
Loren Goldner
The Critique of Pure Theory:
 Moishe Postone's Dialectic of the Abstract and the Abstract¹

Brief Review of: Moishe Postone. *Time, Labor and Social Domination. A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory.* Cambridge University Press 1993 (2003 reprint)

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<http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner>

„Karl Marx was first of all a revolutionary.”
 Frederick Engels, Highgate Cemetery graveside speech, 1883

„The total movement in this form of appearance. Finally, those three (wage, ground rent, profit/interest) sources of revenue of the three classes of landlords, capitalists and wage laborers—the class struggle as conclusion, into which the movement and the dissolution of all this shit resolves itself.”
 Marx to Engels, 4/30/1868

In this important but slightly maddening book, Moishe Postone spends a lot of time demarcating his outlook from what he calls „traditional Marxism”. This traditional Marxism, in Postone's rendition, seems to encompass virtually every self-designated Marxist from the death of Marx onward. In fact, Postone mentions almost no one who has escaped from „traditional Marxism”. Hilferding, Lukacs, I.I. Rubin, Sweezy, Maurice Dobb, Ronald Meek, Joan Robinson, Ernest Mandel, Henryk Grossmann, Oskar Lange, G.A. Cohen, Lucio Coletti, Horkheimer, Adorno, Friedrich Pollock, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Marcuse and Habermas all come in for their licks. Others, less ensconced in the academic universe to which Postone addresses himself, from Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg by way of CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya (who published the first English translations of the 1844 Manuscripts in their mimeographed militant newsletter in 1947), to Amadeo Bordiga, Jacques Camatte or Guy Debord, barely merit a nod, or none at all.

What is this „traditional Marxism”? It focused excessively on „private ownership”, the „market”, and „distribution”. It had a „transhistorical” view of labor, seeing labor both before and after capitalism in terms that are only appropriate for capitalism, thereby repeating classical political economy's „eternalization” of capitalist social relations. It saw Marx as a completion of the labor theory of value of Smith and Ricardo, rather than a radical break with that theory; it talked of „political economy” rather than the critique of political economy (Marx's sub-title for *Capital*). Traditional Marxism criticized capitalist society „from the standpoint of labor”, as if labor were something „extrinsic” to capitalism, rather than critiquing the „constituting” role of labor as something unique to capitalism, and something to be abolished. „Traditional Marxism”, for Postone, imagined its task to be that of freeing industrial production from capitalist social relations rather than seeing industrial production itself as a capitalist social relationship. It overemphasized, for Postone, „class struggle” and exploitation as the core of Marx's critique. It advocated the emancipation of the proletariat rather than the dissolution of the proletariat. In some instances, it had a Feuerbachian understanding of man in capitalism as alienated from an essence to be realized in socialism. It saw capitalism strictly as nineteenth-century liberal capitalism, based on the market and private property, and was thus unable to adequately critique „real existing socialism” (what some of us called Stalinism). It over-emphasized the anarchic (for Postone, market-driven) side of capitalism, and argued that atomized individuals would finally be „socially mediated” in socialism, in contrast to capitalism. Traditional Marxism saw its goal as a new form of „distribution” in a society still ruled by wage labor, value, and commodity production. It understood the proletariat as the „universal class” which „comes to itself” in socialism. It imagined socialism as something whereby the working class would „reappropriate” something of which it had been „expropriated”. Traditional Marxism was unable to deal with the growing importance of scientific knowledge in the capitalist production process. It saw history as linear. It focused on

¹ The following is more a „probe”, intended to spark discussion of an important if flawed book, than a comprehensive review.

„crisis” but did not „address qualitative historical changes in the identity and nature of the social groupings expressing discontent and opposition” (p. 13). The „socialism” articulated by traditional Marxism is today „unconvincing”, as „central planning” and „state (or public) ownership”.

Everyone, today, can recognize a large swath of truth in some, perhaps most of the above characterizations. Not too many people miss Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China or the „Third World socialist” regimes that emerged from the period of decolonization, in which, along with the largely defunct mass socialist and communist parties of Europe, different variants of „traditional Marxism” had their heyday. Fewer still look to surviving relics such as North Korea or Cuba. The most radical elements of the 1960’s and 1970’s upsurge, from Socialism or Barbarism in France, Eastern European „Marxist humanism” (Kolakowski, the Yugoslav Praxis group), the Situationists, or the Italian workerists mainly rejected these regimes as viscerally as they rejected the (Keynesian) Labour and Social Democratic welfare states of the 1945-1975 period.

But Postone’s critique goes much farther. For him, „traditional Marxism” encompasses not merely the nearly forgotten ideologues of the „planning state”, east, west or south, but many of the currents which emerged from the 1950’s to 1970’s as a self-styled break with the statist currents: Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, Lukacs’ History and Class Consciousness, the Frankfurt School’s critique of „instrumental rationality”, and much of the Hegel renaissance. While these latter developments undermined the old bone-hard „materialism” of Stalinism and Social Democracy, they argued for a view of the working class as an historical „subject” that was supposed to achieve the „subject-object identical” with the existing productive apparatus. Not good enough, in Postone’s view. These currents, strengthened by the popularization of the 1840’s Marx and the recovery of the centrality of the Hegel- Marx relationship, still agreed in important ways with the less Hegelianized traditional Marxists about socialism as control of the existing industrial apparatus, whether by nationalization and planners or by workers’ councils (the latter being an apolitical utopia, in Postone’s view). They still believed in the working class as the revolutionary class. Postone’s perspective, on the contrary, is a „critique of labor in capitalism”, and „suggests that the working class is integral to capitalism rather than the embodiment of its negation” (p. 17). (Didn’t Herbert Marcuse in One-Dimensional Man, say the same thing 40 years ago, with less theoretical heavy-lifting than Postone?) Postone’s interpretation of „Marx’s material critical theory” argues that „what the Marxist tradition has generally treated affirmatively is precisely the object of critique in Marx’s later works” (p. 17). Marx’s analysis is not about any instrumental explanation of class „interests”. Postone sets out to focus rather on „value, abstract labor, the commodity and capital”. These latter are

„...categories of a critical ethnography of capitalist society taken from within—categories that purportedly express the basic forms of social objectivity and subjectivity that structure the social, economic, historical and cultural dimensions of life in that society, and are themselves constituted by determinate forms of social practice”. (p. 18)

Traditional Marxism, says Postone, has too often understood these categories as purely „economic”. Postone’s rendition of Marx’s „categorical analysis” asserts, rather, that value, abstract labor, the commodity and capital are „determinative of social being within capitalism”. Postone means to „dispense with evolutionary conceptions of history and with the notion that human life is based upon an ontological principle that ‘comes into its own’” (p. 20).

Much as I find Postone’s book vexing, I cannot deny that it is provocative and important, above all important to critique. It forced me to go back and verify what I thought I remembered from many „canonical” texts. Far from falling into a predictable track, it develops its argument with new turns almost up to the end of its 400 pages. It might be easy to summarize, as I have initially and briefly attempted, but it is extremely difficult to summarize meaningfully. Postone says he has grounded „this dialectic’s fundamental features on... an abstract logical level” (p. 302) and he is certainly right about that. But unlike the Grundrisse or Capital, wherein Marx employed a dialectic of the abstract AND the concrete, moving from what Postone calls Marx’s „categorical” unfolding of capital to historical material and back, Postone mentions the „real existing world” only in the briefest of passing nods. Grubbing in factory inspectors’ reports or the immanent critique of contemporary „economics” is not what he is about. One might be tolerant of this approach in light of the high level of abstraction required by Postone’s argument; such a level has its place. But Marx, unlike Postone, regarded communism as the the „real movement that abolishes existing conditions” (German Ideology),

the „real movement unfolding before our eyes” (Communist Manifesto), and was constantly taking pains to show the „real movement”—the working-class movement, pace Postone—in its immanent relationship to the „inverted world” of capital as he unfolded his categories. Postone, by contrast, makes the most sweeping judgements about the shortcomings of „traditional Marxism” and the working class, but has next to nothing to say about where, or even whom his „old mole” might be.

One rather quick way, albeit by a side entrance, into Postone’s abstract universe is his discussion of „really existing socialism”, the former Soviet Union and its progeny. Though not front and center in his book, it is one constant presence underpinning the „traditional Marxism” Postone wants to undo. After all, the question of „what went wrong in Russia” still hovers over any discussion today of the „crisis of Marxism”. Many of the „traditional Marxists” mentioned earlier busted their chops on the question of the nature of the Soviet Union. But while Postone’s ability to make use of the Grundrisse and Capital is far superior to that of the typical Frankfurt Schooler, in his discussion of „really existing socialism” (pp. 90-104) he relies exclusively on the writings of Frankfurt School economist Friedrich Pollock from the late 1930’s. Pollock called the Soviet system „state capitalism” but was unable to discern the operation of the law of value in its dynamic. Like virtually everyone in the apocalyptic late 1930’s who attempted to critically understand the Soviet Union using Marxist categories, Pollock found the newly-emergent system difficult to grasp. He was hardly alone. Like many others, Pollock’s main frame of reference on what constituted capitalism was 19th century liberal capitalism, and not finding it in the Soviet Union, but not finding „emancipation” either, Pollock concluded that the Soviet system had abolished value in the Marxist sense, but had replaced it with regimented bureaucratic planning, and not the triumph of the working class. From this (Stalinist) experience and from fascism, Pollock embraced a „pessimism” about any possible positive supersession of capitalism, a pessimism that was taken over by the Frankfurt School generally, Horkheimer and Adorno first of all. They are of course welcome to their pessimism, and they had plenty of company in embracing it at „midnight in the century”, as Victor Serge called those years. But why, more than fifty years later, is Postone attempting to overcome his own Frankfurt School lacunae with an exclusive focus on what THESE people concluded about Stalinist Russia? In the same years as Pollock, Lucien Laurat, Leon Trotsky, Max Shachtman, and C.L.R. James were attempting, within a Marxist framework, to understand whether „really existing socialism” was a class or a caste society, and of what type („degenerated workers’ state”, state capitalist, „bureaucratic collectivist”); a few years later, Raya Dunayevskaya wrote her first article demonstrating the operation of the law of value (a term, revealingly, that Postone never uses) in the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, important further Marxist (or, perhaps, „traditional Marxist”) contributions on the question of „state capitalism” were written by James, Dunayevskaya, Paul Mattick, Sr., Cornelius Castoriadis, Tony Cliff, Rita di Leo, Pierre Naville, David Rousset, and Amadeo Bordiga (the early Kuron and Modzelewski opted for the bureaucratic collectivist analysis, and Hillel Ticktin developed a critique sui generis). These people and this work do not exist for Postone and his academic interlocutors, so the reader is left with Pollock’s (and Horkheimer’s, and Adorno’s) pessimism over some major impasse of the seemingly main thread of „traditional Marxism”. East Berlin 1953? Hungary and Poland 1956? Poland 1970 and 1980-81, arguably setting the stage for the final demise of „really existing socialism”? Since Postone believes that the working class is not and was never Marx’s historical „Subject”, none of these theoreticians or messy historical episodes intrude into the „abstract logical level” of his dialectic. Following his demonstration of how the Frankfurt School founders got sidetracked by Pollock’s pessimism, grounded in „traditional Marxism”, the sole post-World War II theoretician Postone considers (and rejects) as representing a worthy attempt to overcome this pessimism is Juergen Habermas, who gets thirty-five pages of critique (he, too, is unable to fully free himself from traditional Marxism’s belief in the working class). And the post-1945 work of Castoriadis, James, Dunayevskaya, Panzieri, the early Tronti and the early Negri, theorizing the postwar revolt against the assembly line in France, Italy, Britain and the U.S.? And the consequences of that revolt (from the 1955-1973 period) which (among other things) is the historical moment that produced Postone, and against which the last 30 years of history must be understood as an extended counter-offensive by capital?

Habermas gets thirty-five pages, but such empirical, „positivist” considerations don’t make it onto Postone’s „abstract logical level” and don’t merit even a mention. „Many interpreters”, he writes, „have proceeded too quickly to the analytic level of immediate

concrete social reality” (p. 20); this is decidedly not Postone’s problem. His corrective is instead to virtually ignore such reality.

Such criticism should not distract attention from Postone’s serious merits. The core of his analysis is drawn from the first part of vol. I of *Capital*, and Marx’s discussion of concrete labor and abstract labor, the latter being the basis of value in Marx’s sense. Postone thinks that „traditional Marxism” has misconstrued this analysis, understanding „concrete labor” in a „physiological” „transhistorical” sense that sees labor’s role as something that existed prior to, and will exist after capitalism. What this „traditional Marxist” confusion misses, according to Postone, is the unique peculiarity of labor in capitalism, its „peculiarity” (*Eigentuemlichkeit*) in constituting the totality of society (to use his language), unlike labor’s role in any previous mode of production, and something to be overcome, rather than glorified. Postone sees capital as a set of „abstract social structures” which are „quasi-independent” and which condition BOTH abstract and concrete labor.

In some sense it can be said that Postone’s book comes down to a critique of most previous Marxists for not having read, or integrated, the so-called „Unpublished Chapter Six” of vol. I of *Capital*, which first became available only in the 1950’s, and only made it as an appendix of vol. I in the new 1976 Ben Fowkes English translation. In this (in fact remarkable) chapter, Marx analyzes a „formal subsumption of labor by capital” in which commodity exchange and then the entire capitalist valorization process invades and takes over previous production processes; this characterizes the (17th and 18th century) phases of cooperation and manufacture. This is followed, for Marx, by a „real subsumption of labor by capital”, the phase of heavy industry, in which capital forges a technology appropriate to itself, and reduces most labor to its completely interchangeable form of „abstract labor”. In the Unpublished Sixth Chapter, Marx is in effect saying that labor and technology in the phase of real subsumption (sometimes called real domination) is not something to which capitalist social relations are „extrinsic”, but rather that they are themselves capitalist social relations. This being the case, a „traditional Marxist” project of freeing this specifically capitalist technology and the labor conditioned by it is in effect a capitalist utopia, whereas true emancipation implies the critique and supersession of both such technology and such labor.

About the latter, Postone is dead right. He lays the foundation for a radical critique of existing technology as well as of existing science as the „materialization of a social relationship”. If Postone had said only this, not to mention elaborating it with some empirical material, his book would be impeccable, though he might have mentioned authors such as the early Jacques Camatte who were saying the same thing 35 years ago. Unfortunately, Postone gets to the Unpublished Sixth Chapter only halfway through the book (p. 182), and he seems unaware that a whole literature, particularly in France, was going over much of the same ground from the early 1970’s onward.

This perceptive core, however, is written over with a number of other claims that are highly dubious. The most important is his attack on the idea of the working class as „subject”, the latter articulated by Lukacs first of all in the 20th century process of „recovery” of the Hegel-influenced Marx. Postone at times sounds almost like an Althusser with his talk of „quasi-independent” „abstract social structures” which become a quasi-autonomous Subject. Postone makes far too much of one passage in vol. I of *Capital* (*Capital*, vol. I (1976) p. 255) in which Marx does call value the „Subject”, but he rides roughshod over a whole different side of the book, including passages of the selfsame Unpublished Ch. 6.²

That side is Marx’s analysis of the „inverted world” (*verkehrte Welt*), which he takes over and transforms from Hegel and Feuerbach, and which is a thread in his work from the 1844 Manuscripts to the Grundrisse and *Capital* to *Theories of Surplus Value*. It is characteristic of Postone’s presentation that when (p. 137) he quotes the famous „Trinity” passage from the concluding part of vol. III, he quotes only:

„Capital-profit (or better still capital-interest) land-ground rent, labor-wages, this economic trinity as the connection between the components of value and wealth in general and its sources, completes the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the reification of social relations, and the immediate coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social specificity,” (pp. 968-969 of the 1981 Fernbach translation)

² Postone further seems unaware that Marx removed that very passage from the French edition of vol. I of *Capital* under the impact of the Commune, and the last edition of *Capital* Marx himself oversaw personally. Most 20th-century readers outside the French-speaking world know *Capital* from the 1890 4th German edition which was still the basis of the new (1976) English translation.

not indicating that the final part quoted ends in a colon, not a period, and that it continues:

„the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things.”

The original German says

„die verzauberte, verkehrte und auf den Kopf gestellte Welt wo Monsieur le Capital und Madame la Terre als soziale Charakter und zugleich unmittelbar als blosse Dingen ihren Spuk treiben” (Berlin 1975, p. 838)

where we see that Fernbach in turn has mistranslated the crucial philosophical term „verkehrte” as „distorted” and not „inverted”, thereby (inadvertently or not) burying the Hegel-Feuerbach allusion, and even more remarkably, totally omits the phrase „ihren Spuk treiben”, which the old English translation at least bothered to render, not implausibly, as „do their ghost-walking” (New York 1967).

The absence, in Postone’s book, of attention to the centrality of „inversion” (Verkehrung) in Capital and in Theories of Surplus Value is another expression of the flawed character of his book. Marx’s work is a phenomenology of the self-abolition of the proletariat, the latter being the commodity form of labor power. Postone is certainly right that „traditional Marxism” by and large did not see this, and glorified the working class and the industry produced by capitalism as a healthy substratum to be „freed” in „socialism”. But that said, Marx’s focus was always on the self-emancipation of the proletariat. What else were he and Engels doing in the First International? What else shines through Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune?

Remaining in his lofty (but admittedly indispensable) realm of abstraction, seemingly oblivious to the concrete history of the „real movement that abolishes existing conditions” as the force which drives the evolution of its inverted form, capital, Postone only gets it half right. He makes capital the subject of history, and fails to come up with a subject that will go beyond it.