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Is Marx's critique of capitalism still valid?

Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory,
by Moishe Postone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993),.

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The meaning of the new reality which has emerged with the collapse of the Communist regimes, the decline of socialist movements worldwide and the alleged move from a „Fordist“ model of standardized mass production to a „post-industrial information era“ has confounded thinkers on both the Left and Right. Reality has changed so fast and unexpectedly that many feel as if the floor has come out from under them. Yet most pundits agree on one point: that Marx's critique of capitalist production has become increasingly irrelevant.

The value of this book, written by a critical theorist influenced by the Frankfurt School, is that it takes the exact opposite approach. Moishe Postone argues that we are now facing the living embodiment of what Marx traced out theoretically in his *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.

Postone's approach centers on a critique of the central premise of what he calls „traditional Marxism“: the notion that private property and the market are the defining features of capitalism. This, he shows, was not Marx's view at all.

To Marx the defining feature of capitalism is that labor assumes the form of value. The value-form of labor does not depend on the market or private property, but rather on the reduction of the concrete dimension of labor to an abstract, routinized kind of activity through the medium of socially necessary labor time in the production process. Whether surplus-value is appropriated by the state or the market is of secondary importance; capitalism exists wherever labor becomes reduced to an abstract, value-creating activity.

Capitalism's trajectory is therefore to assume; evermore impersonal and abstract forms of domination. The emergence of a high-tech Western capitalism increasingly characterized by „virtual reality“ is the media, arts and political life can thus be seen as a logical outcome of the value-form of labor traced out by Marx.

The growth of abstract forms of domination, Postone notes, reaches the point where capitalism can no longer be directly controlled by either private entrepreneurs or the state. In this sense, „far from demonstrating the victory of capitalism over socialism, the recent collapse of 'actually existing socialism' could be understood as signifying the collapse of the most rigid, vulnerable and oppressive form of state-interventionist capitalism.“

Role of Labor in Society

To Postone the *reason* so many view the market and private property as defining features of capitalism is that they have what he calls „transhistorical“ view of labor

By this he means that „Marxists“ have taken for granted that labor as an instrumental activity, into which all social relations are ultimately dissolved, is the natural, species-essence of humanity – when such labor actually characterizes *capitalism* alone. Only in capitalism, he insists, does labor become the medium through which all social relations must pass.

This is because only in capitalism does labor have a dual character, as expressed in the division between concrete and abstract labor. As concrete labor becomes pounded into abstract labor through socially necessary labor time, an undifferentiated, abstract, „universal“ form of activity emerges which defines all forms of human interaction.

Therefore, those „Marxists“ who pose industrial labor as the essence of socialism unknowingly elevate what Marx viewed as the core of capitalism into the „principle“ of the „new society.“

While Postone's critique of those who fail to grasp the historic spe-

cificity of Marx's concept of value-producing labor – which ranges from orthodox Marxists to non-Marxists like Habermas – is on target, it is hardly original. Marxist-Humanists long ago showed that labor assumes the form of value only in capitalism.

But Postone goes further, arguing that *any* effort to pose labor as a socially constitutive activity *necessarily* leads to posing the market and private property as the defining features of capitalism. But this gets him into trouble with Marx, beginning with the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844.

In 1844 Marx posed alienated labor as the hallmark of capitalism. Yet he also spoke of labor in a second, nonalienated sense: as „conscious, purposeful activity,“ which he called humanity's „species-being.“ Since Marx posed labor as a socially constitutive activity independent of the capitalist value-form, Postone accuses him of having a „transhistorical“ view of labor in 1844 which he later dispensed with in *Capital*.

But Postone here falls into a logical contradiction. If „transhistorical“ views of labor necessarily lead to posing private property and the market as the defining features of capitalism, then Marx's „transhistorical“ view of labor in 1844 must mean he did so too. Yet he clearly did not. Marx made it crystal clear in 1844 that private property and the market is a *result* of alienated labor, not the other way around.

Marx's position in 1844 was no different than in *Capital*, where he also referred to labor as „purposeful activity“ and „the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature.“ In both 1844 and *Capital* Marx was distinguishing between two kinds of labor. One is the instrumental kind of labor so evident in capitalism, where everything is reduced to „having.“

The other is the unfoldment of the richness of human sensuousness. „The forming of the five senses,“ Marx wrote in 1844, „Is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.“ In *this* sense „for socialist man the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labor.“

This notion of labor refers neither to an ahistoric human: essence; nor to an: „instrumental“ mode of labor which „comes into its own“ under capitalism. It rather refers to how alienated labor is confronted by the subjectivity of the corporeal, sensuous individual who is in need „of a totality of human manifestations of life.“

Marx's concept of humanity's „species-being“ is the conceptual lens for grasping what escapes those whose minds are imprinted by the commodity-form – the formation, in the struggle *against* alienation, of the *humanism* of the laborer in her/his effort to become *whole* through „conscious, purposeful activity.“

Yet it is precisely this dimension which Postone seeks to remove from Marxism. He is so overburdened with the way „traditional Marxism“ has fetishized relations of distribution by failing to grasp the historic specificity of value-creating labor that he wants to eliminate any notion of labor as a socially constitutive activity – even when it contains a vision of new human relations. As a result we get a subject-less „imminent critique“ which, in the name of avoiding the errors of „traditional Marxism,“ shares with it an aversion to confronting the actual human dimension.

Capitalism without a subject

This is expressed in Postone's view that Marx did not root his categories either in class struggle or in the worker as subject of revolution. He even assumes that posing the worker as subject necessarily entails a „transhistorical“ view of labor which fetishizes the market and private property!

Postone makes this unexamined assumption by equating the proletariat with the alienated form of its laboring activity. Since the proletariat cannot be separated from the value-form of its labor, he argues, to critique capitalism from the standpoint of the proletariat is to pose the content of the value-form as the aim of liberation. It apparently has not occurred to Postone that there is a difference between the content of the value-form and the human

content of the laborer who breaks from it. Nor has it occurred to him that at historic turning points workers have challenged the very mode of labor in centering their struggle on the question, „What kind of labor should man/woman perform?“

Postone sees none of this, for class struggle to him is only concerned with the unequal *distribution* of products of labor. He removes class from any *internal* connection to the value categories and then tries to read this into Marx, by „reinterpreting“ *Capital* through the eyes of Marx's *Grundrisse*.

But Marx's *Capital* is very different from the *Grundrisse*. Though it is a key work, the *Grundrisse* was written in the quiescent 1850s when the masses were not in motion; therefore, the role of revolutionary subjectivity is not as tightly tied into the value categories as in *Capital*, which was written under the impact of the Civil War in the U.S. and the struggles to shorten the working day.¹

Yet Postone makes no distinction between *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. He centers his approach on a passage of the *Grundrisse* where Marx spoke of how the replacement of workers by machines reaches the point where „Labor no longer appears to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process...instead of being its chief actor.“

In the 1960s Herbert Marcuse used this passage to argue that the replacement of workers by automated production means we have entered a „one-dimensional“ society. To his credit, Postone rejects Marcuse's approach, arguing that capitalism remains a system fraught with internal instability and crisis.

Nevertheless, Postone's interpretation of this passage shares a defect common to Marcuse's position: he thinks Marx is talking about the laws of existing capitalism, when Marx is in fact discussing the effects of „the automaton“ when production is no longer based on value. By confusing Marx's discussion of „a higher phase of communism“ wherein freedom arises „outside the sphere of material production“ with the laws of existing society, Postone thinks he has found confirmation for his view that Marx did not pose proletarian subjectivity as internal to the law of motion of modern society.

A negative dialectic

Though it appears only in the form of a „cursory outline,“ Postone tries to ground his argument in a view of the dialectic. He especially focuses on Hegel's concept of the „Absolute.“ To Postone Hegel's „Absolute“ is that which unfolds as the result of its own development; it is the self-moving substance which „grounds itself.“ It is therefore „subject“ – a self-referential, self-grounded entity.

Postone notes that Marx saw capital as a self-moving substance which likewise „grounds itself,“ since it is „self-expanding value“: „Capital, as analyzed by Marx, is a form of social life with metaphysical attributes – those of the absolute subject.“ He concludes that Marx used Hegel's Absolutes to say that *capital*, not the worker, is the „subject.“

This implies the rejection, not just of the proletariat, but also the subjectivity of *philosophy*. Postone notes that capital, as self-expanding value, is a „totalizing“, abstract universal which absorbs human contingency into itself. Since philosophy centers on universal categories of cognition, to Postone it is likewise a „totalizing,“ abstract universal. He therefore infers that the very *idea* of a total philosophy expresses the capitalist value-form.

Though he differs with him in other respects, Postone's peculiar reading of „dialectics“ rests upon a direct application of Georg Lukàcs' thesis, articulated in *The Young Hegel*, that „externalization“ or alienation is the „central philosophical theme“ of Hegel's dialectic and Marx's appropriation of it. But there are major problems with this position. Though alienation is a cent-

¹ Raya Dunayevskaya's tracing of the impact of these and other struggles on the writing of *Capital* is indispensable for comprehending its dialectic. See *Marxism and Freedom, from 1776 until today*, especially Part III: „Marxism: the Unity of Theory and Practice.“

ral theme in Hegel, no less central is his concept of the transcendence of alienation.

Yet, Postone, like Lukàcs before him, ignores this dimension of Hegel in order to argue that Hegel's Absolutes express the logic of abstract, value-creating labor under capitalism. The deficiencies of this one-sided reading of Hegel become clear when Postone tries to impose it upon the categories of Capital.

The abstract and the concrete

We see this from chapter 1 of *Capital*, where Marx discussed the dual nature of the commodity form. The commodity-form is no mere "mental abstraction", let alone a "nothingness". As the unity-in-difference of use-value and exchange-value, the commodity-form contains the material body of value as well as the abstraction of value from all materiality.

Marx expressed this in his „Marginal Notes on Wagner“: „According to Mr. Wagner, use-value and exchange value are to be derived at once from the concept of value, not as with me, from a concretum, the commodity ... neither 'value' nor 'exchange value' is the subject of my work, but rather the commodity.“

The importance of this lies in the fact that although the value of a commodity has nothing to do with its physical properties – since its value is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor time needed to produce it – the commodity-form is not utterly lacking in materiality. As the unity of use-value and value, which expresses the unity of concrete and abstract labor, the commodity-form contains an internal tension between a „logic of abstraction“ and concrete contingency. By making the commodity-form, and not value, the subject matter of *Capital*, Marx was able to trace out abstract forms of value-creating labor without ever losing sight of the side of the concrete human dimension.

This comes out in the open in the famous section on the „Fetishism of Commodities.“ The reduction of concrete to abstract labor reaches the point where living labor seems detachable from the living person; we are in the realm of the „non-sensuous sensuous.“ The value-form now assumes a „ghostly“ character, starts to „dance on its own initiative,“ and becomes an „autonomous figure endowed with a life of its own,“ said Marx. With commodity fetishism we have reached capitalism's self-referential, self-grounded „Absolute.“

Yet precisely because the secret of the fetish lies in the commodity-form itself, in the „peculiar social character of the labor which produces it,“ the all-enveloping mist of commodity fetishism can only be penetrated, Marx insisted, by „freely associated labor.“ In countering the value-form to a totally different kind of self-referential, self-grounded activity which emerges from within to uproot it – “freely associated labor” – Marx splits Hegel's Absolute into two. As Raya Dunayevskaya showed, this is both a return to Hegel and a *break* from him, as „freely associated labor“ is an „Absolute“ based not on a dehumanized „logic of abstraction“ but rather on concrete, human corporeal *sensuousness*.²

But just as Postone sees the dialectic one-sidedly, as only expressive of alienation, so he reads commodity fetishism equally one-sidedly by not even mentioning Marx's projection of „freely associated labor.“

Postone knows full well that the concrete, use-value side of the contradiction does not vanish in Marx's tracing out of the value-form. He also knows that workers rise up in revolt against capitalism. Yet Postone views workers' subjectivity as becoming fully subsumed by capital, since their struggles at the point of production forces capitalism to replace living labor

² For Dunayevskaya's discussion of the impact of Hegel's dialectic on Marx's *Capital*, see „A Decade of Historic Transformation: From the Grundrisse to Capital“ in *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, as well as her expanse of writings on the subject in *The Raya Dnnayevsltaya Collection – Marxist-Humanism: A Half Century of its World Development*, available on microfilm from the Wayne State Labor Archives in Detroit, Mich.

with labor-saving devices which ultimately makes the proletariat superfluous.

This especially comes out in his discussion of the chapter on Cooperation. Marx here posed the „cooperative plan of-labor“ against the „despotic plan of capital.“ Postone tries to get around this clear reference to human subjectivity by saying Marx was referring only to an early stage of capitalism when direct human labor still predominates in the production process.

But Postone doesn't mention that Marx returned to the cooperative form of labor at the apex of *Capital* – the section on the „absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.“ Marx here showed that the drive of capital to reduce the relative proportion of living labor to machines at the point of production reaches the point where living labor becomes expendable. But instead of erasing all forms of human subjectivity, Marx showed that capital is now confronted by the cooperative form of labor in the form of the unemployed, who rise up in revolt.

Remarkably, Postone has not a word to say about this section and doesn't even mention the two categories central to it – constant capital and variable capital. It is strange that a work aiming to present the trajectory of *Capital* has nothing to say about two of the only three theoretic original categories Marx ever created.³

It is also strange that the book has nothing to say about so crucial a feature of today's high-tech capitalism as permanent mass unemployment, „contingent“ work forces and new revolts of the unemployed, as seen in the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992. Postone seems to ignore these issues because they get in the way of his contention that class struggle is not internal to the value-form.

He is so anxious to get rid of subjectivity that he writes, „the women's movements and minority movements should not be understood as a development that points beyond capitalist society ... the form of universality they have helped constitute is one that, for Marx [!!] remains tied to the value-form of mediation.“

If no existing social group can be considered the agent of liberation, then how do we get beyond capitalism? Postone brazenly proclaims, „the possibility of a qualitatively different future society is rooted in the potential of 'dead labor'“ (p. 357).

Basing himself again on the *Grundrisse*, Postone says the „inner contradiction“ of the law of value is that capital must reduce the necessary labor time needed for producing commodities to an absolute minimum. This means it must increase productivity by adding more and more „dead labor,“ such as automated machinery, to the production process. As necessary labor time falls, surplus labor time rises. Yet capital's drive to reduce necessary labor time squeezes the system's only source of value – living labor – to a minimum. By reducing living labor to abstract, homogenous *universal* labor time, „dead labor“ produces both systemic instability and „new needs and capacities“ which can point us beyond capitalism.

But since Postone rejects the notion of subject, he refrains from conceptualizing how these „new needs“ become embodied in human forces which can negate the system. He leaves us only with an abstract declaration about the difference between „what is and what could be.“ With the concept of revolution unable to flow from the analysis, we are thrown back into the quagmire of the Kantian divide between „is“ and „ought.“

The divide of consciousness

Postone's limitations are as instructive as his contributions, for they show that our high-tech society has created a divide in consciousness not unlike what characterized the emergence of automation two generations ago.

³ The only three categories which Marx took credit for creating were labor power, constant capital and variable capital; he refused to take credit for the concept of surplus value on the basis that it was implicit in Ricardo. Though Postone discusses the concept of labor power, he has precious little to say about Marx's split in the category of labor between labor as activity (living labor) and the capacity to labor (labor power as a commodity).

Automation created a divide in thought – between planners, bureaucrats and radicals who viewed automation as „absorbing“ proletarian subjectivity, on one side, and the emergence of new forms of human resistance rooted in the question „what kind of labor should man/woman perform,“ on the other. Our high-tech world is also creating a new divide – between those so swept up in the increasingly abstract forms of social domination that they proclaim „the death of the subject,“ on one side, and the still-uncertain search for new human beginnings from out of this alienated reality, on the other.

But what is „new“ today is that the rejection of the concept of subject leads straight to the death of the very idea of philosophy. Because we live in a retrogressive period when the subject seems quiescent, this threatens to completely assimilate thought itself into the structure of the reified world.

The test of any revolutionary theory is to grasp the newly-emerging forms of domination inseparable from the elucidation, articulation and, indeed construction of its dialectical opposite: the concretum of human powers which the self-movement of capital strives to subsume. That this work fails this test only emphasizes the need for the philosophic labor which has barely begun.