not a proletarian

21 Comninel 1987, p. 116; note the ‘racist’ implications of this concept.
22 Marx 1976, p. 279.
24 Comninel 1987, p. 56.
25 The background for this argument was developed by Horkheimer in his 1930 essay, ‘Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History’ (Horkheimer 1993). Postone, who is right to be dismissive of many of Horkheimer’s positions, tends to overlook the strengths of some of Horkheimer’s early writings.
26 Compare with Postone 1986; Postone’s analysis implies that at the core of antisemitism lies the fetishisation of productive as against unproductive capital. The antisemites imagine themselves as the collective of honest, hard-working producers, the Jews as non-productive parasites who manage to appropriate surplus by domination of the spheres of circulation and mediation in its various modes. The antisemitic projection obscures that the specifically capitalist exploitation is being done in the sphere of production. This crucial aspect of modern antisemitism was indeed first fully developed in the context of what Marx attacked as ‘utopian’, i.e. petty-bourgeois forms of socialism. Adorno and Horkheimer described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that ‘bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic foundation: the concealment of domination in production’ (in Horkheimer 1997, p. 173).
movement. The claim to be speaking ‘from the standpoint of labour’ can be understood in this perspective as an element of bourgeois ideology that is incompatible with Marx’s critique of political economy (whether or not Marx himself occasionally might have formulated such a claim).

The dichotomy of material wealth and abstract value is rooted in the double character of labour in the capitalist mode of production as abstract and concrete labour. The productivity of labour is based on the social character of labour as productive activity (concrete labour); it is nothing other than historically developed forms of social organisation and social knowledge. Value, though, is based on the opposite dimension of capitalist labour: it is the objectification of labour as socially mediating activity (abstract labour). This means that value, on the one hand, does not directly reflect productivity and the production of material wealth, whereas wealth, on the other hand, is not exclusively and not even necessarily bound to the expenditure of human labour. This implies that a society based on the measurement of value – the society of capital – will never be able to radically and globally reduce the expenditure of ‘brains, hands, muscles, nerves’, even if this society would potentially be able to do so and let forces of nature and machines do all or most of the work. This society condemns itself to never ending drudgery.

With advanced technological production, . . . [the] expenditure of direct human labor time no longer stands in any meaningful relationship to the production of [material] wealth. This is, according to Postone, the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist mode of production: the value-form as a core structure of society becomes increasingly anachronistic. Material wealth becomes more and more independent from direct expenditure of labour: productivity, historically accumulated human knowledge and experience, the worldly afterlife of thousands of past generations, works increasingly for the living and could, for the first time in history, free them from most of the drudgery. Only the capitalist mode of production, based as it is on the measurement of riches

\[\text{Postone 1993, p. 195.}\]

\[\text{Machines as such increase wealth but not value. As a machine, as such, reduces the production of value in that it replaces living labour, a capitalist enterprise will only implement it if it is instrumental to an overall strategy of increasing value, that is increasing exploitation. One can expect that, within the framework of the capitalist mode of production, only such machines will be developed and implemented that increase exploitation. No material wealth can be produced beyond what is value-able.}\]

\[\text{Postone 1993, p. 197.}\]
not as material wealth but in the form of abstract value, materialised in money, depending on the consumption of living human labour, keeps that golden age in the bottle.

People tend to know, somehow, about this contradiction. What needs to happen to transform vague awareness into the determinate action that would end the nightmare? Postone does not try to formulate any particular answer to this (decisive) question but he has a contribution to make that I will explore in the third and final section of the present essay.

Pivotal to Postone’s approach to bourgeois subjectivity and its drive to totalisation is his thesis that ‘[d]ealing with commodities on an everyday level . . . involves . . . a continuous act of abstraction’.30 This continuous everyday practice is the basis of the totalising dynamic of modern bourgeois society. Conversely, this seems to imply that failure to deal with commodities (such as one’s labour-power) on a daily basis must result in crisis and disintegration of bourgeois subjectivity.31

A dynamic drive towards totalisation, however, is a unique and extraordinary fact. In an earlier text, co-authored with Helmut Reinicke, Postone wrote: ‘Only capitalism – not the history of humanity – reveals a totalizing logic’.32 Although the logic of modern history is a ‘progressively less random’ one, the essence of the totality that constitutes itself in this process is contradictory, and thus implies its own negation as a possibility:

It is because this present is logically determined as a totality of a contradictory essence that it logically points beyond itself to the possibility of a future form, whose realization depends upon class struggle. The choice becomes socialism or barbarism – and this depends upon revolutionary practice . . . . The historical determination of the dialectic points to a notion of history as the movement from contingency to a necessity which, in its increasing self-contradictions, allows for the possibility of freedom.33

It is interesting to see that Postone and Reinicke seem to equate here the concepts of ‘class struggle’ and ‘revolutionary practice’,34 which implies that in this earlier text, ‘class struggle’ does not generically refer to the daily

30 Postone 1993, p. 175.
31 This is of course true only on a societal level; on the individual level, the opposite may be true.
32 Postone and Reinicke 1974, p. 137.
33 Ibid.
34 A term that does not reappear in Postone 1993.
negotiating processes immanent to the unfolding of capital that it refers to in *Time, Labor and Social Domination*: the term refers here much more narrowly to those immanent moments by which the totality’s dynamic could be superseded. The element of freedom and choice that ‘revolutionary practice’ refers to is directed against the totalising tendency whose product it is: with necessity and domination, the contradictions grow; the possibility of freedom, that is of the negation of the totality, grows too. Nothing here, however, seems to imply that ‘class struggle’ in the sense of ‘revolutionary practice’ is most likely to come especially or even exclusively from members of the industrial working class.

In Postone’s understanding of Marx, ‘the character of modern universality and equality’ are ‘constituted with the development and consolidation of the commodity-determined form of social relations’, in particular, wage-labour. These arise ‘concomitantly’.

Universalising and equalising practice is the root of the – philosophical, political, social – *ideas* of universality and equality. Just as these practices are ever historically specific, so are the concomitant ideas: the specific form of equality as it arises in the context of the capitalist mode of production is based on the opposition of the universal and the particular; the universal is an abstraction from the particular. Marx’s critique is directed neither against the one nor the other, but *against their opposition* and ‘points to the possibility of another form of universalism, one not based upon an abstraction from all concrete specificity’.

As with so many other concepts in the modern world, time leads the double life already familiar from the commodity, as *concrete* time and *abstract* time. Concrete time is time that is a dependent function of events such as natural or human periodicities or particular tasks or processes such as cooking rice or saying a *pater noster*. Concrete time can be determined qualitatively: it can be good time or bad time, sacred or profane and so on. The events . . . do not occur within time, but structure and determine it. The modes of reckoning associated with concrete time allow for temporal units that vary. The measure of concrete time is thereby related to what sort of time it refers to. The event that structures the time, structures the measurement of time, too. Abstract time is classically described in Newton’s *Principia* as ‘absolute,
true and mathematical time (which) flows equally without relation to anything external.  

The dichotomy developed historically together with two opposed forms of time discipline that competed in Europe for predominance from the late-medieval period onwards: a traditional one based on a conception of concrete time, versus a modern one based on abstract time. Time discipline based on concrete time referred to ‘series of time points which marked when various activities were to be done’; this sort of discipline can be found, for example, in a monastery, but had been fundamental to everyday life both in rural and urban Europe up until then. Discipline based on abstract time, in contrast, measures the duration of the activity itself.

Postone distinguishes two dimensions of a transformation of the social reality of time. Until the fourteenth century, the urban workday was defined in variable hours just as the rural was. At that time, ‘relatively large-scale, privately controlled production for exchange (that is, for profit) based upon wage labor’ developed in those European towns where cloth was produced, one of the first mass export products. This new mode of production presupposed and reinforced the monetarisation of some sectors of medieval society and caused also the concept of productivity to become a central category of production. The fact that workers in these places were paid by the day generated a class struggle over the length of the working day: the working day ceased to be understood ‘naively’ from sunrise to sunset, as the ‘natural day’. The disconnection of the working day from the natural day opened the gates to a redefinition of the concept of time as such. It implied that time could be understood as independent from seasonal variations, as constant and homogeneous time.

The transition from concrete to abstract time, however, depended on a second aspect of the overall social transformation underway. The struggle over the length of the working day and even the introduction of constant time would not of themselves replace discipline based on the concept of time as a series of time-points indicating when work started and when it stopped with a discipline based on time as the measurement of work itself. The real
The difference between capitalist manufacture and a (non-capitalist) monastery is that, in the former, wealth is produced in the form of value.

Competition between capitalists, their compulsion to produce according to the latest standard of productivity, gradually subsumed the working process itself and turned the temporal measurement of activity into a compelling norm: only when productivity became the decisive category of organising production, was activity measured in abstract time. Simultaneously, the concrete activity that takes place between ‘time point x’ and ‘time point y’ turns into a mere appearance of an invisible essence, abstract labour of the quantity that corresponds to the duration of ‘y – x hours’. Only this context renders the concept of abstract time socially meaningful. When Newton formulated the concept of mathematical time in 1687, it was already a social practice. Equal and divisible time, abstracted from the sensuous reality of daylight, darkness, seasons, and so forth, and value, expressed in the form of money, abstracted from the sensuous reality of goods, have been the two decisive ‘moments in the growing abstraction and quantification of . . . everyday life’.42

The most interesting point made by Postone is not, however, the mere distinction between concrete and abstract time, but his conception of their dialectic. ‘Not every hour is an hour’.43 Productivity, which is an attribute of the use-value of labour-power, constitutes the ‘social labor hour’, that is the qualitative standard of what can count as a ‘real’, socially valid, hour of labour.44 This means, ‘the abstract temporal constant which determines value is itself determined by the use-value dimension’. Because what is being produced in a time unit under the new standard of productivity yields the same value as what had been produced in that time unit under the old level, production must take over the new standard in order to remain competitive. One hour of labour yields ‘its’ abstract value only when the process that happens concretely in that hour is performed in the latest state-of-the-art manner: the value side determines (‘subsumes’) the concrete side, in turn, because the abstract depends on the concrete. Postone uses the expression ‘treadmill effect’ to designate the dynamic interaction of the duality of abstract labour/value/abstract time and concrete labour/wealth/concrete time: the whole constellation moves on, while it nonetheless stands still.

42 Postone 1993, p. 213.
An increase in productivity makes the social labour hour more ‘dense’ in terms of the production of goods.45 This determination, ‘density’, is an aspect of concrete temporality. The development of productivity does not change the abstract temporal unit (an hour has always sixty minutes) but it moves it ‘forward in time’:46 one hour of labour time today is – in the abstract – one hour of labour time five years ago,47 but they are two different hours in terms of what is happening qualitatively. The more productive and dense the labour time is, the worse for the labourer: ‘density’ corresponds to the related concept of the rate of exploitation.

Postone describes thus ‘a dialectic of two forms of time’ that is related to the dialectic of abstract and concrete labour. An ongoing directional movement of time, a ‘flow of history’, historical time, emerges together with abstract time – time as abstract temporal norm – concomitantly with the development of the commodity as a totalising social form. The abstract norm ‘one hour’ is static, despite the flow of historical time, just as the amount of value yielded in that abstract hour is static despite the progress of productivity.48 Abstract time, although static in itself, moves within historical time. From the perspective of the present, however, history flows invisibly behind abstract, present time. Postone arrives here at a theory of time and the historical dynamic of modern bourgeois society that, in turn, has the concepts of time and history at its core: the capitalist mode of production is characterised by the dualism of normative, abstract and directional, historical time, the latter being a historically specific form of concrete time that expresses an ongoing dynamic transformation at a pace that may accelerate or slow down at times. On the conceptual level, this is the crowning achievement of Postone’s book. From here, Postone is able to point towards an understanding of contemporary social movements that, I suggest, goes far beyond the terms of much debate today. I will address these and add some considerations that I think could be derived from Postone’s work on the concluding pages. Before, I would like to examine two objections that have been made by critics which, by way of contrast, can make the distinctiveness of Postone’s contribution a little clearer.

46 Postone 1993, p. 293.
47 Its value may have decreased, however, if the value of food and all the things that are necessary, or that are considered necessary, to reproduce labour-power has shrunk.
Readings of Postone: universal subjects and eternal structures

In this section, I will explore two reviews of Postone’s book from the opposite poles of the spectrum, by Chris Arthur and Martin Jay. Arthur has a lot of praise for the theoretical structure of Postone’s main argument, which he understands as redressing previous mistaken assumptions about Marx’s relation to Hegel. He agrees with Postone that Marx turned observations made by Hegel into historically specific concepts and discovered Hegel’s ‘rational kernel’ – ironically – in Hegel’s idealism. Arthur further agrees that ‘value is not merely a regulator of circulation, nor a category of class exploitation alone; rather... it shapes the form of the production process and grounds the intrinsic dynamic of capitalist society’.  

Arthur claims, however, that Postone ‘loses sight’ of the ‘dialectical interchange between structure and struggle’ intrinsic to this. Arthur’s formulation is telling here:

His fatal mistake is to go from ‘capital cannot be grasped fully in terms of class alone’ – from this ‘fully’ and this ‘alone’ – to a complete rejection of the significance of class struggle for socialism. Arthur argues here that two statements do not follow from each other that are actually two different statements on different issues and seem not meant to follow from each other in the first place: the significance or non-significance of class struggle for socialism is not the same question as the significance or non-significance of class struggle for capitalist society. What Postone actually states is that class struggle constitutes the history of capitalist society; this is not a statement about ‘socialism’ and how to get there. Postone acknowledges the dialectic of structure and struggle, but, while he agrees that the way out must be found within the actuality of society, it cannot be identical with its main mode of movement.

The main bone of contention in Arthur’s critique of Postone is the concept of ‘standpoint of labour’. Postone stresses that Marx’s is a critique of labour, not a critique of exploitation from the ‘standpoint of labour’. Arthur answers that a critique of labour can indeed be formulated from the standpoint of labour, and claims that this is what Marx intended. Postone’s claim – approved by Arthur – that the working class is integral to capitalism and not ‘the

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embodiment of its negation’ is an ontological statement: without a working class, no value, and no capital. Arthur’s claim that the working class, from its ‘standpoint’, can formulate a critique of labour is an epistemological statement: although being intrinsic to capital, the working class is able to formulate (and realise) a critique. Arthur seems to assume that the first statement logically excludes the second one:

Postone . . . cannot see how from within the system one can posit its objective transcendence. Thus he cannot grasp the standpoint of labour as giving rise to a self-transcending movement.51

Arthur tries to turn, here, the main postulate of Frankfurt-school critical theory (developed by Postone abundantly in the first part of his book) against Postone: the defining hallmark of critical theory being immanent critique based on intrinsic contradictions of the society that constitutes its object.52 Arthur rejects Postone’s argument that ‘overcoming capital cannot be based on the self-assertion of the working class’:53

Of course it can! – if workers assert themselves as the human beings they are in addition to bearers of labour power. Postone speaks as if capital has successfully reified the capital relation – as if workers could not possibly think in and against the value form.54

The problem here is precisely defining what ‘self-assertion’ and ‘in addition’ mean. Workers are, of course, not only ‘bearers of labour-power’ but also, fundamentally (not only ‘in addition’), ‘human beings’. What, however, is the ‘self’ they are supposed to assert? What Arthur suggests is their ‘self-assertion’ would better be described as the self-sublation [Selbst-Aufhebung] or self-abolition of the working class, that is the self-(re-)making of human beings that, in the process, stop being workers and become human beings in a fuller, more emphatic, novel sense of the word. This is the conception implicit in Postone’s understanding of critical theory (and evocative of Adorno’s concept of ‘non-identity’ in Negative Dialectics).55

Arthur claims that ‘Postone cannot locate his critique socially; he can only retreat to “possibilities” that might or might not be grasped “subjectively”’.56

51 Ibid.
52 See Horkheimer’s definition of the term ‘critical theory’ in Horkheimer 1972.
55 Adorno 1990.
It would be more adequate to say that Postone cannot locate his critique sociologically: Postone locates his critique socially, namely in the specific structures of capitalist society. It is true, however, that he does not name the revolutionary subject that can be trusted to carry out this critique in praxis. However, this weakness might prove to be, in reality, a strength because it leaves it to the spontaneity of the historical process to show who is going to carry the torch. ‘How feeble!’, exclaims Arthur. What Arthur has to say about the working class, though, is not so strong, either: if the revolutionary potential of the working class merely consists in ‘asserting their humanity’ which they possess ‘in addition’ to being workers, one might want to ask, what is so special about that? Is this not just another formulation of the humanism of which Arthur accuses Postone? Would not all people ‘assert’ (better: discover, or develop) their ‘humanity’ in a revolutionary process? While, on many points, Arthur seems to be very close to Postone’s position, the one point where he actually differs – his notion of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject – is not convincing. Arthur’s conclusion that Postone is a ‘shame-faced revisionist’ sounds like the work of projection. Shifting the responsibility for making the revolution onto any particular group of people implies the kind of theoretical closure that is the characteristic of revisionism. I tend to a slightly different belief in this matter: the quite plausible assumption that a revolution can only successfully be made if it rests on the general participation of value producers (that is, not in a constellation where a functioning coalition of value producers and value appropriators are opposed only by non-productive groups or categories of people), is a difficulty. It puts the contribution that other social groups can make into perspective. It does not, though, exclude the latter from potentially ‘making’ the revolution, let alone from understanding its necessity and its aims.

Martin Jay by-passed the, otherwise obligatory, discussion of how Postone’s conception relates to the Marxist tradition and asked whether or not it was adequate to contemporary society. Jay states that transcendence of the ‘capitalist order’ will be marked by ‘the end of all . . . abstractly universal meta-subjects’. Instances such as the Weltgeist described by Hegel as transhistorical entities were shown by Marx to be categories specific to capitalist society, and it must be deduced that no such categories have any legitimacy.

\[98\] Ibid.
beyond capital: the ‘universal subject’ is a category of capital, not one of revolution.

Jay grasps accurately the principal concern of Postone’s book: the basic contradiction between wealth and value – the developed contradiction intrinsic to the commodity-form – has not been resolved but, on the contrary, immensely increased, and this fact provides the ground for resisting the pessimistic conclusion of those who only see a ‘one-dimensional, administered world’ replicating itself \textit{ad infinitum}. ‘An immanent critique of capitalism’s dialectical contradictions, and not one that merely pits ideals against their betrayal in reality, is thus, despite everything, still possible’.\textsuperscript{60}

The capitalist mode of production is rendered anachronistic by the immanent dynamic of capitalist society, and along with value, proletarian labour itself becomes anachronistic. While labour continues to constitute value (and it will do so, by definition, as long as there is a capitalist mode of production), the production of wealth objectively necessitates so little working activity now that the latter does potentially not have to take the social form of (proletarian, capitalist) labour. This argument, central to Postone’s conception, implies that working activity could now take another, possibly a communist, social form in the course of the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. This is the core of what is, despite first impressions, as optimistic a social theory as one could currently hope to find.

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that it fell to a noted practitioner of ‘history of ideas’ to point out that ‘it is irrelevant whether or not Postone’s Marx is the “real” one or not. Although the question of a consistent reading of Marx is ‘not a trivial issue’, the ‘more pressing question, however, is whether or not Postone’s version of Marx’s ideas can survive on their own merit’.\textsuperscript{61} The answers that Jay gives to this question are particularly interesting because they are given not from a Marxist perspective but from a rather idealist one. Jay’s rejection of some of Postone’s crucial postulates illuminate, against Jay, that the general strengths of Postone’s argument lie in its Marxian character.

Jay points out that Postone’s portrayal of modern bourgeois society hinges on ‘the theme of dominating abstraction’\textsuperscript{62} emanating from the ‘dual abstraction of temporality and labor’. Jay relates that Postone took up the claim made by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who described the relationship between philosophy

\textsuperscript{60} Jay 1993, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{61} Jay 1993, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
and ‘abstract thinking’ and the inventions of money and the commodity in ancient Greece. Crucially, Postone’s take on Sohn-Rethel’s thesis is the historical specification that ‘only with modern capitalism does the domination of abstraction become genuinely total’.63 This decisive claim is based on Marx’s distinction between overt and socially mediated, apparently natural and non-societal, domination, the latter being characteristic of modern bourgeois society, a social universe ‘of personal independence in a context of objective dependence’. Jay challenges this point that is, without doubt, central to Marx as well as to any form of Marxism, including Postone’s. Jay claims that the difference between the importance of abstraction for ancient Greece and for modern capitalist society is ‘only a difference in degree, not in kind. There are, moreover, other sources of abstraction, which may also dominate the humans subject to them’.64 Jay names monotheism as an example:

A God who is indivisible, invisible, and transcendent is certainly a powerful example of the human tendency to abstract, a tendency which cannot be derived from capitalist relations of production.

Jay argues this point as if monotheism could only have been caused either by ‘capitalist relations of production’, or, otherwise, by ‘the human tendency to abstract’. Actually, George Thomson, on whose research Sohn-Rethel had partly based his argument, did address the emergence of monotheism from a historical-materialist point of view, as did others before and after him: classical-Mediterranean culture did not have to wait for capitalism to develop philosophy, monotheism and other abstractions, but this does not mean that they are human universals. Most importantly, it would be daring to argue that any one of these abstractions in antiquity determined the everyday lives of all members of society (if one can talk of a ‘society’) in a way only remotely as totalising as capitalist society’s domination by value.

As a second example, Jay argues that language, which ‘necessarily employs abstract signifiers to signify an infinity of different phenomena’ and has an ‘inevitably abstracting function’, an ‘always already existing system no one has consciously constructed’, cannot be derived from capitalism either. True enough; nobody ever claimed, though, that any kind of abstraction is due to the capitalist mode of production, and certainly not Postone. The point is that only in capitalism do abstract social forms become determining, totalising

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63 Ibid.
moments. Abstraction may well be found in any form of social constellation or human intercourse, but the question is what their social content and their social function are. Jay’s objections can be refuted with reference to a distinction made by Marx in *Grundrisse* and taken up by Postone, the distinction between *necessary* necessities and *non-necessary*, historically specific necessities, that is necessities only immanent to the capitalist mode of production. The context of this distinction is Marx’s implicit admission that, even in communism, not all activity will be pure play: some things that are not play just *have* to be done, from scrubbing the toilets to heart transplants. The point is that the amount of such necessary, unavoidable necessities is small compared to the non-necessary capitalist necessities, and could not serve as the social basis of a totalising mediation in the way abstract labour does.

A lot of work could be done in pointing out in detail the evolution of the elements of what Postone calls the ‘reconstruction’ of Marx’s critical theory. Obviously, this is not something that has been invented or started by Postone; his is a work of analysis and synthesis. A rich trajectory would have to be unearthed and systematised in order to flesh out a renewed project of Marxian critical theory. The critical exegesis of Marx’s own writings is but the necessary starting point. Postone’s admittedly sweeping category of ‘traditional Marxism’ must not be rejected flatly but answered with detailed presentations of what it fails to cover and acknowledge. I would anticipate, however, that such work of recovery will not invalidate but support Postone’s general argument.

**Reconstructing a movement of a new type**

Although the form of Postone’s discourse is that of a polemic, in its essence it is not a mere contribution to an ‘intellectual history’ of how to read Marx. The book’s implicit aim is much bolder: it could help redirecting the focus

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65 In Postone 1997, Postone discusses in condensed form a large number of references. A friendly remark by Postone typically points out the specific merits of a contribution (for example, Harry Braverman’s) and suggests that his own general conception accommodates critical contributions better than ‘traditional Marxism’ does.

66 In this context, it might be useful to know that *Time, Labor and Social Domination* was written (although not completed) in the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, when Postone lived and studied in Frankfurt. A properly contextualised interpretation of the book would have to explore how it relates to the conflicts and social practices of that period; very broadly, I suggest that Postone’s position developed as a form of defending the essence of Frankfurt-school critical theory against its decline into, on the one hand, Habermasian post-liberalism, and, on the other hand, the re-Leninisation of the extra-parliamentary and student movements.
of contemporary social movements towards challenging the social forms that are essential to modern bourgeois society.

The reception of the book has been largely marred by disputes about who said what first and who said it best, the daily bread of academics (‘committed’ or not) who, by threat of starvation, are forced to stake out and guard their territories. Should, though, the argument of *Time, Labor and Social Domination* somehow trickle through into the wider field of social movements, it could become an important contribution to a most necessary self-reflection and re-conceptualisation. It could contribute to a comeback of critical theory and a serious challenge to the limitations of ‘social postmodernism’ and similar derivatives of philosophical and sociological phenomenology.

Given the immense level of productivity either possible or realised at the beginning of our century, the production of material wealth is much more an objectification of collective human knowledge accumulated in historical time, an objectification of historical time and past labour, than an objectification of present labour and present time. Value, however, remains an expression of immediate labour time. The fetishistic society of capital, mad enough to continue to produce its wealth in the form of value, is therefore increasingly rendered anachronistic by its own historical dynamic. With the accumulation of historical experience, the expenditure of immediate labour becomes less and less necessary. The dead assemble their accumulated strengths, materialised in social knowledge in the widest sense, to work for the benefit of the living: ‘Man [has] succeeded in making the product of his past labour... perform gratuitous service on a large scale, like a force of nature’. 67

However, the living work hard to remain in their zombie state of society: the necessity of labour is actually not being negated but, on the contrary, is constantly reinforced. The present appears ever more an eternal present the more the dynamics of historical time gains momentum. The more it moves in time, the more static the present becomes, because the capitalist dynamic depends on the continuous reconstitution of value production.68 The capitalist dynamic *has* to reconstitute a static, identical present continuously, while the possible dynamic of a non-capitalist, post-capitalist society would not. The twofold character of time in the capitalist mode of production implies a twofold compulsion: people not only have to always perform the same, they

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68 Postone 1993, pp. 299–300.
are also compelled ‘to keep up with the times’. We are compelled to do the ever same in the ever most recent, as the only valid, manner. Whilst all that is solid may melt into air, then Postone’s analysis of Marx’s categories shows that the reverse is true, too: all that is fluid is frozen to stone.

The production of value destroys not only humans and their society but also the non-human environment. Postone stresses that the destruction of nature is ‘not simply a function of nature having become an object for humanity; rather, it is primarily a result of the sort of object that nature has become’, which is a historically specific sort of object. Because the runaway character of productivity is intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production, immanent attempts to restrain production in order to stop nature’s obstruction are impossible, illusory and anti-social because ‘failure to expand surplus value would indeed result in severe economic difficulties with great social costs’. This implies that attempts to reform capitalist society not only fail to work, but can be expected to make things worse.

In a society that has overcome capital, the general large-scale reduction in labour time and a qualitative change of labour would lead to a conception of work that would be both quantitatively and qualitatively different from labour in capitalist society (as well as different from precapitalist drudgery). Such a transformation would have to be based on the negation of the ‘socially constituting role played by labor in capitalism’, that is of abstract labour, which would imply a ‘fundamental restructuring and resignification of social life in general’. It is indeed ironic that the passage through maximal exploitation, destruction and alienation has created for humanity the chance to create itself as humane.

This analysis provides the basis for a social critique that could overcome the double domination of fetishistic forms of social critique as either the ‘primitivist’ abstract negation of advanced technology as if it were per se alienating or, as the affirmative critique that intends to continue capital determined production under a ‘socialist’ régime of ‘just’ distribution. The latter can be understood as a radicalisation, but also a continuation, of the bourgeois revolutions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had based themselves on demanding that the wealth produced ought to be
distributed and consumed by its producers – the Third Estate, alias la nation – not by the ‘idle classes’. The modern bourgeoisie that imagined that even Adam and Eve had nothing better to do than weaving and spinning has always given those who come under the suspicion of being ‘unproductive’ a hard time: it is the essence of the concept of ‘justice’ that those who do not sweat shall not eat. Differences and antagonisms notwithstanding, working-class movements, women’s and minorities’ movements, inasmuch as their struggles aimed at ‘equality’ and the universal validity of ‘rights’, have democratised and ipso facto helped to develop capitalist social forms. Inevitably, though, they developed reservations about equality and universality – as in ‘Liberty, Equality, Property and Bentham’ – too: since universal rights depend on the simultaneous existence of difference and specificity (just as universal value depends on particular use-value), these modern social movements stopped at some point and re-emphasised differences and identities. When feminists regressed into celebrating ‘femininity’, or ethnic minorities put their hopes into chimerical categories such as ‘indigenousness’, they echoed a pattern first established when the revolutionary proletariat – once conceived as the class that is not a class – settled for ‘being’ the working class. The universal class had to discover that its claim to universality could only be cashed in by being a particular and useful class – useful for value production. The trajectory from transcendence to identity (or, from dialectics to positivity) is one trait that otherwise rather antagonistic movements have in common.

Nevertheless, this intrinsic contradiction – basically that of the commodity-form – meant that social movements also subverted themselves: although their main effects were in tune with capitalist modernisation, they produced surplus effects that pointed beyond this and, to a lesser extent, still continue to do so, even in a state of regression and institutionalisation.

Everybody who is an owner and seller of commodities, that is a bourgeois subject, has a material and necessary interest – by punishment of starvation – to contribute to the reproduction of capital in all its dimensions. This includes those who have nothing to sell but their labour-power. The development of consciousness and activity that would transcend the capitalist mode of production does not rise ‘organically’ from the state of being a mere seller

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74 Pashukanis 1989.
75 Postone 1993, p. 369.
76 Marx 1976, p. 279.
77 In the sense of ‘Aufhebung’. 
of labour-power: being working-class, in the first instance, renders one a member of bourgeois society and its community of producers, not its enemy. The main thrust of working-class struggles had – and to varying degrees still has – to aim towards ‘Liberty, Equality, Property and Bentham’, that is towards being accepted as a full member of the existing society – not towards creating another one. Any expectation other than that is – or was – an idealistic delusion. Disappointed lovers of the working class, tired from über-Hegeln the proletariat, cried their ‘farewell’ travelling the dark side of the road back towards liberalism; nothing could have been less surprising.

Once one has arrived within the club of the emancipated and naturalised, one can work towards changing the rules of the game, but it is just as possible – and empirically more probable – that the new arrivals will help to keep others out (see the history of ‘yellow’ trade unions and ‘white’ feminists). This fate is shared by all movements that are modelled on the idea of fighting for ‘justice and equality’ – equality such as in ‘equal wage for equal work’; justice, as in ‘a fair wage for a fair day’s work’, the right to realise what ‘one is worth’,70 the undiminished value of one’s labour-power. Movements that fight for emancipation fight for being a full subject of and within bourgeois society. They are movements struggling for the realisation of the principle of exchange of equivalents,79 that is the totalisation of the bourgeois mode of production, the ‘real subsumption’80 of society under it. Marx gave expression to this tendency in his ironic81 hymn to capitalist society, the Communist Manifesto.

Postone differentiates three forms of ‘critique and opposition in capitalism’,82 which would perhaps better be described as three dimensions of social movements that hardly ever actually occur in ‘ideal-typical’ form: the defence of traditional social forms, or whatever people consider to be such; the reference to the ‘gap between the ideals of modern capitalist society’ (such as justice and equality) ‘and its reality’; and the reference to ‘the growing gap between the possibilities generated by capitalism and its actuality’. Whereas the first form could be described as conservative, the second could be termed liberal. The third form, the movement of a new type, is the determined negation of

81 I mean ‘ironic’ in the strong sense of the word, such as in ‘romantic’ or ‘Hegelian irony’.
the second: it would not appeal – like the liberals – to the supposedly good intentions of capital but to its unintended effects. It would understand capital as that Mephistophelian force that always intends evil but unintentionally produces good.

What exactly needs to happen to make one oppose or even fight this society and its community, is an infinitely difficult question to examine. The implication of Postone’s book is that, in contemporary developed capitalist society, it must have to do with the quotidian experience of the grotesque anachronism of being trapped within a society that is bound to the production of value as the only legitimate form of the production of wealth. Postone states that changing attitudes towards labour, the articulation of various social needs and forms of subjectivity should be interpreted in the framework of ‘the increasingly anachronistic character of the structure of work (and of other institutions of social reproduction) and their continued centrality in modern society’.83 This restates a pivotal argument of orthodox Marxism: the possibility of the emergence of forces that could overcome the mode of production is grounded in the latter’s anachronism, that is the fact that it obstructs society’s further developing its potential. Postone stresses that, in this context, some strands of the feminist movement have tried ‘to formulate a new form of universalism, beyond the opposition of homogeneous universality and particularity’.84 This implication obviously does not answer the question, but it points to one direction where one might look.

On one of the closing pages of the book, Postone suggests: ‘The theory of social mediation I have outlined here might also be able to provide the basis for a fruitful reconceptualization of the social constitution and historical transformation of gender and race in capitalist society’.85

Although this cannot be developed in the limited framework of the present essay, the direction of the discussion to be developed might have become evident: taking seriously the basic categories of ‘Marx’s mature theory’ can provide the conceptual framework for the most adequate analysis of the various aspects of subjectivity and sociality in modern bourgeois society, its historical dynamic and the immanent contradictions engendering movements and tendencies that could finally replace this society with another social formation – possibly, a better one.

84 Postone 1993, p. 372.
85 Postone 1993, p. 396.
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The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940
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Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore
JANAKI NAIR

Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories
CHITRA JOSHI

Reviewed by SUMIT SARKAR

The Return of Labour to South-Asian History

I

Some thirty years ago, Eric Stokes had hailed ‘the return of the peasant’ to modern Indian history.¹ And, indeed, studies of peasant protest and of ‘autonomous’ or ‘indigenous’ forms of popular, predominantly rural, culture came to be prioritised in

¹ Stokes 1978.
There is now an active Association of Labour Historians, periodic conferences on labour history, and the building-up of a central archival collection at the National Labour Institute near Delhi (accessible at www.indialabourarchives.com). There are signs also that research interests of younger scholars, for long focussed, successively, on anticolonial popular movements, predominantly rural ‘subaltern’ protest, and then questions of culture somewhat abstracted from material conditions, is beginning to move towards labour history.

South-Asian scholarship for a whole generation, above all through the impact of the subaltern studies project. Today, an important renewal of labour history has begun after years of neglect and marginalisation, though with much less fanfare and attention internationally or even within the country. Significantly, this is not a revival in the sense of a mere return to old interests and approaches. It has been accompanied by intense debates, auto-critiques, the exploration of new themes, dimensions, methods. Raj Chandavarkar’s two substantial volumes on the Bombay (Mumbai) textile industry, labour and city life need to be located in the context of this renewal. The significance, as well as the limits, of his achievement can be best appreciated through a simultaneous look at certain other works of recent scholarship. Among the latter, I have chosen four: Ian Kerr on railway labour, Dilip Simeon on Jamshedpur steel workers and Chota Nagpur coal miners, Janaki Nayar’s comparative study of the Kolar gold mines and Bangalore textiles, and, most recently, Chitra Joshi’s masterly work on Kanpur.

Early research on capitalist industry and labour in late-colonial India followed patterns reminiscent of the preliminary phases of scholarship in other parts of the world. There was, first, a certain amount of research with a ‘managerial’ kind of thrust, notably Morris David Morris’s study of the Bombay cotton textiles labour force in terms of recruitment, adaptation of rural migrants to the conditions of modern industry, and the evolution of mechanisms of labour control and discipline. Development along broadly unilinear, rightly and properly ‘modernising’, capitalist lines was assumed to be the norm. Indian departures from it – slow or distorted growth of industry, an unstable, inefficient, and volatile working class, backward styles of management – needed to be explained. Here, the big debate turned around whether the impediments came primarily from colonial constraints, or from the persistence of indigenous structures and values. Scholarship of a second kind started from a very different kind of commitment, one given to the cause of labour, and often to socialist revolution. Activists, present or past, of labour movements and trade unions made significant contributions to this other kind of work. As in labour histories of this type elsewhere, in the pre-Thompsonian era, the focus tended to be on strikes, the rise and fall of trade unions, debates on Communist or other leadership strategies – on all of which there would be a considerable amount of easily available and obvious data. Explanations for the ebb and flow of labour movements and organisations tended to be in terms of a combination of economic conjunctures and ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ styles of leadership:

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2 There is now an active Association of Labour Historians, periodic conferences on labour history, and the building-up of a central archival collection at the National Labour Institute near Delhi (accessible at www.indialabourarchives.com). There are signs also that research interests of younger scholars, for long focussed, successively, on anticolonial popular movements, predominantly rural ‘subaltern’ protest, and then questions of culture somewhat abstracted from material conditions, is beginning to move towards labour history.


4 Morris 1963.
variants of what would soon come to be rejected as histories that were economistic and written ‘from above’ alone, blind towards key questions of culture and autonomy.5

The radical-populist turn of the generation inspired, world-wide, by Vietnam and May 1968 brought about a major change in moods, in which disillusionment with orthodox left-wing forms of party and trade-union organisation went along with soaring hopes in the potentials of ‘subaltern’ self-activity. Publication dates indicate what proved to be a rather brief spell of interest in South-Asian labour history during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was also the time when South-Asian labour historians began to become aware of the importance of the Thompsonian transformation of their subject. Instances of the scholarship of these years would include work produced in some Australian universities (the studies of Newman on Bombay labour, and Murphy on four textile centres in South India), the dedicated research over many years of Ranajit Dasgupta (a rare instance of a Communist activist who was able to combine basic adherence to orthodox Marxism with a remarkable openness to new ideas), and the beginning of the research activities of a group of young scholars gathered together by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi – some of which have borne fruit only in quite recent times.6

But academic interest in labour studies proved rather evanescent, for the vogue for ‘histories from below’ manifested itself, in India as well as in most other Third-World countries, mainly through the valorisation of peasant movements and their histories. This was, of course, the predominant note in the early volumes of the Subaltern Studies series, the project which ultimately came to acquire an international reputation that has been both unprecedented and unique for the world of modern Indian history. The peasant focus in radical scholarship was not unnatural, given the apparent triumphs of rural insurrections in China, Vietnam, and elsewhere. India, too, had in the late 1960s and 1970s its share of Maoist peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari movement, embers of which seemed to linger on in some parts of the country – indeed, still do. India, during these years, saw also considerable labour militancy, notably the railway strike of 1975 and the heroic, year-long struggle of Bombay textile workers of 1982–3. But the defeat of 1983 marked the end of an epoch, for soon came the ‘structural adjustments’ and globalising pressures which have led, in India as elsewhere, to the decline of many old industrial centres and what seems sometimes to be a virtual elimination of the old kind of working class.

5 Two instances would be Karnik 1967 and Sen 1970.
6 Newman 1981, Murphy 1977. Ranajit Dasgupta’s numerous research papers on Bengal labour history, spread over several decades, are most conveniently gathered together (Dasgupta 1994). See, also, his important dialogue with Dipesh Chakrabarty (about whom more soon), in Chakrabarty and Dasgupta 1981. A sample of work located at the Jawaharlal Nehru University during these years (articles, rather than books) would include Bhattacharya 1981, Bhattacharya 1986; Joshi 1981, Joshi 1985; Mahapatra 1985. It may be noted that the origins of industrial labour attracted considerable research attention during these years: apart from Mahapatra, and several essays in Dasgupta, one needs to mention particularly Gupta 1974, and a seminal essay by Lalita Chakrabarti (Chakrabarti 1978).
The logic underlying the trajectory of Indian labour studies during these years is perhaps best appreciated through a brief look at the work of the one member of the *Subaltern Studies* editorial collective whose research area, initially, was the modern industrial working class. Dipesh Chakrabarty published his book on Calcutta jute mill workers in 1989, but the core of his thesis had already been conveyed through a series of research essays in the early 1980s. Chakrabarty’s work, though controversial, was widely acknowledged as highly original and almost seductive in its brilliance. Yet, in hindsight, it seems clear that, far from inaugurating any new surge in labour history, it may have acted as a positive dampener for further research. Chakrabarty himself, after 1989, moved away decisively from labour studies, refusing even to enter into debate with his later critics (among whom, as we shall see, Raj Chandavarkar has been the most persistent and aggressive).

Thomposonian in his rejection of reductive economism and focus upon cultural dimensions, Chakrabarty’s work still veered away from many of the stresses and values of *The Making of the English Working Class*. The basic emphasis was on the reproduction of prebourgeois, ‘semi-feudal’, deeply hierarchised assumptions within colonial factories as well in workers’ organisations. Thus, capitalists managed their workers not through the procedures of a Foucauldian disciplinary régime, but via ‘sardars’ or ‘jobbers’ rooted in caste, religious and rural structures of domination. The emergence of class consciousness, in the full Marxist sense, Chakrabarty argued, rested on the premise of a ‘hegemonic bourgeois culture’ – and this colonialism could never create, governed as it was by what Chakrabarty’s *Subaltern Studies* colleague Partha Chatterjee would soon term the basic ‘rule of colonial difference’. Trade-union organisers were, no doubt, often sincere and dedicated, but they, even the Communists among them, still necessarily came from educated, ‘respectable’ (in Bengali, ‘bhadralok’) strata, and they, too, could not escape the insidious pulls of a semi-feudal culture. The assumption of a trajectory similar to that in the advanced bourgeois West, governed by the supposedly uniform and inexorable laws of capitalist economic development, only made them blind to the ways in which their own relations with ‘their’ workers remained hierarchical, undemocratic, akin to that between the ‘babu’ and the ‘coolie’. Worker attitudes towards their employers and overseers oscillated sharply between the poles of deference and defiance. Militant moments were not rare, but what remained absent were stable, long-lasting trade-union structures.

The enduring significance of Chakrabarty’s work is undeniable. No serious South-Asian labour history after him has been able to ignore the questions he raised, in particular the intersections of community ties of religion and caste with class. Nor could a simple, unilinear progression towards higher levels of proletarian class...
consciousness be assumed any longer to be somehow natural. But three kinds of problems appear relevant at this point. Chakrabarty implicitly postulated a Western/non-Western dichotomy, where Indian factory and trade-union realities were counterposed against what was really a model at a very high level of abstraction read off directly from Volume I of Marx’s Capital. One is left in some doubt as to whether a not dissimilar gap might not emerge if the empirical details of nineteenth-century England are compared directly with Marx’s initial abstract model. (To take one instance: there may have been more domestic servants, no doubt entangled within ‘semi-feudal’ connections, in many mid-Victorian cities than factory workers.) Did not such an approach do some violence to what Marx had explicitly proclaimed to be a method of moving from the abstract towards the concrete, only through a whole series of mediations? Then there was also the interesting fact of a leading member of the Subaltern Studies collective developing such a critical, not to say near-cynical, view of labour protest and organisation precisely when his other colleagues were writing histories of peasant movements of a much more eulogistic kind. Doubts regarding the limits of ‘semi-feudal’ modes of leadership, for instance, were not allowed entrance into Ranajit Guha’s Elementary Aspects – in some ways, the flagship of the entire project. ‘Peasant’ insurgent consciousness was probed here in a structuralist manner, through a series of rebellions, most of which had been headed by local chiefs, landlords, sometimes even kings – with little attention to possible internal tensions between leaders and followers. Most directly relevant for my present argument, however, are the ways in which Chakrabarty’s prioritisation of what might be called the ‘backward linkages’ of labour culture – its rootedness in caste, religious, rural, premodern traditions – may have discouraged subsequent studies of workers in their grappling with the new conditions of city and factory environments. If culture was the decisive dimension, and that culture needed to be explored in terms of its roots in the countryside, surely a shift in focus from the city worker to the peasant made ample sense.

But, fairly soon, attention began moving away even from peasants, as dominant strands within Subaltern Studies moved towards more pronounced ‘culturalist’ positions. The problematic shifted towards questions of cultural domination by the modern, ‘post-Enlightenment’ West, acting primarily on and through the colonial middle class. As I have suggested elsewhere, a decline of the ‘subaltern’ was taking place within Subaltern Studies: or, more precisely, the élite/subaltern polarity had come to be abstracted from its initial, quasi-class, moorings and made implicitly equivalent to a Western cultural conquest/indigenous cultural autonomy binary. Meanwhile, the old kind of industrial working class and its organisations, in India as well as nearly everywhere, seemed to have entered into terminal decline, and the collapse of ‘actually-

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9 Guha 1983.
10 Sarkar 1997.
existing socialist régimes in 1989–91 appeared to cap the process. The years during and just after ‘the Fall’ marked the nadir of labour history, a time when even getting publishers to agree to bring out works on such an unfashionable theme became a matter of some difficulty.

II

How, then, did a renewal become possible? Certainly, current conditions in India do not indicate any prospect of a major upturn in the fortunes of organised labour. Quite the reverse, in fact, for the right-wing régime at Delhi between 1998 and May 2004 was more committed to neoliberal strategies than any of its predecessors, and labour and trade-union rights came to be threatened on a massive scale. (There were protests, demonstrations, occasional one-day strikes – but nothing particularly effective). But, maybe the very depth of the crisis, some of the forms it has taken, and the crassness of the present world-wide triumphalism of the votaries of the ‘free’ market, have had some paradoxical consequences for sensitive academics. The withering-away of expectations of any kind of ultimately inevitable ‘forward march’ of labour has occasionally stimulated a more nuanced historical understanding, where empathy is finely balanced with critical detachment.11 In more specific terms, what has become impossible to retain today, as so many old centres of reasonably effective labour organisation enter into apparently terminal decline, is that earlier frequent radical disdain for organised trade unionism, as catering to a privileged minority with wages and conditions so obviously superior to the mass of urban casual labour and rural toilers. The very distinction, for long assumed as a given, between the organised/formal and unorganised/informal sectors of non-agricultural employment seems to be vanishing.12 And a questioning of this and related polarities, we shall see, has been quite central to the work of Chandavarkar and other recent historians of labour. Raj Chandavarkar first attracted scholarly attention through two articles in *Modern Asian Studies*, in 1981 and 1985. The arguments and supportive data presented in these essays remain crucial for his subsequent books, and they have also been incorporated

11 The premier instance, so far, of such fine-grained research is Chitra Joshi’s *Lost Worlds* (Joshi 2003).
12 The formal sector has been conventionally defined as that governed by state laws fixing minimum wages, hours of work, etc. From the initial Factory Acts of the late-colonial era onwards, such regulations had been made applicable only to units that used power and employed a minimum number of workers. During the post-Independence Nehruvian era, with trade unions gaining strength and the passing of a series of reasonably progressive labour laws, capitalists developed strategies of shifting production to smaller units. Textiles provide the clearest example. Particularly after the defeat of the strike of 1982–3, power-loom came to be shifted massively from big weaving factories in old industrial centres like Mumbai and Ahmedabad to a new kind of widely scattered ‘domestic’ or ‘cottage’ production, largely outside the scope of labour regulations, where unionisation was much more difficult. Today, the globalised free trade régime threatens also this renovated kind of ‘domestic’ industry, while the state is in the process of removing the vestiges of the ‘formal’/‘informal’ distinction by drastically curtailing the old régime of limited, but real, labour protection and welfare.
in unchanged form as chapters four and two in *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*. The 1985 essay questioned the model of a linear, ‘normal’ track of development from handicrafts, through forms of putting-out and manufacture, to large-scale, machine and factory-based, industry. Despite their manifold other differences, theorists of ‘modernisation’ and Marxists had for long shared such an assumption. Deviations and retardations from this norm, derived from what was then thought to have been the paradigmatic British model of industrialisation, were assumed to be lags, signs of persistent backwardness. In the Bombay textile industry, however, the point of origin and for long the heart of Indian capitalist development, what remained characteristic virtually throughout was the combination of large factories with a considerable degree of putting-out forms, small workshops, and petty or artisanal units of production. Even in the 1920s and 1930s, seventy years or more after the foundation of the industry, one-third or more of the work-force was hired on a daily or casual basis, and ‘independent’ industrial investment in factories went along with often the same businessmen engaged in putting-out as well as in ‘comprador’ trading in British piece goods imports. A major part of even second- or third-generation industrial workers retained strong links with their village homes. Instead of the perennial search for explanations in terms of assumed backwardness, Chandavarkar suggested, one should rather explore the considerable degree to which such flexible forms may not have been reasonably successful adaptations by both capitalists and workers to specific circumstances. Thus frequent short-term fluctuations in the price of raw cotton as well as in the demand for yarn and cloth made ‘flexible’ investment by capitalists an eminently sensible strategy. The highly oppressive conditions of factory work and uncertainties of urban employment made workers who still had some land prefer circular movements between village and city to one-way migration to industry. They tended to invest whatever they could save on land, kept their families in the villages (living conditions in the city slums were generally atrocious), tried to go back there during harvests and festivals, and looked forward to returning permanently upon retirement.

In more general terms, Chandavarkar sought to shift the focus of attention away from the usual concentration on constraints limiting Indian capitalist development, whether colonial or indigenous-cultural, and giving it an allegedly peculiar, ‘colonial’ character. He emphasised, rather, instances of success through effective adaptations: as with South-Indian handlooms in the early twentieth century. It may be important to note, at this point, that assumptions of linear development were coming under attack even in British economic history from around the mid-1980s, and this may have emboldened Chandavarkar to embark on his revisionist enterprise. One is tempted to suggest a link between this interpretative shift and the transition on a world scale from around the 1970s, away from Fordism towards scattered, flexible forms of investment and production. The lineaments of contemporary capitalism are probably
making historians more aware of the non-linear and more variegated features even of the era of the classic ‘industrial revolution’, for the big factory no longer appears such an inevitable end-product of historical development.  

Chandavarkar’s 1981 essay raised important questions about another standard thrust in labour studies, homologous in many ways with the formal/informal disjunction. Attention had been concentrated on conditions and conflicts within factories, in virtual abstraction from the neighbourhoods or mohallas where industrial workers lived, embedded within an amorphous and highly varied mass of poor as well as lower-middle-class people. The neighbourhood, further, was usually identified as the locus for elements of heterogeneity, cultural and religious sectionalism, rural continuities – all hindering the growth of ideal-typically ‘pure’, proletarian consciousness the seed-bed for which would be necessarily the factory. Chandavarkar was able to go beyond both these stereotypes, through a vivid study of ‘Girangaon’, the area within Bombay city where most textile workers lived (often within walking distance of their places of work), with its slums, vibrant street life, and patterns of entertainment. The neighbourhood was the site of multiple dependencies, binding workers to the markets for housing, credit, and labour recruitment in interrelated ways. The jobber or labour-contractor through whom mill owners usually recruited and disciplined workers often doubled as house-agent, money-lender, petty trader or shopkeeper in the neighbourhood. Chandavarkar thus emphasised the interrelations between the forms of hierarchical domination on the shopfloor and in the mohalla. But the 1981 essay simultaneously probed the possibilities of part-reversals of such connections. The neighbourhood was far from being always a source of weakness, from the point of view of labour militancy and class consciousness. It was also the social arena within which workers exercised a degree of counter-pressure and autonomy, much more so than the factory with its quasi-despotic forms of control and repression and ever-present threats of dismissal for insubordination. Even the jobber was not quite the omnipotent figure sometimes imagined by historians. The hierarchies of domination were multiple, occasionally conflicting, and the jobber was not immune from everyday neighbourhood pressures and sanctions. Jobbers recruited and controlled workers through caste, religious, kinship, or village connections – but these, too, were ambivalent, becoming, on occasion, channels for counter-pressures. Neighbourhood connections and pressures were particularly vital during strikes, with strike-breakers being subjected, for instance, to various forms of social ostracism.

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13 See, for instance, Cannadine 1984, and Sabel and Zeitlin 1985. There can be a more and a less ‘optimistic’ readings of these dimensions, however, whether of past times or the present, and it may not be entirely irrelevant to note that Chandavarkar, who cites the above two articles in his 1994 volume, makes no mention of the important and pioneering study of Berg 1985, with its quasi-Thompsonian emphasis on exploitative dimensions and the everyday life of working men and women in such continuations or revivals of ‘domestic’ forms of capitalist production. (E.P. Thompson himself is a surprising omission from the otherwise very comprehensive bibliographies of Chandavarkar’s two volumes, which contain a large number of references to studies of industrial and labour history of countries outside South Asia.)
Chandavarkar urged the need to go beyond the common assumption that the persistence of working-class connections with the countryside and with premodern patterns of social life and culture was necessarily a hindrance to labour consciousness or militancy. Quite often, it was the worker with land and village connections who could fall back upon them for sustenance during long strikes or lock-outs: the more ‘proletarianised’ were obliged to surrender and serve as blacklegs. The 1981 essay was also prepared to explore certain more novel possibilities, and provided some details about the ways in which the Communist-led Girni Kamgar Union, which helped to organise and sustain two massive strikes in Bombay textiles during 1928 and 1929 and, at its peak, had 65,000 members, effectively intervened in the neighbourhoods to subvert jobber and other forms of ‘normal’ control. For a brief moment, it was also able to set up elected mill committees of workers. Unfortunately, however, as we shall see, Chandavarkar later moved away somewhat from this early interest in the details of labour autonomy and protest, as he became engrossed in building up a polemical counter-model to Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Let us turn now to Chandavarkar’s two major works. Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India presents empirically and analytically rich accounts of the growth of Bombay city, its working population in their relationships with their rural origins, and the conditions of life in ‘Girangaon’. The focus, inevitably, remains on textiles: the evolution of the industry from the 1850s; workplace structures; business initiatives in the inter-war decades to ‘rationalise’ and ‘standardise’ labour in order to maintain and enhance profits and the powerful resistance mounted by workers to such efforts. Colonial state policies, of course, enter centrally into all these narratives, and there is also a closing chapter about the shifting and ambiguous relations between mill workers and the politics of national, class, religious and caste identities. The collection of essays, old and new, that Chandavarkar brought out in 1998 as Imperial Power and Popular Politics in part covers similar ground. But there are important extensions: a critique of the widely-held stereotype about Indian workers, as perpetually immature proletarians, being peculiarly prone to sporadic violence, and excellent studies of police and public order in Bombay and the plague panic of the late 1890s. The volume begins with a valuable introduction summing up the author’s approach and methods, but ends with two rather pedestrian and over-general essays, on Gandhian nationalism and ‘South Asia and World Capitalism’.

Running through the volumes is the sustained questioning of a series of interrelated and homologous polarities, which, Chandavarkar suggests, have bedevilled the entire field of South-Asian industrial and labour history through assumed total oppositions: rural and urban; informal and formal sectors; neighbourhood and shopfloor; ‘semi-feudal’ domination of workers through jobber-intermediaries versus ‘proper’ capitalist managerial methods. Similarly, the alleged tendency of Indian workers to swing between deification and defiance, acceptance of paternalist ties and sporadic bouts of
militancy or violence, was counterposed against ‘mature’ proletarian consciousness, stable trade unions, self-activity and, perhaps, socialist politics. The important, and to a considerable extent, convincing point made by Chandavarkar is that acceptance of this set of polar oppositions has been common to modernising theorists, orthodox Marxists, and the culturalist turn embodied in Chakrabarty and late subaltern studies alike. His polemic, therefore, is directed simultaneously against all three, but most vehemently against Chakrabarty, who, he implies, has retained the old discursive structure while inverting its values. Thus advocates of modernisation, and orthodox Marxism, had assumed and largely welcomed an unilinear, if maybe often belated, transition from tradition towards modernity, from feudalism through capitalism towards socialism, on a world scale. The subalternist stress on ‘colonial difference’ questions the possibility as well as the value of such progression, at times veers towards a preference for the premodern, the indigenous, the authentic: but the assumed disjunctions remain very similar.

The polarities are evidently grounded in a Western/non-Western, colonial/colonised binary opposition which, depending on the associated value-judgements, can have both orientalist and anticolonial-nationalist implications. Chandavarkar does not elaborate this theme much, but the introductory essay to his 1994 volume does make an important point about South-Asian labour history having been hindered for long by the domination of the entire field by a single, imperialist/nationalist binary.14 Questioning of this central paradigm of Indian-nationalist, as well as much Marxist, historiography tends to evoke suspicions – not always entirely groundless, it has to be added – of apologetic, neocolonial motivations. Any such charge, however, would be quite unfair to Chandavarkar. His analysis of the hindrances to indigenous capitalist growth, in fact, follows lines similar to the standard, vigorously anti-imperialist, left-nationalist-Marxist account of Amiya Bagchi.15 Indeed, at one point, he adds to that critique in an important way. Drawing on the research of Marica Vicziany, Chandavarkar explains the well-known shift of big Indian export merchants of Bombay towards investment in the cotton textile industry from the 1850s by the gradual easing-out of indigenous traders from external commerce (notably the China opium trade) by growing British domination.16 He also emphasises the many ways in which the peculiarities of capital investment in Bombay textiles – continual shifts between factories and putting-out forms, large-scale use of casual labour, and so forth – were related to the structural constraints imposed by colonial domination. These included a home market limited by mass poverty, Lancashire competition backed by British refusal to give any tariff protection till well into the 1920s, and a dependence on textile machinery

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14 Chandavarkar 1994, p. 4.
15 Bagchi 1972.
16 ‘... the development of the cotton textile industry was a response to the subordination of the Indian capital and not a function of its linear progression from trade to industry’, Chandavarkar 1994, p. 65.
imports virtually till Independence (the first indigenous ring-frame was manufactured only in 1946). The structures of high finance, commerce, and shipping, dominated by British banks and firms and regulated by a state tilted in favour of British businessmen, was inadequate and largely beyond the control of the Indian bourgeoisie.17

Chandavarkar deploys two kinds of arguments in his effort to undermine the binary structures which he feels have been the bane of South-Asian historiography. In so far as ‘colonial difference’ has come to be construed in principally cultural terms, he uses a kind of rational-choice theory to argue that culturalist interpretations are redundant, since the same phenomena can be more easily explained by the commonsensical responses of capitalists or workers to specific, material, economic and/or political determinants and conjunctures.18 More impressive, perhaps, is the skilful deconstruction of some of the binary categories, revealing their roots in official presuppositions, stereotypes, and policies. The formal/informal sector disjunction that has been mentioned already is the most obvious example. Chandavarkar demonstrates in a fairly convincing manner that

historians . . . in quest of the ‘mind’ of the working classes, have often unwittingly taken over and replicated [the categories of colonial] discourse and sometimes even elevated it into grand explanatory frameworks and transcendent sociological truths.19

The great critics of colonial discourse have, in effect, uncritically surrendered to many of the terms it had constituted.

The critique of culturalism, predictably, is focused upon Chakrabarty, and I do feel that, here, Chandavarkar on the whole has been able to put forward a more convincing thesis. He takes up the paradox with which Chakrabarty had started – that of labour militancy going along with persistent weakness of organisation – and suggests that sporadic outbursts were not the result of any peculiarly premodern ‘deify/defy’ combination, but no more than a rational response to material conditions. Cultural explanations have tended to implicitly underestimate the sheer extent and efficacy of capitalist-cum-colonial state repression, making stable yet militant trade unionism almost impossible. Again, the worker dependence on outsider ‘babu’ leaders need not have been related to persistence of ‘semi-feudal’ culture. Actual workers in leadership positions often faced immediate dismissal, or worse, while the low level of literacy also made dependence on outsiders with education and some knowledge of law quite indispensable.

18 ‘... [T]he history of capitalism and of the working class in India could most fruitfully be investigated, not as an exception – neither as a case of “pre-capitalist” development nor as the product of a peculiar and unique “Indian culture” – but firmly in relation to what are deemed to be the “rules” or expectations of sociological discourse’ (Chandavarkar 1998, p. 1). This is about the closest the author comes to defining his own methodological postulates, and it can hardly be taken to be particularly explicit: an important area of weakness to which I will return.
The deconstruction of official categories is at its most effective in three chapters of *Imperial Power and Popular Politics* that range beyond labour history, strictly defined, and take up as polemical target another historian associated with *Subaltern Studies*, David Arnold. Historians, he suggests, have merely taken over the assumption commonly held by policemen, civil servants, and employers that Indian workers were prone to sporadic bouts of violence, as a function of their pre-industrial character. A closer look reveals considerable variations in the usage of the term ‘violence’ (extended at times to cover even wildcat strikes), and the conjunctural nature of the moments when this discourse became particularly prominent. One such moment, predictably, was Bombay in 1928–9, in the wake of the massive, yet generally peaceful strike led by Communists, and the upshot of the panic whipped up by British officials as well as by Indian mill owners and substantial sections of ‘respectable’ citizens was a draconian anti-labour law and the Meerut Conspiracy Case against left trade unionists. ‘Violence’, thus, was not a given but constructed and shifting category, and its provenance could extend across colonial/indigenous divides. Chandavarkar goes on to make the interesting suggestion that

> [C]olonialism in India might . . . be defined, in one of its characteristic aspects, as the process by which labour was cheapened and more fully subordinated to capital, both indigenous and imperial.21

The subverting of over-sharp polarities is carried further in the succeeding two chapters of *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, dealing with the Bombay police and with the plague panic of the late 1890s. The first attempts a kind of social history of the police, a subject that David Arnold had pioneered way back in 1986. As one would expect, Chandavarkar refuses to focus solely on the police as a principal, if socially subaltern, agent of foreign rule, and highlights their everyday linkages also with indigenous structures of local power. He takes issue with the widespread assumption that colonial conditions made the police necessarily more authoritarian (except at moments of extreme danger, as in 1919 and 1942, when, in any case, the British relied much more on the army), and recalls, in respect of labour, the methods used in Britain to smash Clydeside workers in 1919 and the General Strike in 1926. Alien command in a non-settler colony with a massive indigenous population could also be a source of weakness and necessary caution. As indicated by the anti-labour legislation of the Congress ministry in Bombay during 1937–9, ‘increasing Indian control over the institutions and agencies of the state’ could go along with ‘increasing state repression’, with local élites deploying the resources of the state built by colonialism ‘to discipline and control

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22 Arnold 1986.
labour, whether in the towns or the countryside’. A tendency which, it must be admitted, has been fully continued under successive post-Independence régimes.\textsuperscript{23}

Chandavarkar is perhaps at his deconstructionist best in the essay on the plague panic of the late 1890s in Bombay Presidency, where draconian segregation efforts led to massive unrest and culminated in the murder of two British officials, Rand and Ayerst, at Poona in 1897 in the first act of middle-class terrorist nationalism. Resistance to plague control, and, sometimes, Western-colonial medicine in general has been widely portrayed in terms of a cultural conflict between aggressive modernism and indigenous-popular traditions, ‘a reminder of the great cultural gulf which divided the colonizers and the colonized’.\textsuperscript{24} As throughout his work, Chandavarkar prefers to focus upon specific, shifting conjunctures, seeking ‘hard’, ‘rational’ explanations in place of assumptions of cultural uniqueness. Both the scale of official restrictions, and resistance to them, was largely confined to a specific area and time, the province of Bombay between 1896 and 1902 – yet the mortality rate was considerably higher (twelve-fold, in fact) during the period from 1903 to 1907, when its main target area had shifted to the Panjab countryside. But plague in the 1890s was a sudden intruder, affecting the premier port of British India, and raising fears of an international embargo which would hit European and elite-Indian business profits as well as the British balance of payments. A decade later, plague had become much more of a poor people’s disease, control measures were no longer so panicky and excessive, and resistance had become sporadic and attracted less attention. Chandavarkar goes on to argue that the extreme nature of the early segregation measures and their unimaginative implementation made resistance quite understandable, without benefit of any presumed deep cultural difference. Thus, it was surely perfectly ‘rational’ for people to refuse to go to plague hospitals, considering that, in Bombay city, the mortality rate there had touched eighty per cent. Nor was there, really, any uniform or clear-cut elite/popular disjunction in Indian attitudes, as often assumed: ‘Resistance was not the only response to the plague measures and collaboration was by no means confined to the elites’. The disjunction has been sought to be substantiated by reports about rumours concerning the plague allegedly in ‘popular’ quarters, for here Arnold found a ‘significant divergence . . . between the middle classes and the subordinate population’.\textsuperscript{25} Chandavarkar makes, here, a point of wider significance, drawing attention to the fact that data about oral rumours generally enter historical discourse only through official reports, memoirs, middle-class newspapers. In a largely illiterate country, rumours most often can be no more than ‘an elite discourse about popular attitudes’, the constructions and implicit presuppositions of which need to be carefully explored.

\textsuperscript{24} Chandavarkar 1998, p. 236.
In general, he finds little evidence of any uniform popular hostility to Western medicine: attitudes were determined, rather, by ‘its efficacy, its accessibility and its cost’. 26

It should be evident that there is much in Chandavarkar that I find acceptable and valuable. His handling of official material, in particular, is often exemplary, reminiscent at peak moments of Richard Cobb’s classic critique of over-facile use of the police archives of Revolutionary Paris in exploring the history of the ‘crowd’, without taking account of the processes of construction of official and other stereotypes. 27 But there are also major problems, to which I now turn.

We may start with the less substantial. Chandavarkar has a rather irritating habit of claiming or implying excessive originality. This is surely quite unnecessary for a well-established scholar whose substantial contributions to South-Asian industrial and labour history are not likely to be denied by anyone. The questioning of the formal/informal sector dichotomy, for instance, had begun with a much-cited article of Jan Breman way back in 1976. This had emphasised the persistent similarities and interflows between labour in ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ sectors, and sought to explain the survival or reproduction of allegedly ‘primordial’ caste and religious loyalties within the Indian factory proletariat by the ‘advantages offered by such ties under highly unfavourable economic conditions’. 28 Two years later, Lalita Chakrabarty’s pioneering study of labour migration had similarly undercut many standard polarities, showing how the ‘labour catchment areas’ for indentured ‘coolies’ recruited for plantations in Assam or overseas also came to supply a major part of ‘free’ labour for factories. The emergence of the industrial labour force in late-colonial India, she suggested, ‘is a part of the story of so-called coolie migration’. 29 Chandavarkar’s emphasis on the ‘powerful connections . . . between factory proletarians, casual workers, rural migrants, agrarian labour, artisans, “tribals”, and dalits’ 30 really falls within an already fairly established historiographical tradition. To take a second instance: an essay published in 1977 by E.D. Murphy had already suggested an inverse correlation between proletarianisation – in the sense of total uprooting from village connections – and labour militancy, for such detachment reduced staying capacity during strikes. 31

It would be unfair to suggest that these and other ‘anticipations’ have been entirely ignored by Chandavarkar, for the articles I have mentioned are all included in his bibliographies. But the lay or unwaried reader is still likely to assume an unwarranted degree of originality, for the text does tend to convey an impression of a lone pioneer.
struggling against the weight of previously unchallenged modernising or Marxist orthodoxies.

To turn to more substantial problems. The recurrent, yet never fully explicated premise of rational choice which underlies so much of Chandavarkar’s argument is undoubtedly effective as polemic, but it also has a self-limiting dimension. The method seems to be to begin with ‘hard’, material, pressures and constraints of specific economic or (more often) political conjunctures, and then suggest that questions of culture are more or less redundant, since the phenomena being scrutinised can be explained without them. But when, by what sorts of criteria, does an explanation become satisfactory or complete? Surely that depends crucially on the overall framework being used by the historian, and, here, complete agreement is unlikely. A scholar with ‘culturalist’ leanings might well suggest that to posit individuals or groups across cultures and times acting always according to ‘the “rules” or expectations of sociological discourse’ is to universalise arbitrarily a specific, modern Western, culture, and that the whole procedure has an ‘Eurocentric’ flavour. Yet the opposite assumption, of a fundamental, indigenist cultural particularity, also has major pitfalls, as Chandavarkar sometimes shows very well. The case, on either side, can hardly be ‘proved’ in any formal, positivistic sense.

If we still want to avoid the morass of complete relativism, perhaps a criterion of generative capacity, productiveness in terms of professional or scholarly consequences, might be helpful. Frameworks are not equal here, for some tend to stimulate more questions, extend our curiosity and understanding of previously unexplored dimensions of life of greater numbers of people. And, here, a paradoxical ‘unity of opposites’ seems to emerge, between Chandavarkar and Dipesh Chakrabarty, a limit they have in common to which Chitra Joshi has recently drawn our attention. Both, though in different, indeed opposite, ways, tend to underestimate, even ignore, the possibility of workers’ agency. The culturalist determinism of the one is inverted into the economic or political determinism of the other, and what tends to get relatively missed out, in Chakrabarty and Chandavarkar alike, are the moments of labour self-activity, militancy, autonomy. These, of course, had been the central, almost the only foci for earlier radical historiography, and so, once again, there is an inversion common to both historians.

For Chakrabarty, Bengal jute workers were enmeshed in premodern, hierarchised relationships and values, which prevented stable organisations and self-activity. Labour protest consequently could never be more than spasmodic and ephemeral, while the persistence of traditional community ties of caste and religion kept workers inexorably fragmented, quite incapable of moving towards class consciousness in the ‘proper’

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33 Joshi 2003, p. 8.
To cite a specific instance: more than twenty years ago, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s paper on capital-labour relations in Bombay in 1928–9 (Bhattacharya 1981) had made some use of the proceeding of a Joint Strike Committee of workers in 1928, which he had found in the private papers of the labour leader N.M. Joshi. That had been a preliminary article, part of a study which Bhattacharya unfortunately has never completed. Chandavarkar does include the N.M. Joshi Papers in his bibliography, but does not seem to have used such material.

Marxist sense. Bombay textile workers, for Chandavarkar, were equally entrapped, not through semi-feudal culture but by more material determinants of the labour market, managerial authority and disciplinary mechanisms, and police and state interventions. Disunion and fragmentation, once again, are assumed to have been the basic characteristic of labour history, with unities across such divisions being no more than conjunctural and momentary. The consequence that follows for both historians is a common tendency to leave relatively unexplored the moments of effective and united labour militancy. And, yet, these were far from uncommon during the interwar decades: two general strikes in Bengal jute, in 1929 and 1937, and no less than eight of these in Bombay textiles, all lasting for at least a month and some of them much more prolonged (1919, 1920, 1923, 1925, 1928, 1929, 1934, 1940) – impressive by any standards, national or international. Perhaps even more remarkable is the history of the Communist-led Girni Kamgar Lal Bavta (Red Flag) Union, bitterly repressed almost throughout its history, by the British and then in 1937–9 under a Congress provincial ministry, not effective most of the time in the sense of bringing material gains for its workers, yet retaining their loyalty across a whole generation. With the partial exception of his early, 1981, essay, little of the atmosphere and emotions that must have accompanied such moments enter Chandavarkar’s otherwise richly detailed narrative. Labour subjectivities are not his concern – but, then, Chakrabarty’s culturalism has an essentialised, tradition-oriented tint which, in effect, produces a not dissimilar silencing.

The limits, for both historians, are set by an interaction of framework with the kind of source materials they have preferred to work with – or ignore. Chandavarkar makes no use of oral material, apart from a few interviews with well-known middle-class labour leaders. Chakrabarty’s bibliography is even more sparse in this respect. More remarkable is the almost total neglect of contemporary vernacular material – indeed, by and large, of sources other than those of mill owner or official origin. Even the well-known depositions and other data (including pamphlets and other strike material) preserved in the Meerut Conspiracy Case files figure but rarely in Chandavarkar’s volumes. We shall see shortly how Chitra Joshi has been able to unearth a significant amount of contemporary material of direct labour origin about a rather brief moment of labour upsurge in Kanpur in 1937–8. I find it difficult to believe that the Girni Kamgar-led movements, undoubtedly more powerful and prolonged, did not leave in their wake many more traces and memories than have entered Chandavarkar’s history.

34 To cite a specific instance: more than twenty years ago, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s paper on capital-labour relations in Bombay in 1928–9 (Bhattacharya 1981) had made some use of the proceeding of a Joint Strike Committee of workers in 1928, which he had found in the private papers of the labour leader N.M. Joshi. That had been a preliminary article, part of a study which Bhattacharya unfortunately has never completed. Chandavarkar does include the N.M. Joshi Papers in his bibliography, but does not seem to have used such material.
For all their undoubted achievements, Chakrabarty and Chandavarkar’s volumes leave us with a sense of incompleteness, a certain bloodless quality. It is as if both historians are primarily interested in establishing a thesis, and controverting the views of others, less in exploring the times and spaces and lived experiences of their subjects as human beings. Fortunately, for the future of South-Asian labour history, Chakrabarty and Chandavarkar have been surpassed in these respects by a number of publications over the last decade, and it is to some of these that I would like to briefly turn in the concluding section of my review essay.

III

The first of the four recent works I want to look at, Ian Kerr’s *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900*, is appropriately titled, for it has an unusual focus, not on the management and working of an industry assumed as already established, but on construction and maintenance as ongoing process. This, of course, is particularly relevant for the early history of railways across a sub-continent. Between 1850 and 1900, an average of 1,405 miles were added every year to railways in India, and construction work employed from between 180,601 to 221,253 labourers. The bulk of this vast mass of men, women, and children were engaged in purely menial kinds of unskilled work, where the labour processes, as yet largely unmechanised, had remained virtually unchanged across centuries. Yet, on their toil rested an elaborate and immense hierarchy, highly capitalised and sophisticated in its upper reaches, and having at its command the latest in nineteenth-century engineering technology. Railway construction, maintenance, and operation, Kerr reminds us, has necessarily involved the bringing together of labour processes of the most diverse kinds, ranging from the most simple to the most complex, from the almost-primitive to the ultra-modern. Railways demanded the bringing-together of the most diverse kinds of organisation and labour – skilled and purely manual, permanent and casual, formal and informal. Railway workers were hierarchised into relatively well-paid and skilled engineers and drivers (for long, largely European or Eurasian), through a clerical intermediary strata, down to a mass of unskilled manual labourers.

Two interesting consequences follow from this unusual focus adopted by Kerr. The concentration on the everyday details of labour processes required for construction and maintenance highlights the usually forgotten ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ – to borrow the striking Biblical phrase deployed recently by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, in their study from below of the emerging Atlantic economy, to categorise those who ‘built the infrastructure of merchant capitalism’.35 Labour history thus gets extended beyond its usual concentration on artisanal, manufacturing, and mechanised-industrial forms of work. In the second place, Kerr’s study is not just

35 Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 49, and Chapter 2.
The distinction between formal and real subsumption had been introduced into Indian economic-historical discussion by Jairus Banaji, an important participant in what came to be known as the ‘mode of production debate’ concerning the nature of the precolonial South Asian society and its transformation under colonialism (Banaji 1977).


Empirically rich: working within an explicitly Marxist framework, it goes on to suggest a rather interesting theoretical point. Marx, it might be recalled, had distinguished between two dimensions of the labour process within emergent capitalism. Capitalists could establish control over already-existing labour processes from the outside without major technological transformation, extracting absolute surplus-value from workers. This was a ‘formal subsumption’ of labour to capital, conceptually distinct from ‘real subsumption’, associated with technological change and a shift towards relative surplus-value. Kerr uses his Indian railway data to argue that the ‘two dimensions of the labour process could and did exist at the same work-site . . . with no necessary, unidirectional movement from the former to the latter’. He thus effectively undercuts the common assumption, made notably by Chandavarkar, that unilinear teleologies are necessarily built into all varieties of Marxist historical practice.

Kerr has an interesting chapter on instances of early worker resistance, which follows up an earlier article he had published a decade back. But the bulk of the book is deliberately a study ‘from above’, about which he is, rightly, unapologetic, feeling this to have been indispensable for its central theme of railway construction and operation as a ‘complex assembly of labour processes’. Kerr suggests that socialist sympathies do not preclude, but rather demand, an understanding of the power and strategies of capital and management. The nature of his subject, and particularly its location in time more than a hundred years in the past, also preclude entry into labour perceptions through interviews or vernacular writings: the vast majority of the subalterns of labour who are his principal focus of interest would have been illiterate. In these respects, Kerr’s work differs significantly from the other three recent works I have selected for my sample.

Dilip Simeon’s The Politics of Labour under Late Colonialism: Workers, Unions, and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928–39 is a study of two sites of labour, geographically close to each other and with very close economic links, yet markedly different in many ways. Jamshedpur (Tatanagar) in South Bihar (today part of the recently formed Indian state of Jharkhand) is India’s first steel city, built in the early twentieth century by indigenous capital though with considerable support from the colonial state. Its coal came from mines in the nearby Jharia-Dhanbad region, with Jharia alone accounting for more than half of India’s coal production in the 1920s. The Tatas cultivated the self-image of being ‘modern’ entrepreneurs, employing a necessarily large proportion of skilled, often high-caste workers along with smaller numbers of lower castes and...
tribals [adivasis] as well as a reserve army of casual labourers. Unusually for Indian capitalism, they also built quarters for their employees, thus constructing a new, entirely company-controlled city with a reasonable standard of amenities. Jharia represented a different world: mines ruthlessly worked to exhaustion and then abandoned, a predominantly unskilled workforce dispersed across the countryside, recruited predominantly from low-castes and tribals and including (unlike steel workers) large numbers of women and children. Labour conditions in the mines were – and largely remain – atrocious, with frequent accidents (one underground fire in this region has now been ablaze for some seventy years!). Simeon’s thus is an interesting attempt to bring together within a single focus two quite different kinds of industry and labour: the sources available, though, have permitted more details about Jamshedpur than Jharia.

A distinctive – indeed rather unusual – feature of Simeon’s book is its firmly chronology-based organisation of material pertaining to the limited time-span of a single decade (1928–39). Thematic arrangement is usually preferred as indicating greater ‘sophistication’, the author admits, but chronology permits a firmer grasp of the discipline of historical context. It has enabled a highlighting of the fluidity of positions and attitudes of capitalists, state officials, politicians of varied kinds, jobbers, union leaders, shopfloor activists, a highly differentiated labour force, emphasising complex, conjunctural, shifting interactions, rather than fixed polarities.

Treating such matters as if one were observing a spectrum, makes it easier to observe distinctions without being tied to precise lines of demarcation, which can be left to emerge and dissolve within the account.

This mode of presentation does have a problem, though. Numerous implications of general or theoretical interest remain embedded in the text (except for a concluding section, after three hundred pages of dense narrative), and might get lost amidst detail for many readers.

Among these is a non-polemicised, but quite effective, raising of doubts about Dipesh Chakrabarty’s model of ‘semi-feudal’ labour leaders running unions as their landed estates [zamindaries], with the workers’ representatives being also their masters. The detailed chronologically-arranged narrative suggests, rather, that if leaders could instrumentalize workers’ struggles, there were many occasions when ‘workers could no less instrumentalize their leaders and/or reject them’.* But Simeon simultaneously rejects any ‘subalternist’ romanticisation of worker autonomy as always contributing to more effective class struggle. Establishment of a single union would obviously have made collective bargaining more effective for the steel workers and coal miners. But this was almost never achieved, in significant part, it seems, because workers did not

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* Simeon 1995, p. 5.
want to become over-dependent on a unified body of outsider ‘controllers’.40 A related, interesting point, which Simeon leaves implicit rather than worked-out, is the way Indian labour has often been attracted to maverick figures not bound by discipline or ideology, whether nationalist or left-wing. Of the two outstanding leaders of Jamshedpur workers during the period studied by Simeon, Maneck Homi had no stable political connections, while Abdul Bari, though initially sent to the area by the Congress, was drifting away from his parent organisation during his period of maximum popularity.41 Mavericks remained a prominent and recurrent feature of the Indian labour landscape, right down to Datta Samanta who led the last great struggle of Bombay textile workers in the early 1980s. The explanation perhaps lies not in ‘charisma’ alone: individual leaders without stable external stable linkages could have seemed more amenable to local pressures, less likely to take decisions on ‘broader’ grounds of national politics or ideology that often must have remained somewhat mysterious to many workers. But such leaders at times could also be quite irresponsible, letting down their followers in unforeseen ways.

Concentration on a brief time-span enabled Simeon to make a fairly exhaustive study of a mass of sources: official reports, archival material, Tata managerial files, private papers of businessmen and labour leaders, some interviews. Direct worker testimony is not very abundant, but the author has carefully included in Appendices the texts of material of this kind which he was able to unearth – some leaflets, memorials coming from workers, and police records of a few speeches by labour leaders.

Politics of Labour begins with a moving acknowledgement of the ‘radical utopianism of the 1960s’, and indeed its author has remained an activist all his life, in varying forms and in different spheres of life. Changing times and a determination to combine commitment with academic rigour have ensured that this does not result in a relapse into any teleological or celebratory mode. But some incidents linger particularly in memory, amidst the often tedious detail: most of all, perhaps, the martyrdom of the Communist Hazara Singh, standing in front of a lorry bringing in blacklegs to break a strike in July 1939. He was deliberately run over – it seems at the order of the owner’s son, who, incidentally, later became independent India’s Defence Minister. Forty years later, a retired worker told the author that ‘it came to be said that every drop of Hazara’s blood produced Communists’.42 Simeon’s narrative does not deny that such militant moments in labour history tend to be rare, evanescent, quantitatively less prominent than periods of quiescence and fragmentation. But they can also sometimes acquire greater salience, in the memory of workers as well as in historical reconstructions. But that, of course, will depend on values, and circumstances of recall

40 Simeon 1995, p. 344.
41 Homi was a Parsi, and Bari a Muslim: the workers they led were largely Hindu. As Simeon suggests, this seems to indicate that Indian workers could be less bound by ‘primordial’ attachments of caste or religion than historians have often assumed.
or writing. And, here, the choice made by Simeon, and indeed in different ways by all the historians I am looking at in this concluding section, differ significantly from those of Chandavarkar and Chakrabarty.

Like Simeon, Janaki Nair has attempted a study of two adjoining but contrasting locations in her *Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore*. To an even greater extent than the coal mines of Bihar, the Kolar gold mines represented colonial extractive methods at their most oppressive. Opened up by British capital in the 1870s, they were at their peak in the early twentieth century, but began declining from the 1920s, leaving Kolar a deindustrialised ghost town by the late twentieth century. The mines in their heyday had been the deepest in the world, with workers made to labour 8,000 feet underground, without air-conditioning till 1936. In addition, the possibility of theft of the valuable product led to ‘extraordinary levels of surveillance’, and so, the author suggests, Foucault might be more relevant than Thompson in understanding the nature of the structure of domination at Kolar. Foucault with a ‘colonial difference’, however, targeting collectivities rather than constituting individuals, operating through contractor-intermediaries, and aimed at producing not ‘disciplined subjects’, but a ‘repressed and docile workforce’. Repression blocked formal trade unions till the 1940s, but failed to stamp out other, occasionally more violent, forms of protest. There were numerous sporadic attacks on the watch and ward staff, and an interesting sub-culture of anonymous notices. One of these, denouncing the taking of thumb-impressions of workers, was put up on a rock in 1930, and led to a twenty-one day strike the organisers of which were never traced.

Bangalore, the capital of the kingdom of Mysore (one of the largest of the many ‘native states’ of British-dominated India) had a different industrial and labour pattern. It became a major industrial centre after independence, but had grown slowly in the colonial era, with a small and struggling textile industry which really took off only during the Second World War through manufacturing silk for parachutes. Mysore princes and their ministers were rather unusual in the interest several among them took in trying to foster indigenous industrial development through bureaucratic initiative. (Some scholars have even suggested that Mysore, along with a few other princely states like Baroda, provided an early version of what in post-1947 India became the Nehruvian pattern of state-promoted economic development.) The Mysore rulers, predictably, sought to combine such industrialisation ‘from above’ with a markedly anti-democratic stance. Trade unions were legalised only in 1942, while in directly British-ruled India they had been so from 1926. But repression was never as intensive and thorough as at Kolar. Unlike in the mines, Bangalore factories did provide some opportunities for skill development and a measure of upward mobility: strikes, too, could be more frequent.

43 Nair 1995, p. 42.
Tanneries apart, the Bangalore industries employed somewhat upper or ‘respectable’ caste workers, but an important feature of the Kolar gold mines was their heavy reliance on low-caste and untouchable (Adi-Dravida, in South-Indian parlance) migrant labour. Kolar in the early twentieth century was one of the major centres of lower-caste assertion, which took the forms of a neo-Buddhist religious revival and then a socially radical ‘Self-Respect’ movement. The nature of her material thus obliged Nair to confront more directly than the historians discussed so far the difficult question of the relationships between identity formations of class and caste. Nair’s theoretical discussion, however, remains somewhat unsatisfactory, for it ends up with a rather banal dualistic assertion: the importance of ‘cultural identities’ have to be recognised, but ‘capitalist work-experience . . . [is] equally important’.

More interesting is the argument that, despite the atrocious work conditions, Kolar low-caste miners do not fit into the general mould of ‘reluctant proletarians’ nostalgic about their lost village moorings. Such an assumption, veering towards an occasional valorisation of precapitalist identities, has been common among South-Asian labour historians. Dalit life in South Indian villages, Nair suggests, produced instead ‘searing memories’, and may have even contributed to a certain exaggeration of ‘the relative freedoms of the capitalist workplace’. Her main evidence here comes from some early twentieth-century miners’ songs printed in a Tamil journal, contrasting the ‘little gruel’ and ‘tatters’ of life in the ‘wild countryside’ with the ‘mutton and rice’ in the Kolar Gold Fields. But, unfortunately, Nair tells us nothing about the exact provenance of these songs, whether anything is known about how they came to be collected and published at a surprisingly early date, and consequently how representative they may have been of miner values. One is left unsure whether her interesting hypothesis may not have been relevant only for a small section of relatively better-off miners, who would have been the ones most likely to be attracted by the improvement discourse of the Self-Respect movement. In more general terms, however, it should be added that like Simeon and, as we shall see shortly, Joshi, Nair has been able to gather some interesting first-hand data about worker experiences and perceptions through interviews. Around thirty of these are listed, mostly though with middle-class Communist leaders or activists. But, there are also two brief life histories of workers, reconstructed through interviews. A woman tobacco worker still recalled her active participation in a strike way back in 1936, as a brief moment of pride in a lifetime of drudgery and oppression. For a Communist activist of Kolar, likewise, the long strike in 1946 represented a very special moment. But there was a certain nostalgia also about a past that was not rural,

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44 Dipesh Chakrabarty provides the most obvious instance, but Nair notes occasional traces of such valorisation also in Dilip Simeon, in a contrast between the rich ‘symbolic coordinates’ of tribal or rural homes and the ‘subordination . . . drudgery and humiliation’ of factory or mine work, making the ‘class existence’ of labour itself a matter of resentment. Nair, p. 296; Simeon, pp. 2, 326.

45 Nair 1995, p. 296.
but located in the mines of a bygone boom era, when employment was abundant, however exploitative. A mood quite characteristic, we shall see, also of deindustrialised Kanpur today, as explored by Chitra Joshi.

What had been an occasional or passing glimpse for Simeon or Nair has become a central and profound feature of *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*. The title is unusually appropriate, for the book is a meditation (and I am using this word, more common in literary or philosophical writings, quite deliberately) on shifting times and spaces, and the ways in which they mould and interact with experiences, memories, histories of labour. The lost worlds are not one but many. There is the world of the radical intellectual and historian, someone like Joshi herself, evoked in moving terms at the beginning of the book. She had been inspired by vestiges of the moods of May 1968 while studying in an university famed then (and to some extent even today) for its radicalism, and began research on Kanpur labour in the wake of a major strike at the Swadeshi Cotton Mills there in 1977. The research was completed, however, and the book published, a quarter-century later. A very different time, when the old kind of working class, concentrated in big factories and cities, appears to be fast disintegrating more or less everywhere, trade unions have become shadows of their former selves, and the ideals of socialism seem to have received a mortal blow. Kanpur, once described as a kind of Manchester of the East, is today a medley of sprawling mill compounds – noiseless and deserted – majestic buildings worn down and crumbling, [where] tall and smokeless chimneys stand as silent reminders of the past . . . young and old, the unemployed waiting for jobs or for mills to reopen, sit around vacantly: others push carts, ply rickshaws, or work in cottage industries in alleys and bylanes.46

Such scenes are common in many parts of the world today, in the burnt-out areas of inner cities or old industrial areas. Labour history itself has been a casualty of this decline, being deserted, as we have seen, by most radical scholars, first for research on peasants and then studies of ‘culture’ or ‘colonial discourse’. The efforts of historians such as Joshi to recover something of Indian labour’s ‘forgotten histories’ therefore becomes additionally significant. Failure, in this respect, would surely provide one more instance of that ‘enormous condescension of posterity’ of which Thompson had written memorably in a very different context, forty years ago.

But Joshi’s is not a simple, binary contrast between present and past, both imagined in homogenised ways and therefore open in equal measure to facile assumptions of linear progress, or nostalgic evocations of an undifferentiated ‘world we have lost’. The strength of the book consists, in significant part, in its deconstruction of such imputed, essentialised unities. The disintegration of the old industrial working class

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46 Joshi 2003, p. 3.
is no doubt a ‘loss’ of a qualitatively more tragic kind. Yet, in a profoundly original emphasis, Joshi suggests that the lives of workers, maybe everywhere but notably in South Asia, with its ‘footloose labour’ and perpetually circular migration from villages to cities and back, have been, in a sense, always a history of worlds getting lost. Through complex and changing combinations of external compulsions and choice, men, women, and quite often children have been moving from the countryside to cities, from one factory to another, from regular to casual employment or joblessness. And this sense of movement – a part of capitalism itself, it may be added, as the Communist Manifesto had suggested way back in 1848 – is conveyed by Joshi, not primarily by formulaic presentations, but through vivid stories of the lives of individual workers that she has been able to recover through enormously impressive research.

There is Shriram, for instance, who wrote an autobiography in the 1970s – moving from village to Kanpur, then through a mingling of need and sense of adventure to factories in Delhi and several other cities, returning in the 1930s to Kanpur and becoming a Communist trade unionist there. Shriram showed no inclination to go back to his original village home, but, for Ramcharan, who moved to Kanpur in more recent times, the village still represents a (somewhat uncertain) hope of comfort and security in old age. And, unlike much conventional labour history in India or elsewhere, the faces that we see are not just those of male workers: women, within factories or engaged as commonly nowadays in various forms of sweated ‘domestic’ industries, figure prominently in Joshi’s narrative. Throughout, experiences, memories, identities, emerge as both diverse and shifting, in and through complex interpenetrations of structural determinants with elements of choice, an agency that is limited but not entirely or always illusory. And the rhythms of movement and change that pervade the entire book enable an exceptionally profound grasp of the fluidity of all identities, a firm historicisation that has been able to avoid all kinds of essentialism, whether of class, caste, religion, or gender.

It will be evident that, in broad terms, Joshi’s affinities remain with the Thompsonian tradition of labour and social history. As we have already seen, it is from this perspective that she has mounted a most effective, simultaneous critique of the apparently opposed poles of Chakravarty and Chandavarkar, pointing to a common occlusion of agency through assumptions of a reified traditional culture in the one, and by the emphasis on determinations through external labour market-pressures and business strategies in the other. Both have inverted in similar ways the conventional Marxist assumption of linear change leading on teleologically towards working-class unity, to produce, however, an opposite kind of essentialism, one in which fragmentation and internal conflict is inevitable, and change, agency, moments of effective, class-conscious militancy, well-nigh impossible. It should be added that Joshi has been able to fully incorporate

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47 Joshi 2003, pp. 7–8.
within her vision the undoubted strengths of Chandavarkar, in particular his state-of-the-art awareness of recent trends in industrial and labour history and the questioning of the traditional polarities of rural and urban, informal and formal, factory and neighbourhood. What she adds, however, is a deeper perception of fluidities, the ability, I am tempted to suggest, to make rigid categories dance to a dialectical tune:

How does one straitjacket people like Ramcharan? It would be simplistic to categorise them as either workers or peasants. In a sense they were labourers-in-between, living partially in both worlds and fully in neither. Just as the lines between city and village blurred, so did boundaries between the employed and unemployed, between substitutes and regulars, between factory jobs and other work.48

Lost Worlds is, evidently, a work imbued with a profound and sophisticated grasp of questions of theory. Yet its primary purpose is not the testing-out of one or other hypothesis, while, in sharp contrast again to both Chakrabarty and, even more, Chandavarkar, polemics figure very little within the text. What lingers in the mind, above all, is the sheer richness of the multiple narratives of labour and urban life, and, here, three features need to be highlighted. There is, first, a rare ability – missing, I think, even in Thompson – to convey through appropriate visual images the sense of changing locations and spaces. The illustrations are not mere accompaniment, as they so often remain in books by historians. Three series of sketches and photographs convey a vivid sense of the evolution of Kanpur, from a small riverside trading centre in a setting still predominantly rural, through the imposing, busy factories of the 1930s, down to today’s images of disrepair and desolation.49 Then there is the capacity to combine effective presentation of an abundant mass of ‘hard’ data – statistics concerning industrial growth or decline, labour composition and conditions, the reworking of urban spaces through municipal and sanitation policies – with a remarkably acute eye for vivid human detail. I have already touched on some of the life histories of workers, but Joshi’s imaginative reach does not exclude the employers, or even their wives: the British wives in mid-nineteenth-century Kanpur, for instance, who waited with such eagerness for their ‘boxes’ carrying European goods and delicacies from ‘Home’. And, finally, what above everything else has made these many achievements possible: an extraordinarily rich abundance of material, collected over decades of necessarily intermittent but determined research, which includes a wealth of vernacular and oral data of direct worker origin that, I think, is quite unprecedented in South-Asian labour history. Joshi has been able to unearth a large number of vernacular tracts and pamphlets, including some composed by workers themselves,

49 Joshi 2003, pp. 25–6, 40–1 and 322–5.
which include an autobiography by Shriram, and several volumes of poems by a Communist worker, who calls himself Sudarshan Chakr (a takeoff from a symbol associated with Krishna). And the list of ‘oral accounts’ run to more than fifty, among which only about half-a-dozen are interviews with middle-class trade-union leaders.

I have mentioned Joshi’s affinities with Thompson. But a book dated 2003 instead of 1963 can only be Thompsonian with differences, of which two are particularly significant. The effective deployment of terms like ‘in-between’ or ‘hybridity’ – associated, of course, with Homi Bhabha – indicates an unusual ability to integrate within a basic Marxian perspective elements or insights of value drawn from today’s poststructuralist, postcolonial intellectual currents. Marxist attitudes here have tended to oscillate wildly between rejection or surrender, both equally uncritical: Joshi is able to steer clear of both. And, while a high-point of the book remains a vivid, not to say enthusiastic account of ‘Lal Kanpur’ (Red Kanpur) – the brief moment in 1938 when workers on strike seemed to dominate the city – this obviously cannot be the concluding or dominant mood. Thompson could end on a semi-triumphalist note, with the achievement of a ‘working-class presence’ in England by 1832. The final, intensely moving and sad, chapter of Lost Worlds, dealing with Kanpur today, is instead titled ‘Despair’. It describes a time when workers unemployed for years have even begun to look back with a certain nostalgia towards the oppressive work discipline of the past, remembering them ‘with a sense of male pride and achievement’, regretting the passing of a world when capitalists, so to say, had been able to exploit them with ‘proper’ efficiency. The memory of Lal Kanpur, in contrast, has almost vanished for the current generation. More generally, Joshi suggests that ‘the culture of worklessness in the present’ can give ‘insights into the meanings of work’, the ways in which it had once meant ‘a forging of relationships, bonds between wage earners, a sense of power of their collectivity in the city, a sense of pride and dignity’.50 Therein lies what is, perhaps, the deepest loss of all.

The book has to end with the admission that, faced with what really is ‘the death of a world, a whole way of life, of a cultural form which was once seen as the backbone of urban, industrial India’, a labour historian can perhaps only make ‘what E.M. Forster might have termed “one of the slighter gestures of dissent” – an attempt, against the grain, not to forget that world’.51 And, yet, in keeping with her ever-present emphasis on fluidity and rejection of essentialised closures, Joshi does hint towards a subdued counterpoint. There is the wonderfully evocative cover photo, of what had been once the bustling union office at Gwaltoli, the ‘fortress of the workers’ – now virtually deserted, with rickshaws plied today by unemployed workers drawn up in front of it. But a boy with a hauntingly quizzical, inquisitive expression looks

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50 Joshi 2003, p. 11.
51 Joshi 2003, p. 329.
forward towards us from one of the rickshaws. And there is also a dedication by the author, to her daughter, ‘and a world of new possibilities’. The old kind of working class may be dead or dying, but surely not the struggle, in new forms, for a more just and better world.

Lost Worlds, I will be bold enough to suggest, is labour history at its best. And, with its ability to transcend both positivist naïveté, and that ‘lazy scepticism that refuses to see any distinction between history and fiction’, it is also a triumphant vindication of the abiding power of historical research and writing.

References


52 The quote comes from what some might think an unexpected source: Chatterjee 2002, p. xi.


Chatterjee, Partha 2002, A Princely Imposter: The Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism, Delhi: Permanent Black.


Karnik, V.B. 1967, Strikes in India, Bombay: P.C. Manaktala and Sons.


During the heyday of Eurocommunism in the 1980s, it was fashionable on the academic Left to say that the argument over reform and revolution – and with it, the great split which took place in the world working-class movement during the First World War – was no longer relevant. A similar claim is being revived today among some sections of the ‘globalisation’ movement. A section of the movement sees its goals as simply anti-neoliberal rather than anticapitalist, and prominent intellectuals claim it can achieve victory without fighting for state power. At the same time, the growth of the movement has led to a new airing of the issues of imperialism and finance capital.

All this makes the study of the life and thought of Rudolf Hilferding particularly worthwhile. He was one of a handful of Marxists who produced work of immense theoretical value in the first decades of the twentieth century. His major work, Finance Capital, published in 1910, was an important development of Marxist thought, in the same league as Rosa Luxemburg’s The Accumulation of Capital (which appeared in 1912), Bukharin’s Imperialism and the World Economy (finished in 1915), and Lenin’s Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916). Like the others, Hilferding was horrified by the barbarity of the First World War. But, unlike them, he claimed it was possible to avoid the choice between reform and revolution.

Two recent intellectual biographies provide a valuable opportunity to re-evaluate his theory and his political practice – and, in so doing, to throw some light on current discussions both of imperialism and of socialist strategy. F. Peter Wagner and William Smaldone seem to have produced their biographies completely independently – such is the fragmentation of academic life even on the Left! But they cover very much the same ground, giving thorough accounts of his intellectual and political development, so providing a chance for a new generation of readers to know some of the most important theoretical debate of the first half of the last century in detail. They also adopt a similar, sympathetic, stance to Hilferding’s attitude to the reform-revolution
debate while honestly, and perhaps, paradoxically, developing the impasse which Hilferding was eventually led into by his stance.

The Hilferding who wrote *Finance Capital* was very definitely on the Left of the German socialist movement. In the debates over the mass strike in 1905, he took a position close to that of Rosa Luxemburg. Wagner quotes him as criticising the politics of the German Social-Democratic leaders because '[they] does not know when to let the masses act for themselves'. He also quotes Trotsky to the effect that, at this time, he shared a ‘political friendship’ with Hilferding, who was then ‘at the peak of his revolutionism’.

*Finance Capital* set out to explore the impact on the dynamics of capitalism since Marx wrote – the rise of the joint stock company in place of the individual entrepreneur, the growing importance of the banks as a source of investment, and the role of the state in protecting the markets of already mature national capitalisms.

This resulted in Hilferding expounding Marx’s own theory, which he did in a much more rounded way than most other accounts at the time, trying to integrate the theory of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall from Volume III of *Capital* into the account of the circulation process in Volume II and the theory of value and money in Volume I. By contrast, Rosa Luxemburg, Bukharin and Lenin played very little attention to the trend in the rate of profit.

Still, what Hilferding is most noted for is his examination of the rise of what he called ‘finance capital’. There was, he argued, a merging together of financial capital and industrial capital to produce a synthesis of the two. On this basis, giant trusts and cartels that could dominate whole sectors of industry were appearing. They leaned on the state to protect their domestic markets: the state would enable them to raise their prices at home and to put up with the reduced profits they received as they attempted to conquer foreign markets with lower prices.

This began to change the whole attitude of capital towards the state. ‘It is not free trade England, but the protectionist countries, Germany and the United States, which become the models of capitalist development’, wrote Hilferding.1 Far from continuing with the traditional liberal notion of a minimal, ‘night-watchman’ state, the great trusts wanted it to have the power to widen its boundaries so as to enlarge the market and gain monopoly profits. ‘While free trade was indifferent to colonies, protectionism leads directly to a more active colonial policy, and to conflicts of interest between different states’.2 The drive for empire was endemic to the most modern forms of capitalism and, since British, French and, to a lesser degree, Dutch and Belgian capitalism had already carved the world up between them, the expansion of German capitalism would inevitably lead to military clashes.

Finance Capital may start with an analysis of money and banks, but it ends with the themes of imperialism and the drive to war. As such, it was a fundamental influence on the analyses of imperialism by Bukharin and Lenin, and through them, Finance Capital has had an impact on much Marxist economic thought over the last ninety years (although the work was not translated into English until 1981). As Wagner notes, it was the radical left . . . who applauded Hilferding’s interventions in Marxist theory . . . and who would seize the analysis presented in Finance Capital . . . [but] Hilferding himself never quite drew the radical conclusions from his own work.3

In fact, once World War I had broken out, Hilferding tended to downplay the catastrophic dynamic of capital and to consider the system amenable to regulation and piecemeal transformation through reform.

There are some important theoretical points over which Hilferding was ambiguous in Finance Capital, an ambiguity that lives on in most of the works produced since the appearance of the concept. First, there is the question of the interrelation between finance and industrial capital. At points in Finance Capital, what is being analysed is a merger of the two, as the culmination of the tendency towards the centralisation of industrial capital. So Hilferding writes:

The banks have to invest an ever-increasing part of their capital in industry, and in this way they become to a grater and grater extent industrial capitalists. [What] I call bank capital . . . is actually transformed in this way into industrial capital, finance capital. . . . Industry becomes increasingly dependent upon bank capital, but this does not mean that the magnates of industry also become dependent on banking magnates.4

Yet, a page later, the bankers dominate the industrial capitalists:

The mobilization of capital and the continual expansion of credit gradually bring about a complete change in the position of the money capitalists. The power of the banks increases and they become the founders and eventually the rulers of industry, whose profits they seize for themselves as finance capital, just as formerly the old usurer seized, in the form of ‘interest’, the produce of the peasants and the ground rent of the lord of the manor.5

Associated with this ambiguity was another difficulty: the impact of the rise of finance capital on the dynamic of the system.

3 Wagner 1996, p. 86.
The effect of the concentration of industrial capital, Hilferding argued at some points in the book, was to make it more difficult for the system to cope with the problems arising from the downward pressure on the rate of profit. In the most ‘highly developed industries’, he writes, a few giant firms predominate, without any being able easily to outcompete the others:

The competitive struggle is not now between the strong and the weak, in which the latter are destroyed and the excess capital in that sphere is eliminated, but a struggle between equals, which can remain indecisive for a long time, imposing equal sacrifices on all the contending parties. The enterprises involved must find ways of continuing the struggle, if the whole immense capital invested in each of them is not to depreciate in value. Consequently, it has become extremely difficult in this sphere to ease the situation by writing off capital. A situation may easily develop in these areas, in which the rate of profit remains below the average for a long period, and the situation is all the more dangerous, the lower the average rate of profit. The decline in the rate of profit which is associated with the development of the capitalist production continually narrows the range within which production is still profitable.6

The great firms respond by getting together in order to fix prices by the formation of cartels or by mergers. The banks play a vital role in helping the bring these about. In this way, Hilferding argues, some restoration of profit rates is possible:

Cartelisation brings exceptionally large extra profits, and these extra profits . . . flow into the banks as concentrated sums of capital. But at the same time cartels tend to slow down capital investment . . . because the first concern of a cartel is to restrict production . . . Consequently, while the volume of capital intended for accumulation rises rapidly, investment opportunities contract.7

The logic of this argument is that, although cartelisation and mergers can postpone certain symptoms of crisis by passing the burden of falling profit rate from big capital to small capital, they cannot prevent crises indefinitely.

Cartels do not diminish but exacerbate the disturbances in the regulation of prices which lead ultimately to disproportionality, and so to the contradiction between the conditions of utilization and the conditions of valorization. The anarchy of production is not abolished by reducing the number of individual units while simultaneously increasing their strength and effectiveness.8

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It is this that makes the export of capital so important as a way of escaping from the impasse in the domestic economy – and, with it, the inevitability of peaceful competition periodically giving way to war. Such an interpretation of the theory of finance capital opens the way to Bukharin’s theory of imperialism, in which it is the drive of industrial capital to expand beyond national borders that is central in pushing towards continual military competition and war.

But the second of Hilferding’s formulations, in which banking capital comes to predominate over industrial capital, can point in different directions – to the notion that the rise of finance capital alters the fundamental dynamic of the system.

One such view had already been put forward by the British liberal economist Hobson, some eight years before the publication of Finance Capital. For Hobson, finance capital was an essentially parasitic growth on the essentially sound capitalist system. The drive to imperialism was a result of political manipulation by financial interests, who opted for guaranteed returns of interest on overseas loans rather than taking the risks involved in industrial investment at home. The alternative to imperialism, on this reasoning, was not the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, but governmental action to expand the domestic economy and defend the interests of industry against finance. This was a view of the distorting effect of finance on the system which, in many ways, foreshadowed Keynes’s call in the 1930s for the ‘euthanasia of the rentier’ and the 1990s’ denunciations by writers such as Will Hutton of the ‘short termism’ supposedly imposed on British industry by the City of London.

The Hobsonesque view of finance capital has also had some influence on the Marxist tradition. Lenin used Hobson’s work as well as Hilferding’s as a source when writing Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (Lenin’s actual subtitle was ‘The Latest Stage of Capitalism’), and some passages of the work do play up the purely parasitic role of finance capital. Lenin was insistent that it was the system in its entirety that drove capitalist ruling classes to war in order to ‘partition and repartition’ the world. But the phraseology used in those passages enabled some later Marxists influenced by Stalinism to see finance capital as an especially reactionary force, against which it was possible to construct ‘anti-monopoly alliances’ with ‘progressive’ capitalists.

More recently, the notion that all that is necessary to control some of the worse excesses of the system is to impose controls on finance capital, but not industrial capital, underlies the theories of ATTAC in France, with their view of the Tobin tax (first promulgated by a mainstream Keynesian supporter of capitalism) as the key mechanism for improving the lot of the world’s people.

Hilferding’s own use of the term finance capital was to lead him in similar, reformist, direction, but by a different route, to the progeny of Hobson. At several points in Finance Capital, he begins to develop the notion that the banks, by gaining control of

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9 For a recent defence of Hobson’s ideas which sees their closeness to Keynes’s, see Gregory P. Nowell, ‘Hobson’s Imperialism, A Defence’ on <http://csf.colorado.edu/pkt/seminars/nowell.pktsim10.txt>.
the main sections of big capital, can begin to co-ordinate their activities so as to avoid the disproportionate development of different sectors within the national economy.

There is a continual tendency for cartelization to be extended. . . . The individual industries become increasingly dependent upon the cartelized industries until they are finally annexed by them. The ultimate outcome of this process would be the formation of a general cartel. The whole of capitalist production would then be consciously regulated by a single body which would determine the volume of production in all the branches of industry. . . . Price determination would become only a nominal matter, involving only the distribution of the total product between the cartel magnates on one side and all the other members of society on the other. . . . Money would have no role . . . since the task to be accomplished would be the allocation of things, not the distribution of values. 10

Hilferding knew that things had not reached this level yet, but still believed that ‘the tendencies towards the establishment of the general cartel and towards the formation of a central bank are converging’ so that ‘the specific character of capital is obliterated in finance capital’. However, all this would happen in what was still a class society, with ‘property, concentrated in the hands of a few giant capitalist groups’, manifesting itself ‘in direct opposition to the mass of those who possess no capital’.

The problem of property relations thus attains is clearest, most unequivocal and sharpest expression at the same time as the development of finance capital is itself resolving more successfully the problems of the organization of the social economy. 11

Such a picture implied that the tendency towards finance capitalism was also a tendency away from repeated economic crises. Hilferding, at points, moves towards this view when he writes of ‘the modern firm’ that:

Its output is so large that some part of it can continue even during a crisis. . . . As capitalist production develops, there is therefore an increase . . . in the part of production that can be carried on under all circumstances. Hence the disruption of credit need not be as complete as in crises in the earlier period of capitalism. Furthermore, the development of the credit crisis into a banking crisis on the one side and a monetary crisis on the other is made more difficult. . . . 12

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And he adds that, ‘[T]he mass psychoses which speculation generated at the beginning of the capitalist era . . . seem gone for ever.’\textsuperscript{13}

Hilferding did not carry his arguments through to their logical conclusion when writing \textit{Finance Capital}. After passages like these, he went on the stress that none of the changes he had referred to could resolve ‘the emergence of an industrial crisis, the cyclical alternation of prosperity and depression’.\textsuperscript{14} But the ground was already laid in \textit{Finance Capital} for a theory he developed during and after the First World War – that of ‘organised capitalism’, of a system in which the anarchy of the market and the trend towards crisis disappears. As he wrote in 1927:

Organized capitalism means the replacement of the capitalist principle of free competition by the socialist principle of planned production. This planned, consciously directed economy is subject to a much higher degree of social intervention, which means nothing other than the activity of society’s only conscious organization equipped with coercive power . . . the state.\textsuperscript{15}

By then, he had also come round to the view that the transition from capitalism to socialism could take place peacefully, through parliamentary action to democratise the state and thus society’s economic activity.

The theory of organised capitalism led, logically, to another conclusion quite different to that in \textit{Finance Capital} itself. As Smaldone writes,

The economy, he suggested, had now reached such a level of technical organization that capitalist leaders no longer regarded war as an attractive option. . . . In the Weimar period he came to accept Kautsky’s pre-war suggestion that capitalism was entering a new phase of ‘ultra-imperialism’, in which the great capitalist powers would cooperate to divide up markets without any need for military conflict.\textsuperscript{16}

The ‘peaceful’ transition towards socialism did not, of course, occur as Hilferding had hoped. Instead, the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, and the struggle for a further repartitioning of the world led to another horrendous war. This did not, however, shake Hilferding’s basic theoretical notions about ‘organised capitalism’. But, by the late 1930s, he was putting a minus where previously he had put a plus. In his last writings, he described both Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia as new forms of class society, in which ‘organisation’ had superseded ‘capitalism’, and where the driving force was no longer profit-making to feed the competitive accumulation of rival capitals.

\textsuperscript{13} Hilferding 1981, p. 194.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} In Smaldone 1998, p. 105.
So, *Finance Capital* contains the germs of two quite different appreciations of the course of capitalism. One sees the drive to accumulate surplus-value as necessarily leading to ever-greater clashes between rival capitalist groups, to repeated social disruption, and to an era of wars and revolutions. The other sees the larger units of capital able to take greater control of their own destiny until they escape the dynamics of capitalism as analysed by Marx, whether this takes the benign form of the social-democratic or Keynesian welfare state, or the malignant form of ‘totalitarian’ or ‘bureaucratic’ ‘collectivism’.

Yet, despite, or perhaps because of that, *Finance Capital* remains an important work for Marxists to read today. It began to raise a central question for understanding capitalism in the last century, which too many Marxists have tried to ignore: what happens when control of capital within a particular country overlaps, or even fuses into, the control of the state machine, leading to various forms of centralised, bureaucratic direction of the economic mechanism? Hilferding did not succeed fully in answering these questions, hence his ambiguous legacy.

His main weakness is that he never fully grasped that the capitalist state is not an entity that exists alone, but, rather, is characterised above all by its relation to other states – and that the parameters within which any national economy operates are defined by its connection with other national economies. Capital and the state have grown up together as units in a world system of capitals and states. The internal organisation is structured by external pressure – and, in turn, exerts pressure on other units in the system. Marx wrote that the tyranny of the factory was the other side of the anarchy of the market. Hilferding should have seen more clearly that the organisation of national capital was a product of the disorganisation of world capitalism. And the response of national capitals to this was to resort to military as well as market methods in order to expand the resources at their disposal.

This was the argument Bukharin spelt out in his two magnificent books, *Imperialism and the World Economy* and *The Economics of the Transformation Period*, where the central concept is ‘state capitalism’, not ‘organised capitalism’. Bukharin was able to do so because he began, as Hilferding did not, with his central focus on the world system (‘[M]odern capitalism is world capitalism’).

> Theoretically, world capitalism is conceivable as a system of individual private enterprises. Yet the structure of modern capitalism is such that collective capitalist organizations appear as subjects of the economy: state-capitalist trusts.

And

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17 Bukharin 1972.
18 Bukharin 1971, p. 11.
Finance capital has abrogated the anarchy of production within the large capitalist countries. . . . Capitalist ‘national economy’ has moved from an irrational system to a rational organization. . . . [A]t the same time, however, neither the anarchy of capitalist production in general nor the competition of capitalist commodity producers was eliminated. These phenomena have not only remained but have deepened by reproducing themselves in the framework of world economy. The system of world economy is just as blindly irrational and ‘subjectless’ as the earlier system of national economy.20

The system, he explains, is one with ‘labour socialized on a world scale’ but with state-‘national subjects of appropriation’.21

Under these conditions, the contradictions in the system grow more intense and more violent at the international level just as they seem to subside inside each state:

Centralization of capital consumes competition but on other reproduces it on an extended base. Centralization destroys the anarchy of small units of but thereafter aggravates the anarchic relations between the large sectors of production. ‘Frictions’ in the economic system as a whole disappear in one place, only to emerge in another place in much greater dimensions. They transform themselves into frictions between the basic sectors of the great world mechanism.22

When this happens, the methods of competition themselves can undergo an enormous change.

Capital starts to use as its major role methods of direct pressure . . . competition, i.e. the battle between capitalist enterprises, can also be fought outside of the market in the actual sense of the word – for example, the fight over spheres of investment of capital, i.e. over the possibility of the expansion of the production process itself.23

Which bears fundamental implications when considering war:

Vertical and combined competition are accompanied by methods direct power influence. Therefore the systems of world finance capital unavoidably brings about the armed conflict of imperialist competitors. Here lies the root of imperialism.24

By contrast, Hilferding’s weak point is that his central focus is on the individual industrial and financial capitals within the national economy. Their international
connections only come afterwards. He could thus conceive of the Weimer Republic simply in terms of the coming together of national finance, industry and the state, and of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia in terms of nationally based administrative apparatuses of economic and military coercion. The world system of military and economic competition in which they were placed, and which exerted on decisive pressure on what national ruling classes did, was missing from his picture.

It was this which led to the glib optimism about future developments in the 1920s – and the grim despair about them in the late 1930s.

The problem was not just one for Hilferding. It beset much Marxist and ex-Marxist analysis during and after his lifetime. Hilferding’s postcapitalist totalitarian class society is similar to the model theorised by Max Shachtman, Hal Draper and numerous lesser thinkers – presented in a popularised form in George Orwell’s 1984. And his benign ‘organised capitalism’ has parallels in many writings in the 1950s about ‘welfare capitalism’ and ‘neo-capitalism’. In either case, it leads towards an abandonment of the central notion in Marx that the accumulation capital leads to the growth of a class capable of overthrowing it and that the contradictions of the system weaken it, making such an overthrow possible.25

This is why the work of Tony Cliff was so important. Cliff took up Bukharin’s dialectical view of the interaction of part and whole in the world system and applied it to the USSR, as Bukharin had not been willing to once he embraced (in 1925) the notion of ‘socialism in one country’.26 This led Cliff to conclude that the organised production of use-values, as described by Hilferding in his last writings on Russia and Germany, turned into its opposite when seen in its connection with the rest of the world economy. For the direction in which the internally organised economy moved was not random. As Cliff showed, drawing together an enormous amount of empirical material, it was characterised by as massive piling up of means of production at the expense of the living standards of the mass of workers and peasants – and of means for producing means of production at the expanse of means for producing consumer goods. The empirical picture was one remarkably like that summed up by Marx in Capital, when he wrote, ‘[A]ccumulate, accumulate, that is Moses and all the prophets’. Cliff argued this was only explicable if you saw that decisions made by

25 Marxists, like other people, are rarely wholly consistent. So many of those who spoke of neo-capitalism abandoned the struggle for socialism, some did not. Similarly, while many ‘bureaucratic collectivists’ succumbed to the notion that capitalism was more progressive than Stalinism and ended up supporting the US in the Cold War (Shachtman, for instance, backed the US Bay of Pigs attack on Cuba in 1961), others, such as Hal Draper continued to oppose both blocs and place their faith in working-class struggle (although the logic of their theory should have led them to hold that, because capital did not exist in the USSR, the working class in the Marxist sense did not exist either).

the ruling bureaucracy inside the USSR were part of a process of military and economic competition on a world scale, that is of the dynamic described by Bukharin.

Once one understands this, one can see that what appeared as a piling-up of use-values when looking inside the national economy, was, in reality, the accumulation of exchange-values in relation to the world system – of products whose value to the ruling bureaucracy depended upon the amount of labour that was socially necessary to produce them on a world scale. From this, it followed that the internal economy actually followed a dynamic which the ruling bureaucracy could not resist, even if it wanted to – a dynamic of competitive accumulation, which would eventually lead to massive economic and political crisis.

The insight had wider significance than its mere application to the USSR. By the 1960s, a host of Third-World countries had adopted forms of economic ‘planning’ of greater or lesser stringency, which led many on the Left to describe them as ‘socialist’ or as ‘deformed workers’ states’. From Cliff’s standpoint, they were units in the world system which could not escape from the logic of that system – something confirmed from the mid-1970s onwards, as they increasingly integrated their economies into world markets, undertaking neoliberal policies, privatisation, and so on. In much the same way, what some people called the ‘organised’ or ‘Keynesian’ capitalism of the West was a transient stage in the world system. For three decades, varying degrees of state intervention (with the military expenditures usually playing a central part) were able to ensure the expansion of nationally based capitals – until the expansion began to break through the constraints imposed by national boundaries, leading to the rise of the multinationals, massive international financial flows, and the phase of intensified market competition on a world scale which is commonly referred to as ‘globalisation’.

Hilferding’s *Finance Capital* was a pioneering study opening up the path which others followed to the end. Hilferding himself, however, retreated back into the myth of the organised national economy in the years after he had written it. This was his theoretical failing.

The shift in Hilferding’s view of the logic of system took place as he moved from the Left of the German socialist movement before the World War to its Right by the mid-1920s. Smaldone and Wagner both trace this transformation. When the World War I broke out in 1914, Hilferding was absolutely firm in his opposition to the War. As one of the editors of the party daily *Vorwärts*, he signed an unpublished declaration to the Social-Democratic Party leadership denouncing its decision to vote for war credits. The pro-war leadership of the party eventually sacked most of the editors,

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27 I remember the British Communist Party describing Egypt as ‘socialist’ at the time of the Six Day War in 1967, the British *Militant* group as classifying Syria as ‘a deformed workers’ state’ and sections of the Fourth International describing post-independence Algeria in the same way.
including Hilferding, and he was among those who split from the party to form the
anti-war Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD) in 1916.

Yet he never identified with the hard-left Spartakusbund opposition around Rosa
Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring and Clara Zetkin, and held that the War
would not lead to revolution. When revolution broke out anyway in November 1918,
with workers’ and soldiers’ councils briefly the only authority across the whole of the
former German Empire, he was against installing permanent workers’ council rule.
Instead, socialism was going to come about by electing a parliamentary majority of
the two Social-Democratic Parties which would carry through the socialisation of
major industries. The workers’ councils would have merely supplementary role to
that of the parliament, acting as a sort of second chamber.

Hilferding saw his role as being to prevent hasty and rash actions by the growing
section of workers who wanted revolutionary measures against capitalism, but also
to try to hold back the efforts of the right wing of the Majority Social Democrats who
were working with generals of the old army to crush the Left physically. He used
revolutionary language to try to influence the Left, while continuing to collaborate in
certain measures with the right-wing Social Democrats (for instance, presiding over
the government’s ‘socialisation commission’ which was supposedly drawing up plans
for nationalisation of major industries even while the government was working with
the owners of these industries to crush the workers’ councils and the Left). This
middle-of-the-road position led to the Independent Social-Democratic leadership to
be referred to as ‘the Centre’, and its politics as ‘centrism’.

For a time, it seemed like an absolutely winning formula. The Party grew at a
massive rate in 1919 and 1920. From 5 per cent in January 1919, its vote rose to nearly
18 per cent in June 1920, by which time its membership was over half a million. But,
along with the growth, went a massive radicalisation of the mass of ordinary Party
members. Eighteen months of mass strikes and repeated spells of civil war changed
the attitude of workers who had shared the supposedly moderate left-wing ideas of
Hilferding in November and December 1918. For them, the ‘Centre’ was a bridge over
which they moved from a belief in changing society by parliamentary means to
acceptance of the revolutionary message of the recently formed Communist International.

The parting of the ways came at the end of 1920. At the congress of the Independent
Social Democrats at the end of the year, Hilferding debated with the Russian
revolutionary leader Zinoviev over the future of the Party. He lost the argument and
the majority of his own party split away to merge with the Spartakusbund into a
mass United Communist Party (VKPD). A few months later, the rump Independent
Social Democrats followed Hilferding back into the Majority Social-Democratic Party.

In fact, ‘practical’ politics, for Hilferding, meant that, by the time the German state
faced its next major crisis, in the summer of 1923, he was as happy as the rest of the
old Social-Democratic leadership to bale it out. Inflation was reaching stratospheric
levels. There was discontent, spilling over into riots, right across the country. French troops had occupied the Ruhr. The far Right was beginning to take control of the state government of Bavaria and had the intention of taking power in Berlin. The Communists and Social-Democratic Left were a growing force in the states of Saxony and Thuringia, standing between Bavaria and Berlin. The conservative Cuno government was increasingly unpopular. Then, in August, a general strike spreading out from Berlin brought the government down, raising the spectre of a new wave of working-class insurgency. At this point, the Social Democrats agreed to restore stability by forming a coalition government with the parties of the centre-Right – and Hilferding agreed to give left credibility to the government by serving as Finance Minister.

The far-left critic of ‘finance capital’ had become the willing advisor to ‘organised capitalism’, justifying his role by claiming it was preparing the ground for the peaceful transition to socialism. It was a role he was to continue to play throughout the final crisis of the Weimar Republic a few years later.

In 1928, the Republic seemed finally to have achieved stability after an election in which the Social Democrats emerged as the biggest party and the Nazis were reduced to little more than 2 per cent of the vote. The Social Democrat Herman Müller formed a coalition government with the ‘moderate’ bourgeois parties, and Hilferding was once again Finance Minister. But only briefly. It soon became clear that all was not well with the economy of ‘organised capitalism’. A disagreement with Schacht, the head of the National Bank, over repayment of state debts led to Hilferding’s resignation. And then, a few months later, as unemployment rose to 14 per cent, the coalition government itself fell, as Schacht demanded an increase in national insurance contributions from workers. For Hilferding, the fault lay with the workers. He claimed that the SPD was sacrificing the Republic and democracy ‘for the sake of a thirty pfennigs of the unemployed and the unions’.28 The truth was that ‘organised capitalism’ – or at least the heavy industry section of it – was not prepared to tolerate in government any party that made concessions, however meagre, to its working-class supporters. As the world economic crisis got worse, it looked to a series of minority right-wing governments – led first by Brüning, then by von Papen and finally by Schleicher – to impose ever harsher conditions on the mass of people through emergency decrees. The unpopularity of these measures meant that there was no majority in parliament for them. But the Social-Democratic MPs were told to vote to keep these governments in power for fear of something worse. Hilferding was the staunchest defender of this ‘toleration’ policy, even though its effect was inevitably to drive impoverished sections of the middle class into the hands of Hitler’s Nazi Party and many workers towards the Communist Party. He again blamed the mass of people themselves for what was happening, writing of ‘the incredible primitiveness with which [vast strata of the

population] politically react to material circumstances’.29 Meanwhile, he admitted, ‘the basic problem of the situation is that we are unable to tell the people in a concrete manner how we will eliminate the crisis . . .’.30 And, despite everything, he thought that constitutional niceties would ensure that the right-wing governments were not replaced by Nazism.

Just a month prior to Hitler’s chancellorship, Hilferding could see Hitler’s ‘oath of legality’ as a decisive step towards the defanging of the National Socialists, a product brought about by their weakness.31

He ruled out a united front with the Communists to fight the Nazis, on the grounds, as Smaldone puts it, that ‘in the struggle for democracy, it was just as important for the SPD to fight against communism as it was to fight the presidential regime’. Even after Hindenburg had appointed Hitler Chancellor on 30 January 1933,

Hilferding counselled caution and insisted that any pre-emptive action by the SPD to prevent Hitler from coming to power would only lead to armed conflict with the SA and the Reichswehr.32

One Party comrade reported raising the question of calling for a general strike to resist the Nazi seizure of power with him:

He was sitting in a comfortable easy chair with warm felt slippers on his feet and remarked with a benign smile that I was a young firebrand and that political skill consisted in waiting for the right moment. After all, he said, Hindenburg is still the president, the government is a coalition government, and while the Hitlers came and go, the ADGB [union federation] is an organization that should not risk its entire existence for a fleeting political purpose.33

Hitler, of course, was determined not to let the working-class movement wait ‘for the right moment’. Within weeks, the Social-Democratic and Communist Parties were both banned, the unions were dismantled and Hilferding himself had been forced to flee, initially, to Prague.

There, he played an important role in the attempt to reorganise the Party from exile, editing its journal and putting forward a much more left-wing line than he had held in the previous dozen years. But it was not long before he and the rest of the exiled leadership turned away from ‘what in retrospect was a radical interlude’.34 In Hilferding’s
case, Smaldone argues there was ‘a gradual moving away from Marxism’, which culminated in his view of both Germany and the USSR totalitarian, ‘non-capitalist’ societies.

By this time, the exiled Social Democrats had been forced to flee Czechoslovakia for France, which was where Hilferding found himself when German troops occupied the country in 1940. The Nazis viewed a Marxist of Jewish descent as an enemy, regardless of the good turns he may have done for German capitalism in the 1920s, and seized him. He committed suicide in La Santé prison rather than face imprisonment, torture and probable death at Nazi hands.

Both Smaldone and Wagner tell Hilferding’s story well, interspersing accounts of his theoretical development with details of his political activity. They cover very much the same ground in both books, which are roughly the same length, but readers will find several points where events dealt scantily by one are filled out by the other. So, for example, Wagner devotes twenty pages to Hilferding’s ideas and activity in his last, exiled years, Smaldone only ten; but, at other points, the balance in is Smaldone’s favour.

The similarity does not end there. Both suffer from one major fault. They do not seriously examine the revolutionary alternatives put forward during three important turning points – 1918–20, 1923 and 1930–3.

Like other recent authors, for instance Eric Hobsbawm in his Age of Extremes, they dismiss the revolutionary potential of 1918–20, and draw the conclusion that the approach taken by Hilferding was the only one that made sense. In doing so, they ignore the way in which civil war raged in one part of Germany after another, with mass strikes, unsuccessful insurrections and, at the height of the struggle against the attempted right-wing coup of March 1920 (the Kapp Putsch), full-pitched warfare between the military forces of the state and an improvised red army in the Ruhr. Unfortunately, neither Smaldone nor Wagner (or, for that matter, Hobsbawm) make reference to key works on this period such as Erhard Lucas’s magnificent Märzrevolution 1920 – or even to works derivative to some extent of them, such as Pierre Broué’s Révolution en Allemagne or my own The Lost Revolution. If you ignore the reality of revolutionary upheaval, then you necessarily end up believing that only the non-revolutionaries were practical people.

Much the same is true of coverage of the crisis of 1923. Neither Smaldone nor Wagner describes the rising agitation in the summer of 1923, the general strike, the radicalisation of sections of Social Democracy nor the growth of Communist influence. Instead, they restrict themselves to discussions over the efficacy of the monetary reforms Hilferding suggested. As a result, they skate over a key moment in the history of the Weimar Republic and of Hilferding’s political biography.

The picture is no better in Wagner’s case when it comes to events that led to Hitler taking office in January 1933. He dismisses, virtually out of hand, any possibility of
successful resistance, even with different policies from Social-Democratic and Communist Party leaders. ‘Organized labor’, he writes, ‘even under the best of circumstances would have been unable to prevent Hitler’s ascension to the chancellorship’. Smaldone, by contrast, just shows how there was a very strong desire to fight among the Social-Democratic rank and file that the Party leadership, including Hilferding, refused to bow to.

Trotsky once described people who held to the sort of ‘centrist’ politics displayed by Hilferding at the end of World War I as standing ‘in the middle of the road’. That is a position that it is possible to take with equanimity when there is not a lot happening. But once the road gets busy, you have to jump to one side or the other. Hilferding opted to jump to the right, to the apparent security of the parliamentary pavement. But even pavements are dangerous places once tanks start rolling.

But why did he abandon the left-wing ideas which inspired him when he was young, and which, even today, shine through Finance Capital? Part of the reason lies with the lure of the easy life which can await those who compromise with the existing system. And, as a Social-Democratic parliamentarian and journalist, Hilferding did come to enjoy a very comfortable life in the 1920s. Smaldone writes that:

He certainly enjoyed dining in first class restaurants and prided himself an expert on fine foods and cigars. As a young man, the dark haired and moustachioed Hilferding had been of medium build. By the mid 1920s, the bespectacled intellectual . . . had grown quite corpulent. Lord d’Arbenon’s [the English ambassador’s] comment that Hilferding ‘looks too prosperous to be a fighter’, was fitting. But that was not all there was to it.

The ambiguities that existed in Finance Capital played some part. There is rarely a perfect fit between the ideas people hold and the actions they undertake, and so you cannot draw a straight line from the books people write to the lives they lead. But connections do exist. Hard, sharply defined theoretical positions rule out certain forms of conduct. To change drastically your practice, you have to tear up your old theory. Many people, of course, do so. Any of us could name prominent defenders of the existing system who once believed themselves to be revolutionaries. But we can do so because their apostasy is visible both to themselves and to the rest of us.

But when the edges of the theory are blurred, there can be a slow, barely visibly but cumulative shift in the practice. And they were blurred in Hilferding’s case. Even Finance Capital, one of the major pieces of Marxist analysis of the twentieth century, was imprecise when it came to examining the impact of what he called ‘finance capital’


on the dynamic of the system, so opening the door to the transmutation of the term into ‘organised capitalism’.

Equally blurred were the notions of the state and the revolution Hilferding adopted during and immediately after World War I. He tried to insist that the old argument between reform and revolution no longer mattered. In doing so, he opted to urge people to put their faith in the reform of a system that was, in its essence, not amenable to serious reform and which would take its eventual vengeance on those who tried to undertake it.

This is an argument we have met many times since Hilferding’s days. It characterised the left Eurocommunists of the 1970s and helps explain why so many of them ended up in the camp of Blairism in Britain, of PSOE in Spain and of the Democratic Left in Italy. It is an argument we face again in sections of the anticapitalist movement today. They should all ponder the lessons of Hilferding’s life and see how dangerous is the position they have been adopting. Both these books provide a good starting point, despite the interpretation of events often provided by their authors.

References


João Bernardo is one of the most prolific, and prodigious, radical theoreticians of the past thirty years, yet, because he writes in his native Portuguese and because very little of his work has been translated into English, he remains largely unknown in the world of Anglophone Marxism. The publication in 2002 of the third and final volume of his massive 2,000-page study of the seigneurial régime in Europe from the 5th to the 15th centuries provides an occasion to correct modestly this lacuna. The purpose of the following review is both to make João Bernardo better known in the Anglophone Marxist world, and, above all, to bring his most ambitious work to date to the attention of that world, and beyond. One hopes that this review will make Bernardo’s book known to a few real medievalists – which I am emphatically not – capable of reviewing it in greater depth, and to expedite its translation into English.1

Readers of Bernardo’s previous work know the significance he gives to os gestores [managers and administrators] in the development of capitalism, but those encountering the author for the first time in this three-volume study of the seigneurial régime (a term with which he replaces the overused and inadequate term ‘feudalism’)2 would not necessarily recognise the centrality and sources of this aspect of his agenda, just as os gestores were not socially front and centre in most of the period he is analysing. But the book ‘looks forward’ often enough – towards the emergence of absolutism, and beyond absolutism to capitalism – to make it clear what the ultimate import of the ‘impersonal state’ is for Bernardo.

What stands out in Bernardo’s entire analysis is a serious challenge to mainstream (including orthodox-Marxist) interpretations of these centuries. These interpretations all converge around the thesis that the crisis of the seigneurial régime (most dramatically, 1

1 See references for a summary of Bernardo’s most important works to date.

2 Bernardo also prefers the term ‘régime’ to the Marxist term ‘mode of production’, believing the current level of historical research to make the use of such a term for modes other than capitalism ‘premature’ (I, p. 237).
Bernardo argues that exploratory probes into virgin lands were closely linked to social tensions (II, p. 62). These include (i) the zone between the Loire and the Rhine; (ii) Franconia, Thuringia, Alamania and Bavaria; (iii) Frisia and Saxony; (iv) Anglo-Saxon England; (v) the area that makes up contemporary north-eastern France; (vi) the area south of the Loire; (vii) central and northern Italy; (viii) Spain; (ix) and (x) two inter-related zones extending from the Cantabrian mountains to the sea, and the Douro valley. (i), (iv) and (vi) are further divided into two distinct periods, making a total of thirteen variants. This use of variants, as opposed to ‘types’ (such as Weberian ideal types), is the core of Bernardo’s method. Later, for example, discussing the appearance of occasional wage-labour in the countryside, Bernardo says:

Only historical evolution can make distinctions among what, in a given epoch, appears as a unique situation. One of the characteristics of the model of history infusing this book is the consideration of each phenomenon, not in light of a supposedly typical phenomenon, but always as an articulation of variants. And when given variants stand out in a certain context and give rise to something different, this is not due to the minutiae of historiographical analysis, but to the dictates of real history. If, centuries later, capitalism had not come along to take this aspect of peasant life as one of the bases of its development, we would today have no reason to separate the precursor forms of the introduction of the wage from the other forms of domestic labour and services made in the form of labour... (II, p. 345).

Bernardo identifies no less than twenty-two different types of transfers of wealth, between and within different classes, and also shows how each transfer effected the bannum, that is seigneurial power (summarised in I, p. 430). It is also in the discussion of money in Volume I that he integrates wide-ranging anthropological material from all over the world, to explain the economy of gifts.
the ‘law of the seigneurial régime’ (first version, for the fifth to tenth centuries) as the ‘personal and particularised exchange, over time, of presents consisting of concrete economic objects of unequal function’, or more succinctly an ‘exchange of unequal functions’ (I, p. 239).6

Such relations governed, for example, the coinage of money, as in the case of the Carolingians, and Bernardo sees such attempts to ‘strengthen the silver content as confirming a desire for continuity in systems of power’ (I, p. 553); monetary and social relations were inextricably intertwined, a further expression of the bannum. But, ultimately, the expansion of the bannum through money, and the reduction of independent peasants to serfs, was only realised through intensive social conflict. Further, in contrast to mainstream historical thinking (including mainstream Marxist thinking on this period), Bernardo insists that ‘conflicts are not a reality distinct from the daily operations of the social system’, but, rather, that they are essential to illuminating such operations. Already from the last centuries of the Roman Empire onward and the early formation of the seigneurial régime, flight and banditry, for instance, were extensions of the struggles that had been quelled militarily.7 Later, repressing such struggles often compelled the Christian aristocracy to suspend the wars against the Muslims. Once again, pushes into virgin lands, for Bernardo, were also forms of struggle (II, p. 73).

Bernardo sees the initial, personal form of power transformed into an impersonal one through the major social crisis of the ninth and tenth centuries. It is here that his originality first comes clearly into view, turning the more traditional interpretations of the expansion into new lands into an expression of social conflict. He shows, for example, how the invasions by Vikings, Magyars and Muslims, associated with the period following the collapse of the Carolingian Empire should be considered, not merely as disruptive military incursions but, crucially, as events which were deeply rooted in the transformation of social relations then underway.8 The invasions, because of alliances between invaders and factions of the invaded, resulted in an expansion of the seigneurial system. The military results in different parts of the ex-Empire drew on previous centuries of history in different, specific re-organisation of local hierarchies. Up to the crisis, the uncultivated lands and vast forests were a permanent escape-valve for simple flight as well as migration, and for an independent peasantry: the

6 The four characteristics of the system in the first phase are (i) the reciprocity of duties, (ii) the completion of these reciprocal movements was not simultaneous (such as the sporadic character of alms in moments of crisis), (iii) the character of these duties was always personal, that is they could not be performed by any else except an heir, and (iv) the character of the duties was always concrete.

7 Perhaps most interesting in the late Roman Empire were the Bacaudae, who carried out guerrilla actions and integrated bandits and refugees into their ranks.

8 Bernardo draws on Ibn Khaldun and the little-known eighteenth-century figure Joseph de Guignes in analysing the impact of nomadic invasions on sedentary societies. ‘Neither the Scandinavians nor the Muslims nor the Magyars would have had such notable successes if they had not systematically benefited from alliances with factions of both aristocrats and peasants’ (II, p. 95).
existence of this escape-valve had a direct impact on the possible rate of exploitation of the servile peasantry in the lands under seigneurial control. ‘Control over the opening up of new lands was, for the aristocracy, the condition for overcoming the crisis’ (II, pp. 607–8). Bernardo shows how many of the well-known heresies of the period were, in fact, closely linked to the establishment of these places of refuge. The crisis of the ninth and tenth centuries was shaped by the disappearance of an independent peasantry, as the seigneurs extended their control over the previously uncultivated lands. Family structure was an integral part of the development, as second sons of both aristocratic and peasant families were the main force in new settlements. The earlier relationships, modelled on the family and hence appearing as personal relationships, gave way to an impersonal type of relation in which the large seigneurs dominated a more uniformly serf population that lived on their territories. The same impersonality extended to the seigneur’s relations to his vassals. Bernardo examines this transition in tandem with the profound changes in the family structures of the peasantry and aristocracy. Rural communitarianism, in his view, evolved as a ‘large artificial family’. Until the crisis of the ninth and tenth centuries, rural communities contained both serfs and independent peasants; after the disappearance of the independent peasantry, rural communities acquired an impersonality reflecting the new impersonal rule of the seigneur. Heresies appeared in lands which had been newly enmeshed by seigneurial relations, and they reflected a new communitarianism which came as a response to the new impersonal seigneurial forms. Control of local churches by the seigneurial class was an integral part of the new relations. The role of second sons of seigneurial families in populating the upper level of the church hierarchy shows the ongoing centrality of the family in the overall system. The spread of fortifications was aimed not so much at external enemies as at potential internal opposition. In this new context, without independent peasants, rural communitarianism and the relations of exploitation therein, were remade, as was the seigneurial family, with ‘the systematic containment of the rural population being inseparable from the remaking of the ruling class’ (II, p. 361). Part of this, for the exploited, included the penetration of wage-labour into the old seigneurial forms (II, p. 343).

9 ‘The incorporation into the sphere of the bannum of the uncultivated lands was the first step in the conversion to serfs of all the rural families which were using them’ (I, p. 349). More emphatically: ‘The control achieved by the aristocracy over the uncultivated areas was one of the factors that allowed it to dominate the entire process. If one can find a single axis of continuity during the two great periods of the seigneurial régime, not merely unifying both in a common evolutionary line but also serving as an articulation in the great crisis of the 9th and 10th centuries and allowing the aristocracy to recuperate peasant ferment and to re-establish its authority in new forms, this axis is the exercise of the bannum over uncultivated areas and their uses. Overly preoccupied with agriculture, the advance of its techniques and the improvement of the land, so many historians never overcome a curious error in perspective, when in fact the destiny of this régime was decided in the previously-open areas’ (II, p. 528).

10 Bernardo sees the pagan roots of many heresies as a further indication that they sprang from resistance to the spread of the seigneurial system.
A similar remaking of the aristocratic élite took place in the cities, through both peaceful and violent forms of struggle. Even where certain aspects of manufacture appeared, as in Venice, the corporative form of organisation maintained all production within urban seigneurial relations (II, p. 429), and, according to Bernardo, there was no wage-labour class as such through this period (II, p. 437). There was, of course, in various cities a large floating population [arraia-miúda] excluded from both the élite and the craft corporations, that survived on a combination of charity, crime and casual labour, but their eruptions were, up to the late fourteenth century, always mobilised in struggles between factions of the urban élite. Their convergence into a single form of wage-labourers was centuries away (II, p. 449).

For Bernardo, moreover, the city acted as a ‘collective seigneur’ with regard to the surrounding rural world, over which it effectively exercised the bannum; cities were ‘an integral part of the seigneurial régime’ (II, p. 516). Thus, many members of the urban seigneurial élite, while remaining in the city, continued to acquire more land and remained intensely interested in the operation of their rural holdings (II, p. 476). The city exploited the peasantry under its control, usually through taxation. In Flanders, the cities even organised confiscatory attacks to enforce taxation on the countryside. Bernardo rejects the ‘myths’ that have tended to see large urban merchants as aspiring to a different kind of life from the nobility, or to see the nobility as indifferent to business affairs. He finds it impossible to disentangle the two spheres, as for example in the business activity of many military orders such as the Teutonic Knights. Similarly, most of the famous urban factional battles in various Italian towns (such as those between Guelph and Ghibelline) were generally tied to conflicts and alliances with the rural nobility.

Bernardo, as indicated earlier, rejects demographic explanations of the expansion of the system.

It is undoubtedly very comforting for historians to invoke external events, themselves inexplicable, to justify complex social processes. Demographic fluctuations are always available as an argument, and as I observed . . . when I made the analysis of the expansion into new lands during the previous period, the fact of an increase in land under cultivation is the basis on which many authors deduce that the population had increased, with this deduction being presented at the same time as the cause of that fact. The explanation for one of the most decisive economic and social processes thus remains caught in a methodological vicious circle. (II, p. 529.)

11 Bernardo sees the 1378 Florentine movement of the ‘People of God’ (within a larger ferment more generally known as the Ciompi rebellion) as perhaps the first movement of the entire period in which workers acted autonomously, and were not manipulated by an élite faction (II, p. 451).

12 Bernardo points out (II, p. 487) that the Florentine élite seriously reduced taxes on the peasantry during the movement of summer 1378, trying to win its allegiance against the urban popular movement.
No such population increase, argues the author, caused the colonisation and new settlements. Rather, such expansions generally were an expression of seigneurial power, as (to take one example among many) in the case of the Bohemian and Hungarian monarchs who encouraged foreign immigration to strengthen themselves and to reduce the power of local aristocrats (II, p. 539). The great pilgrimages, above all from the end of the eleventh century, to Jerusalem (Bernardo rejects the term ‘crusades’) are even more striking evidence of the spread of seigneurial sovereignty without colonisation (II, pp. 550–1). They were, rather, escape valves ‘permitting the régime to overcome the great crisis of the ninth and tenth centuries without the explosion of its antagonisms’ (II, p. 552).

The clearing of forests and the opening up of new fields were not merely operations of agrarian economics, but aspects of a colonisation understood in the broad sense of the word, as submission of populations to an ongoing fiscalisation. (II, p. 583.)

By depriving the heresies of their strongholds, the seigneurial class temporarily contained them. While some of these movements, such as the Waldensians, achieved widespread peasant support, their military self-defence ultimately pushed them to exact tribute in a new form from the peasants, thereby alienating them and leaving the isolated heretics open to destruction. By the end of the period under study (the fourteenth century), these movements began to shift their focus from imaginary Jerusalems to the construction of a real Jerusalem.

Having laid out this analysis, Bernardo then turns in Volume III to the question of money, and it is here that he shows, in highly original fashion, how it is impossible to understand money in the seigneurial régime without understanding the relationships sketched above, and their evolution. Money, for Bernardo, was the vehicle of impersonal power. After the imposition of impersonal power by the tenth century, the seigneurial class achieved complete control of the creation of money, but Bernardo insists that it is a common mistake of older interpretations to see this evolution as the result of commerce. Money spread, in his view, as an instrument of impersonal power between both seigneurs and serfs and between seigneurs and vassals. Its spread in no way called into question seigneurial power. For Bernardo, money did not function as an agent of exchange, but as an agent of the impersonal exercise of power, as in the substitution of money tribute for older forms of tribute in kind.13 He insists, once again, on a distinction between commerce and capitalism.

To further this analysis, Bernardo distinguishes three types of money: Form I used...
in relations between the seigneurs and the serfs, Form II used in relations between the seigneurs and their vassals, and Form III, fiduciary money that emerged to finance credit operations in the cities, which, as previously noted, Bernardo considers a ‘collective seigneur’ in their relations with the rural world around them.

For Bernardo, these three types of money are the key to an understanding of the new role of the monarchy from the tenth century onward. Their convergence in the king occurs precisely after the extinction of the independent peasantry. Thus the operation of money, far from being a blind commercial force, actually expresses social relationships throughout. Monetary policy of kings (such as the attempt to establish a strong currency in France between 1360 and 1385) was often the direct cause of popular resistance. The new phase of impersonal power remade both aristocratic families, as well as the relationship of the latter with vassals. The use of mercenaries spread, undermining older forms of vassal military service. Vassals increasingly paid their tribute in cash. Money steadily took over the remade impersonal *bannum* and *mundium*, with credit playing an increasing role (III, pp. 268–9). The two great military orders, the Templars and the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, were bankers. The very emergence of groups such as monks in this capacity reflected the new impersonality of social relationships. Similar relations, again mediated by money, gave rise to a salaried seigneural bureaucracy, new ‘professionals in management’ (III, p. 280) as Bernardo calls them. ‘The separation of the public sphere from the private sphere, without which the modern state would not develop, has its genesis in this period…’ (III, p. 286). Universities developed to educate this stratum independently from the institutions for the education of the clergy. For Bernardo, this impersonal remaking of seigneural households through Form II of money (used between seigneurs and vassals) points to the whole period of absolutism, and ‘from the 15th to the 18th centuries all social and political life can be analysed in the paradoxical terms of “impersonal artificial household”’ (III, p. 293). Returning to his own period of the emergence of impersonal power, he points out how the model of the family shaped even commercial institutions (III, p. 355).

In the urban setting, by the fourteenth century, what Bernardo calls Form III or fiduciary (fiat or paper) money comes into its own, financing an impressive level of long-distance trade. He sees this type of money emerging in tandem with ‘the relations between the seigneurs and the serfs, Form II used in relations between the seigneurs and their vassals, and Form III, fiduciary money that emerged to finance credit operations in the cities, which, as previously noted, Bernardo considers a ‘collective seigneur’ in their relations with the rural world around them.

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In the urban setting, by the fourteenth century, what Bernardo calls Form III or fiduciary (fiat or paper) money comes into its own, financing an impressive level of long-distance trade. He sees this type of money emerging in tandem with ‘the
intensification of the internal contradictions of urban society’, above all in northern
Italy. Nevertheless, this fiduciary money (unlike what occurred centuries later under
absolutism) expanded ‘without the existence of any stable centre of sovereignty with
a global reach’ (III, p. 375). This form of money was, following Bernardo’s insistence
of the model of the family in both phases of the seigneurial régimes, still ‘parafamiliar’
and not merely mercantile, as it would later become. Bernardo traces the emergence
of bills of exchange, insurance and credit as newly-specialised activities within this
framework. Fiduciary money began to spread out of improvised fractional-reserve
practices by professionals of foreign currency exchange (III, p. 405). Major trade fairs,
such as the famous one in Champagne, achieved such dimensions that the money
changers and bankers who oversaw the settlement of accounts began to handle
transactions seriously exceeding the activities of the fairs themselves, thus becoming
another source of fiduciary money (III, p. 418). The fiduciary money created by these
Form III practices frustrated the ability of authorities to control money as they did
Forms I and II through old practices of coinage and debasement. The precapitalist
social relations expressed through money forms were underscored by the importance
of looting for international trade associations such as the Hanseatic League; they
thereby extended an old seigneurial practice and could not be understood as merely
commercial. The King of France carried out a massive form of looting in 1307 when
he suppressed the warrior-monk bankers, the Knights Templar, and seized all their
assets. In the cities, the management of the public debt did achieve a level of
sophistication that would later pass to the great absolutist states, and was underwritten
by new forms of steeply regressive taxation of the poor (III, pp. 456 and 461). The
functioning of the public debt ‘was always accompanied by social convulsions’. Thus
public banks were called into existence that were, in effect, central banks.

The principle attributes of money in the seigneurial régime were of a social
and political order, as a vehicle of social relations and systems of power,
and not of an immediately economic order, as would occur in capitalism.
(III, p. 472.)

Forms I, II and III of money converged in the monarchs, who debased the
metallic Form I held by the poor to strengthen the Form II used with vassals, which
in turn had an impact on the ability to create Form III of fiduciary money. But, once
again, these

operations of money and credit did not in any way anticipate the capitalist
system. Quite the contrary, they constituted, at both the economic and
ideological levels, the full functioning of the seigneurial régime. (III, p. 484.)

Here, again, Bernardo polemicsises against many historians ‘in a hurry to assimilate
commerce to capitalism’ (III, p. 490). The nobility ‘without exception’, had to constantly
intervene in commercial activities, with their powers of local coinage. The Anjou
monarchs speculated massively, hoarding food to sell at high prices in times of scarcity,
revealing the surreptitious mechanisms of the mundium in the new impersonal period.
The credit activities of the Church, such as those of the Knights Templar and the
Papacy, are, for Bernardo, to be explained ‘as modalities of the mundium’, not some
hypocrisy against ideological strictures on interest (III, p. 505). By the end of the
period, the management of the public debt was also no longer classified as usury.
The religious aristocracy was as much a part of the seigneurial régime as the lay
nobility and the urban élites. Up to the fourteenth century, following the crisis of the ninth
and tenth centuries, the monarchs fought to assert their control over previously
decentralised coinage. In their fiscal and credit practices, the three forms of money
converged. The new fiscal systems required ‘a conjugation of very deep social
transformations’, one that was possible

only when the impersonal character of the relationship acquired complete
hegemony and when the monarchs succeeded in managing a new bureaucracy
capable of dealing with the abstract mechanisms of money. (III, p. 563.)

As Bernardo puts it, ‘[O]nly in a society in which money already permeated all relations
was it possible to differentiate the personal bannum of a sovereign and the authority
of the crown’ (III, p. 564). The later period was thus characterised by a royalty ‘at
once magical and bureaucratic’. Great revolutions would still be necessarily to ‘liquidate
the sacred character of the king’ and arrive at the ‘impersonal and impersonal apparatus
of state authority’.17

The second version of the law of the seigneurial régime, (for the period from the
end of the great crisis to the fourteenth century) is thus formulated by Bernardo as
follows: ‘an exchange, over time, of presents consisting of economic objects of unequal
function, with undifferentiated agents of exchange and an indeterminate content of
the obligations’, even as it remained (as in the earlier period) an ‘exchange of unequal
functions’. In the new period, the ‘circuits of money were substituted for both the
personalisation of economic agents and for the concrete character of economic objects’.

In this new situation of ‘enormous artificial and impersonal households’, and the
homogeneity it engendered, the peasants ‘lost social initiative, and the impulse to
migration and the opening up of new lands declined and finally ground to a halt’
(III, p. 582). This led to a period of economic contraction, and the seigneurial class
was forced to greater and greater exactions. Famine returned in the last decades of
the thirteenth century with an intensity not seen for over a hundred years. ‘The more
severe exercise of the bannum forced rural people to dispense with types of food they

17 For Bernardo’s rich discussion of the transformation of these elements into absolutism after
the end of his period, see Volume III, pp. 564–7.
traditionally consumed’ (III, p. 584). With weakened populations, the stage was set for the Black Death.18

In a concluding chapter, Bernardo presents the English insurrection of 1381 and the Hussite rebellion in Bohemia and Moravia beginning in 1419 as, respectively, the last struggle of the second phase of the seigneurial régime and the opening of a new period.

The English rebellion, for all its far-reaching scope, never rejected the authority of the king. It showed ‘the dual character of the rural communities, which were at once a framework for peasant solidarity and an element of seigneurial control’ (III, p. 606). In the Hussite movement, for the first time, there occurred a convergence between serfs in revolt with the urban poor [arraia-muída], thereby unifying the currents of rebellion (the heretical communitarian movements and the egalitarian urban ferment) which previously had occurred in isolation. And, unlike the English insurgents, the Hussites never turned to any king.

The fact that this massive study is written in Portuguese (pending its translation into English, which this review hopes to expedite) should really be the least of the obstacles to its diffusion and (to use contemporary jargon) ‘reception’. I wonder to what extent there exists any reader capable of fully meeting it on its own ground (as I am certainly not). Not only did Bernardo spend the better part of twenty years researching and writing this work, but as an independent intellectual connected to no university, he was entirely free from the kinds of institutional patronage, career pressures and faddism (most notably, in the past two decades, the postmodernist vulgate) that mar so many academic ‘monographs’. Perhaps some medievalists might be capable of poking holes in different aspects of Bernardo’s analysis, but particularly because its theoretical underpinnings flow from a whole body of his earlier writing and specialist will be at a great disadvantage in attempting to enjoin Bernardo’s book where it demands, namely as a whole. Its major radical import, as I, a ‘general reader’, see it, lies in the author’s insistence that the social relations of the seigneurial régime permeate and explain phenomena that have up to now generally been interpreted as agrarian, technological, military, ‘economic’ (in an anachronistic backward projection of capitalism), demographic, or epidemiological (for example, the Black Death), that is causes that diminish or eliminate the centrality of the social, and of the activity of classes within specific relations. One might without great exaggeration paraphrase Bernardo’s general perspective as being that the phenomena to be explained are social relationships, mediated by agriculture, technology, warfare, ‘economic’ activity,

18 Once again, Bernardo attacks ‘historians who invoke demographic reasons’ to explain the plague, and which ‘allow historians precisely to hide the antagonisms between classes behind apparent acts of nature’ (III, p. 586).
demography and epidemics. Whether analysing the successes of the Viking, Magyar or Moslem invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries, or the depersonalisation of the bannum and the mundium, or the migrations into uncultivated land, or the rather sophisticated institutions of foreign exchange, state debt, taxation, banking and insurance of the fourteenth century (which latter can appear so protocapitalist to the less critical eye), or, finally, the places where the Black Death struck and did not strike, Bernardo always insists on the reproduction of the seigneurial relationship as central to any real explanation. Where questions of agricultural productivity, technological innovation, opening of virgin lands, wars or epidemics are concerned, Bernardo systematically rejects any ‘ex machina’ explanations that remove the social from its centrality. The weakening of the European population by the fourteenth century that left it vulnerable to the Black Death (to take perhaps the most dramatic example) was not the result of the ‘dumb’ fact of population growth filling up all available land and producing a food shortage, but, rather, of the complex process of the extension of the mundium as the solution to the ninth- and tenth-century crisis, and the later intensification of seigneurial exactions when the migrations into virgin lands had ground to a halt. Bernardo, through this analysis, greatly extends the explanatory power of social relations governing social practice into areas where more mechanical causes have long held the high ground. From other historical periods with which I am more familiar, this ‘relational’ explanatory method has the ring of truth, and however successful Bernardo’s use of it in various dimensions of the fifth to fifteenth centuries, his book will certainly force many medievalists to rethink their premises in attempting to stand their ground. This will already be its powerful theoretical and historical contribution.

References

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Critical realism is described by some of its proponents as a ‘movement’; it develops themes such as critique and emancipation, and has traditionally tended to attract people on the Left, including Marxists. So what is the relationship between critical realism and Marxism? Critical realism was rooted initially in Roy Bhaskar’s defence of realism in the philosophy of science and social science, articulated in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, critical realism has grown in different directions. Roy Bhaskar’s own philosophy has moved far beyond his initial scientific realism and critical naturalism, through dialectical and transcendental dialectical stages, to his latest elaboration of ‘meta-reality’. Bhaskar’s early work makes fairly frequent references to Marx, and occasionally deals explicitly with Marx as a (indeed perhaps the first) realist social scientist. Bhaskar’s social ontology elaborated in The Possibility of Naturalism,1 the Transformative Model of Social Action (TMSA), is clearly influenced by and consistent with Marx’s social ontology, though it is derived independently of Marx through transcendental enquiry into the presuppositions and conditions of possibility of intentional human agency. Thus there is a discernible Marxist hue to Bhaskar’s own earlier work, which, however, has tended to fade in the later developments of Bhaskar’s thought.

The critical-realist ‘movement’, at times, displays somewhat cultish characteristics, with its central focus on the figure and work of Roy Bhaskar. Critical realism is, of course, not reducible to his work, however. Many others in philosophy and the substantive social sciences have engaged with and developed different aspects of critical realism, and there are now a variety of positions and approaches falling under the general term. While a number of critical-realist works make reference to Marx’s work in more-or-less explicit ways, some more centrally than others, other critical realists make little or no reference to Marx and clearly do not espouse a Marxist tradition. This, in itself, is not inconsistent with the claims of critical realism, as a set of arguments in philosophy. Bhaskar is explicit in his claim that critical-realist

1 Bhaskar 1998.
philosophical ‘under-labouring’ – the meta-analysis of the practice and conditions of possibility of science and other practices – does not, in itself, entail any particular social theory in terms of content; he insists that critical-realism philosophy does not and cannot ‘legislate in advance’ for the social sciences. But, among those who would describe themselves as critical realists, there is some debate over the extent to which critical realism entails or enhances Marxist social theory. ² On the other hand, among those who call themselves Marxists, many see no need for, or are critical of, critical realism. Again, this is hardly surprising, given the variety of positions and approaches which fall under the term ‘Marxist’.

Sean Creaven’s book-length treatment of the overlapping fields of Marxism and critical realism is, thus, an intervention into a much debated set of questions over which there is little agreement. This, in itself, makes his work an important contribution, to be welcomed and engaged with by non-Marxist critical realists, Marxist critical realists, and non-critical-realist Marxists alike. Creaven does not aim to engage directly in existing debates among critical realists and Marxists, but, rather, to propose a particular, original synthesis of Marxism and realism as superior to other positions in the social sciences, which are his primary target of criticism.

In *Marxism and Realism*, Creaven’s aim is to set out and defend a view of Marxist social science as being a non-reductive emergent-materialist approach. He uses the philosophical arguments of critical realism to defend and elaborate Marxist social science; and he argues that critical realists can enrich and radicalise their approach by drawing more systematically on the heritage of classical Marxism. He advocates a position of ‘critical materialism’, which consists of a synthesis of philosophical realism (as set out principally in Bhaskar’s early work) and dialectical materialism (primarily that of Engels). Creaven’s work is located above all within sociology. He aims to elaborate and defend a Marxist understanding of the relationship between human agency, social interaction and social structure in social systems, by reconstructing Marxist social theory on the basis of critical realism as a form of ‘emergentist’ social theory which he terms ‘emergentist Marxism’. In doing so, he aims at several targets:

i) to show how realist social theory provides a solution to several long-standing debates in social theory regarding structure and agency, and voluntarism vs. determinism; and how it transcends the weaknesses in the contending positions of holism, individualism and elisionism;

ii) to produce a radicalised version of realist social science by systematically incorporating the insights of dialectical materialism, as developed by Engels and Lenin among others;

iii) to defend the central claims of classical Marxism regarding the explanatory primacy

² See, for example, Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (eds.) 2002.
of specific forms of human agency (social labour and class struggle) and social structure (the forces and relations of production) in shaping the constitution and dynamics of social systems and the directional movement of history.

There are several components to Creaven’s overall argument. The first chapter establishes the basic grounds of the book. He identifies the key weaknesses of established traditions of social theory as being reductionism (reducing a system to the nature and properties of its parts) and conflationism (conflating the parts of a system with the nature and properties of the whole). Against these, a realist approach reveals the world to be stratified, each strata of being having emergent properties and powers which are irreducible to those of the lower strata, although existentially dependent upon them. However, Creaven argues, if it is to overcome entirely the weaknesses of traditional approaches, realism has to embody the principles of dialectical materialism, so as to adequately conceptualise the dynamics of social systems and historical change.

The further elaboration of this argument in the rest of the book is organised around different ontological levels. Chapter Two, ‘Organisms, Subjects and Society’, examines how we should understand human agents and their social interaction. Creaven introduces and defends a Marxist theory of human nature, defined in terms of a range of powers, capacities and qualities which are uniquely human and shared by all human beings. Against the widespread view that Marx and Engels were ‘anti-humanist’ or ‘structural-determinist’, Creaven emphasises the central role of the uniquely human capacity for self-conscious, reflexive intentional human agency in their understanding of human history and the dynamics of social change. He uses this as a basis upon which to build a theory of the interface or connection between individuals and society which avoids the pitfalls of reductionism, violent abstraction and conflationism. Creaven elaborates a sharp critique of contending approaches to the society/individual relationship, which either reduce the social to the biological (sociobiology), ignoring emergent properties and powers of human nature and the causal and moral role of human agency; reduce the social to the individual (utilitarianism), positing atomised self-interested rational agents abstracted both from socially and historically constituted norms and beliefs and from objectively real needs and constraints; or conflate the ontologically irreducible strata of individual subjectivity, social relations and human nature (the various ‘elisionist’ theories of symbolic interactionism, structuration, social behaviourism, and poststructuralism).

Having thus established a realist, critical-materialist model of the ‘micro-foundations’ of society, social structure and human agency, in terms of a strong model of human nature and the non-social subject, Creaven moves in Chapter Three (‘Subjects, Actors and Agents’) to examine the constitution of the ‘interaction order’ which arises upon these foundations. The ‘interaction order’, where structure and agency meet, is the product of the dialectical interaction between already-existing structural relations
which constrain and enable interactants, and the natural powers and properties of those interactants. Here, a stratified notion of agency is developed (involving subjects, actors and agents) to conceptualise and explain different forms of individual and collective action oriented towards reproducing and changing society. This, together with a stratified conception of ‘interests’ (as human and social, arising from a person’s objective species-needs and their agential location in particular social relations, as opposed to the individualised notion of interests as subjective preferences in rational-choice and social-exchange theory), provides a means to address theoretically and to explain the possibilities of revolutionary or reformist social change, collective agency, and the forms and possibilities of political struggle under different determinate conditions and social formations – in other words, ‘to obtain an explanatory purchase on why and how social systems are replicated, elaborated or transformed over time’ (p. 202). Creaven demonstrates again how attention to stratification and emergence in social theory avoids the flaws of both structural determinism and voluntarist idealism.

The final chapter, ‘Structure, Power and Conflict’, turns to examine the mechanism which explains the overall dynamics of social systems and the progress of human history. Here, the emergentist, realist social theory developed thus far is employed and elaborated in order to provide a non-reductionist, non-reified defence and reconstruction of some central principles of classical Marxism: that social labour and class agency have priority in explaining the dynamics of social systems and the movement of history. The reality of interests and the subjective experience and awareness of them is central, in providing differently-situated interactants with rational motivation to seek either to preserve, or to change, the existing structure of economic relations which structure the unequal distribution of life-chances in society. These struggles are themselves bounded historically by the prevailing configurations of forces and relations of production (the level of development of material production and the kinds of class groupings and attendant class capacities this supports). Creaven’s reconstruction of classical-Marxist themes thus pays attention to the dialectical interplay between structure and agency, contingency and necessity.

This is a bold and ambitious work which engages in detail and at length in a wide variety of issues and literatures, including Marxism, realism, dialectics, human nature, human needs and interests, anthropology and human evolution, structure and agency, theories of the self and subjectivity, and the interaction between class, race and gender. In the course of putting forth and defending his own argument, Creaven engages rigorously, at each stage, in extensive and detailed critique of other approaches to social theory at a number of levels. These include, for example, sociobiology, Giddens’s structuration theory, rational-choice theory, utilitarianism, symbolic interactionism, Foucault’s poststructuralism, Mead’s social behaviourism, Skocpol’s neo-Weberian sociology, Western philosophy’s idealist and elitist theories of human nature, Rawls’s
theory of justice and community, theories of the significance of race and gender. His argument is important in elaborating a detailed critique of pluralist, idealist and behaviouralist approaches in different areas of social theory.

Because so much of Creaven’s argument is so expertly constructed and defended, and so thorough, it is perhaps necessary to draw attention to two minor points which detract from the rest of this excellent work.

The first is a matter of style but it undermines the force of Creaven’s argument. Creaven periodically articulates his argument with a mode of expression which verges on dismissive, complacent and at times sarcastic. For the most part, as already observed, the book develops different strands of argument meticulously, proceeding rigorously step by step through successive points and potential counter-arguments and elaborating detailed critiques of contending perspectives. In this regard, he has performed an important service by not only defending his own approach but carefully elaborating the implications of a realist-emergentist ontology for a wide variety of prevailing approaches. But this impressive rigour, command of a wide literature and attention to detail is, unfortunately, undermined by the unnecessary use of phrases such as ‘it is hardly surprising that’, ‘it seems to me uncontentious that’, ‘it can scarcely be doubted that’, ‘it is a commonplace that’, ‘after all, who would doubt that’, ‘it is hard to see how anyone can sensibly deny’, ‘every sensible person knows’, and so on.

If this were merely a slightly irritating stylistic feature, it would not be worth commenting upon. However, it detracts from the book’s argument in two significant ways. Firstly, adopting a flippant tone with respect to contending perspectives suggests that the book is directed primarily at the ‘already-converted’. If the book aims to try to persuade non-Marxists or non-realists – a postmodernist, for example – of the superiority of Marxism/realism, then this scornful tone might well put them off before they take the trouble to engage with what he has to say. Secondly, this tone is suggestive of a level of certainty in one’s own position which critical social scientists can ill afford these days, least of all Marxists. At one point, in criticising symbolic interactionism’s account of human nature and the social self, Creaven asserts ‘The fact that this account of the individual is profoundly unsatisfactory is perhaps obvious to everyone other than the naivest students of sociology’ (p. 123). And, when setting out a defence of the Marxist thesis that being determines consciousness and not the other way round, he claims

Not even the most naive of ontological idealists deny that humanity’s natural powers of mind, self and rationality have a biological basis, or that these same capacities are developed and greatly enriched through processes of social learning and enculturation. Although there are cultural imperialists who would deny that non-social interaction with the physical environment is efficacious in shaping human development in these crucial respects, this is not the perspective of those outside this charmed circle. (p. 41.)
Both are examples of an unfortunate tone which detracts from his insightful and important critiques of established positions in social theory. The power and strength of Creaven’s critique is contained within the substance of his writing and this stands for itself, without requiring further embellishment through expressing explicit disapproval of others in this way. Furthermore, to simply dismiss all those who do not hold a materialist view of mind as being part of a ‘charmed circle’ with whom it is not worth engaging seems absurd today, given the widespread acceptance of some core themes of postmodernism. On the contrary, a more proper critical-realist approach would be to ask: what is it about the world today, the social conditions of the present historical conjuncture, which explains the phenomenon of irrealist and postmodern thought and its popularity? The prevalence of false beliefs in society needs to be given a social explanation, rather than being implicitly explained away in terms of people’s stupidity or naivety.

The second is a more substantive point. There are some aspects of Creaven’s argument which seem to be inconsistent with important elements of a critical-realist understanding of historical materialism. Such inconsistency is manifest, for example in his discussion of human nature, and his general notion of historical change.

In Chapter Two, Creaven engages in a long discussion about human nature, in order to lay down the foundations of an understanding of human agency and social interaction compatible with realism and Marxism. His discussion is rooted in Marx’s ‘philosophical anthropology’ of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. He defends Marx’s distinction between species-being and social-being, agreeing with Norman Geras’s equivalent distinction between ‘human nature’ and ‘the nature of humanity’. In brief, Creaven defends a notion of a core, common set of attributes, powers and tendencies which all human beings have as part of their species-being; in addition, are ephemeral cultural traits and behavioural forms which are the social-being produced by historically specific social relations. This separation of ‘species-being’ from ‘social-being’ leads to a problematic argument in his critique of other, ahistorical, approaches to human nature.

Creaven rightly criticises the ‘Hobbesian’ view of sociobiologists such as Wilson that human nature as inherently competitive, individualistic, aggressive, and so on. However, surprisingly, Creaven’s counterargument about human nature contradicts central methodological principles of historical materialism. He proceeds to adopt the same methodological procedure as his opponents; but, he applies this procedure to a different historical period, thus arriving at opposite conclusions about human nature. Marx criticised the bourgeois political economists of his day for mistaking historically specific empirical forms and behavioural patterns, which were the product of historically specific social relations, for eternal characteristics of an essential ahistorical human nature. The observable characteristics of competitive behaviour, for example, were not essential to human nature but a specific product of the particular form of capitalist
social relations, which Marx went on to explain. The methodological point of his critique was that patterns of behaviour will always be historically specific, according to the prevailing social relations. The bourgeois political economists systematically confused historically specific with transhistorical aspects of human being. Marx’s critique does not deny a common human nature, but emphasises that the common attributes of humanity are only ever manifest in historically specific forms.

Creaven does not follow this logic of Marx’s in his critique, however. Rather, he counters the ideological conception of inherently competitive human nature, in its current sociobiological form, with an opposite argument that human nature is inherently egalitarian and co-operative, claiming ‘a perfectly reasonable natural selection argument can be made which infers altruism and egalitarianism from the historical interface between self-conscious “cooperative man” and the social and physical circumstances of our hominid forebears’ (p. 292). He roots his argument in evidence from the research of paleoanthropologists, evolutionary biologists, archaeologists, zoologists, and prehistorians, in order to show that, over thousands of years of evolutionary development, human beings have developed a genetic predisposition to be, by nature, ‘intensely sociable and cooperative’ (p. 80). Thus Creaven counters Wilson’s sociobiology view that human nature is inherently competitive and aggressive, with the equally ahistorical and essentialist contention that hunting and gathering is ‘an indelible part of what makes us human’ (p. 94, citing Richard Leakey); that 2.5 million years of hunting and gathering between the first appearance of *Homo habilis* and the first planting of crops by eighth millennium BC *Homo sapiens* has moulded, through a process of natural selection, a human nature characterised by sociability, communality, altruism, co-operative and egalitarian behavioural traits (pp. 94 and 292).

This argument simply follows the same logic as those who construct a Hobbesian theory of individualistic human nature, but derives the characteristic features of human nature and behaviour from a different, earlier historical period! A Marxist critique, on the contrary, would insist on the historicity of cultural, moral and behavioural patterns and norms, and show how they derive from the historically specific nature and structure of the social relations prevailing in a particular context. If egalitarian forms of behaviour and cultural norms are observed, these must be explained with reference to the particular nature of historically specific social relations prevailing in that context, not to the genetic predisposition of *Homo sapiens*. Creaven’s argument about human nature suggests a mistaken defence of socialism and communism. A historical-materialist argument for communism is based on the objective fact of human beings’ simultaneous and common dependence on each other, through objective social relations, and on nature. As Andrew Collier has argued very clearly, given humanity’s

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3 Collier 1990.
common dependence on nature, the freedom of each will be enhanced only by both increased control over nature (development of the forces of production) and increased collective social control over the resulting augmented social powers. This historical-materialist argument for a different, socialist, organisation of society is not derived from a theory of human nature as inherently, genetically predisposed towards communality and egalitarianism.

Creaven’s arguments about human nature, needs and interests, elaborated in Chapter Two, are related to his general view of the nature and cause of historical change, which is set out in Chapter Four. He explains:

the concept of human needs and interests also furnishes Marxian theory with an elementary ‘micro’ explanation of the ongoing process of social conflict and class struggle which provide socio-cultural elaboration/transformation with its historical dynamic. The simple fact that human beings have basic material needs . . . and thereby possess interests in ensuring that these needs are met, supplies them with urgent imperatives to modify or even overthrow those hierarchical or unegalitarian (i.e. class-divided) social relations (and attendant vested social interests) which retard or deny all of them. (p. 86, original emphasis.)

This is a valid and crucial argument and provides objective grounds for a critique of capitalist society. Creaven makes important arguments in defence of the objectivity of human needs and human interests, the consequent political and ethical implications for a critique of existing social orders which systematically prevent the satisfaction of historically-satisfiable needs for some, and the rationality and necessity of changing society in order to overcome the systematic frustration of historically-satisfiable human needs caused by exploitative class relations. His basic argument about the primary explanatory role of human needs and interests in the dynamics of social change is similar Roy Bhaskar’s argument about absences and absentings in the dialectic of emancipation (to which, however, Creaven makes no reference). In his book Dialectic: the Pulse of Freedom, Bhaskar argues that human intentional action to overcome (to absent) lacks and frustrated needs (absences) is at the heart of social change and, in particular, struggles for social transformation. However, both analysts, perhaps because they concentrate mainly at the level of philosophical or social-theoretical underlabouring, end up suggesting an unwarranted optimism about the likelihood of the eventual overthrow of hierarchical or unegalitarian social relations (Creaven) or master-slave type power relations (Bhaskar).

Bhaskar’s elaboration of the dialectic of emancipation does not conflate his logic of

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5 Creaven has more recently engaged explicitly and at length with Bhaskar’s dialectical critical realism. See Creaven 2002.
dialectical universalisability with actual historical process, despite the appearances. Some parts of Creaven’s discussion give the impression, however, of falling into this trap. In Chapter Four, Creaven makes a detailed argument that the dynamic of historical change results from the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, and that, at certain stages when the further development of the forces of production is fettered by the prevailing relations of production, social struggle will arise to overthrow and transform the social relations. Thus he boldly asserts, towards the end of the book (p. 229),

relations of production always invest in the agents of subordinate classes not only vested interests in developing the productive forces beyond the existing economic organisation of society, but also the ‘structural capacities’ to do so. In other words, there are powerful and objectively determined factors working in favour of the overturning of existing relations of production by the developing forces of production these have themselves (at least in part) engendered. For example, under capitalism, the structural capacities of the working class include:

‘its immense numerical superiority over the bourgeoisie; its concentration in workplaces and the cities; the dependence of the bourgeoisie on the working class for all its operations including the operation of its state; and the fact that the working class can rule society without the bourgeoisie but the bourgeoisie cannot exist without the working class, which means that the bourgeoisie has to go on defeating the working class indefinitely but the proletariat has only to defeat the bourgeoisie once (in the world historical sense).’

Creaven continues:

Such structural factors of the capitalist mode, generated by the relentless expansion and centralization of production, and hence of the working class, impart a certain directional impulse towards the establishment of socialist relations of production. This is by virtue of the fact that they make the eventual victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie not only a possibility but also a probability (though not of course an inevitability: this depending on the outcome of the struggle between the classes during ‘critical periods’ where the balance of power between them is virtually even.)

This exhibits a problematic sense of world history in two important senses. Firstly, the characterisation of ‘working classes’ is remarkably Eurocentric, implying a simplistic stereotype of a classical urban industrial proletariat which pays no attention to the

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6 Here, he cites John Molyneux 1995, p. 64.
huge variety of social conditions and forms characterised by the workers of the world in the twenty-first century? Such Eurocentrism is manifest elsewhere in the book, too: for example, earlier in his discussion (p. 159) of ‘many of the ancient and medieval Asiatic societies which comprised the “tributary mode of production”’. This discussion is restricted to abstract theoretical terms about ‘cultural hegemony’ and ‘structural monolithism’ leading to ‘stable reproduction’ rather than ‘structural-cultural and agential elaboration’. This echoes perhaps one of the worst moments of Marx’s theoretical work, which has been widely criticised for its ‘orientalism’ and its historical bluntness and inaccuracy. For Marx to be ignorant of, or to ignore, the histories of ‘other’ peoples is, to an extent, understandable, given the social and historical context in which he was writing; it is not excusable today. Creaven’s discussion of ‘relatively stagnant societies’ makes no reference whatsoever to any particular society or period, save a footnote to an article with the title ‘The Uniqueness of the East’. Is he referring to societies in China, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, India? The twelfth, sixteenth, nineteenth or twentieth centuries? These analyses of ‘the working class’, and of ‘other’ societies in ‘the East’ display an approach which fails to address the historical specificity of different societies and social contexts, and the very different material, cultural and political conditions of the ‘subordinate classes’ around the world today.

Secondly, and perhaps as a result, to express such optimism in such simplistic terms today displays an incredible lack of engagement in the actual history of the last hundred years, and of the conditions of global capitalism in the current conjuncture. At this particular historical moment, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, after a century characterised by the rise and defeat and destruction, all around the world, of revolutionary movements, social scientists on the Left cannot simply sit back and talk about the ‘probability’ and ‘directional impulse’ of the contradiction between forces and relations of production, and the necessary impulse of subordinate classes to struggle to meet their needs, leading to the eventual victory of the proletariat and the establishment of socialism. To do so is likely to give Marxism a bad name and do little to persuade the unconvinced of historical materialism’s more adequate explanatory powers.

References


7 See, for example, Panitch and Leys (eds.) 2001.


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