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After Marxism
 Rezension zu:
Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination
A Reinterpretation of Marx' Critical Theory
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Should Marx be given yet another chance? Is there anything left to gain by returning to texts whose earnest exegesis has occupied countless interpreters, both friendly and hostile, for generations? Has Marx's credibility survived the global debacle of those regimes and movements who drew inspiration from his work, however poorly they understood it? Is it premature to conclude that we have entered a new era in which post-Marxism has joined a host of other „post-“phenomena as transitional bridges to a future whose outlines are still only dimly visible?

The answer to all of these questions proposed by Moishe Postone's remarkable new book is a resounding and unapologetic yes. Without worrying about patching up the alleged holes in Marx with arguments from psychoanalysis, structuralism, rational choice theory, deconstruction or other possible alternatives, he argues that virtually all the resources are there in Marx's own writings for a viable critique of modern society. Without agonizing over the unity and coherence of Marx's thought or entertaining Alvin Gouldner's claim that there are at least two Marxisms, critical and scientific, with equal claim to textual legitimation, he provides a strong reading – largely focused on *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* – of what he considers the essential message of Marx's work as a whole. Not even the now familiar distinction between the young and mature Marx survives his desire to present „Marx's critique of political economy in as logically coherent and systematically powerful way as possible.”¹ Postone's ultimate goal is no less than the laying of a firm theoretical foundation for a detailed account of a global capitalism that is still vulnerable to Marxist critique.

Yet for all of Postone's unapologetic fidelity to the letter and spirit of Marx's work, there is nothing of the sectarian or the dogmatic in his reinterpretation. Reasoned arguments rather than appeals to textual authority, close consideration of alternative positions rather than dismissive polemics, painstaking expositions rather than promissory notes characterize a work that will enlighten and stimulate even those who may ultimately remain unconvinced by its conclusions. Although it is by no means easy reading because of its uncompromisingly high level of argumentation (and tendency to repeat its main points excessively), *Time, labor, and Social Domination* is worth the effort for anyone still uneasy with the thought that late capitalism must forever be the best socioeconomic solution to the dilemmas of human existence.

Postone's basic strategy is *reculer pour mieux sauter*. That is, he willingly abandons much of what normally passes for Marxist theory in order to salvage a core of defensible ideas. What he terms „traditional Marxism“ not only encompasses standard Second International, Leninist, Trotskyist and even most Marxist Humanist versions, but also serves, he argues, as the (strawman) target of pessimistic critics of Marx like Friedrich Pollock and more optimistic ones like Jürgen Habermas. He identifies it with „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“ (7). Following from this premise, he argues, is an image of socialism as the collective ownership of means of production that are no longer in the service of a dominating class, but which are still continuous with the industrialized model that characterizes high capitalism. Not surprisingly, the „actually existing socialism“ of the former Soviet bloc was, in his eyes, far less of a break with capitalism that it purported to be. In fact, its reliance on the centralized planning of a large-scale industrial economy should be called „the most rigid, vulnerable, and oppressive form of state-interventionist capitalism“ (14) instead of a true alternative.

¹ Postone 19. (Hereafter, all references will be given parenthetically within the text.) If there is any distinction, he argues, it is not between a youthful humanist and a mature idealistic Marx, but rather between one who thinks in more universalistic categories and one who is more rigorously historical and self-reflexive about his own historical specificity.

The traditional reading of Marxism, Postone contends, seriously misrepresents Marx's attitude towards labor, value and history. Rather than holding that labor is the transhistorical source of value, a source which is merely alienated under capitalism, Marx identified capitalism precisely with a system in which labor – alienated or not, „dead“ or „living“ is a subordinate issue – has become the primary constituter of the social world. Rather than believing that exchange value is the capitalist surrogate for the real value created by labor, Marx understood the very category of „value“ as an expression of capitalist social relations. Rather than seeing history as an inevitable and automatic unfolding of a universal law of development, Marx understood such law-like regularities as themselves a function of the capitalist form of social organization, in which all relations are yoked together in a totalizing system, indeed, any transhistorical claims were foreign to Marx's critique of capitalism, which remained doggedly focused on just dial historical formation and no other. Accordingly, „totality“ was not a positive term in his vocabulary signifying a theoretical grasp of all of history or a normative goal to be realized in the socialist future, but rather a negative term expressing the capitalist drive to subordinate otherness to the rule of the same.

Genuine socialism, Postone understands Marx to be saying, can only be said to have arrived when labor no longer serves as the central social motor of a totalized system that posits something called „value“ (use, exchange, *or* labor) as its standard of worth. Marx's critique was far more fundamental than had been imagined by friendly interpreters like Maurice Dobb, Joan Robinson or Paul Sweezy, who read him as little more than a left Ricardian. Postone's Marx is the author of a radical critique of political economy, including its labor theory of value, not a critical version *of* political economy.

Because of his understanding of the need to overcome the domination of labor, Marx also knew that the proletariat, as the laboring class far excellence of capitalism, cannot be the grave-digger of capitalism, insofar as it is itself a function of the very hypertrophy of labor that characterizes the system it seeks to overcome. However understandable it may have been to enhance the dignity of labor at a time when workers were being increasingly exploited and their actual immiseration – defined by Postone as their work growing „one-sided and empty“ (347) – was rising, it is nonetheless wrong to transform that class into the saviors of mankind. So-called praxis philosophers, who sought a *point d'appui* for their critique in the activity of a potentially universal class, were thus misguided. Freedom *from* labor as the mediating motor of society, not the freedom *of* specific kind of non-alienated, social labor will mark the end of the capitalist order. Not the proletariat as the new expressive meta-subject of history, as Georg Lukács had thought in *History and Class Consciousness*, but rather the end of all such abstractly universal meta-subjects will spell its transcendence. „Overcoming alienation, in this view, involves the *abolition of the self-grounding, self-moving Subject* (capital) and the form of labor that constitutes and is constituted by structures of alienation“ (224).

Concomitantly, the more equitable redistribution of the outcome of modern industrial production cannot be enough to signal the new age: modern industrial production is not extrinsic to capitalism, but rather partakes of its ultimate project of valorization. Nor can the reappropriation of *surplus* value by the working class transform the system, since value itself is the problem. For the historical page to be turned, Postone's Marx claims, the capitalist mode of industrial production itself must be undone. The fundamental contradiction of that system is not between private appropriation and socialized production, but rather „*within* the sphere of production itself, whereby that sphere includes the immediate process of production *and* the structure of social relations constituted by labor in capitalism“ (35). Within capitalist production, labor acquires a double character, at once concrete and abstract, particular and universal, which then determines the antinomic structure of the social totality as a whole. It is apparent in the commodity form of the market place and the political form of bourgeois democracy, both of which reveal a split between concrete-material and abstract-social dimensions. To privilege one or the other is to succumb to fetishism, which manifests itself, *inter alia*, in the reduction of abstract labor to an instrumental tool for the endless maximization of profit (the increase of value), the reification of commodities as „things“ devoid of social mediation, and the substitution of abstract markers of exchange (money) for real wealth. This fetishism is evident in the epistemological dualisms, most famously those of Kant, they have plagued bourgeois thought.

Perhaps the most fundamental expression – indeed source – of the double-sided, fetishistic character of labor under capitalism occurs on the basic level of its temporality, a theme to which Postone devotes an especially acute chapter. The category of value, he argues, is created when abstract, invariable, mechanically homogenized time is split off from the lived time of concrete production. The latter, Postone hastens to add, is merely the reverse of the for-

mer and should not be fetishized as a fully realized form of temporal experience in itself (or, as with Lukács, turned into a romanticized version of „historical“ as opposed to mechanical time). Such a differentiation cannot be understood, as it has been by commentators like David Landes, merely in terms of new technical inventions, such as the escapement clock of the thirteenth century, but as a result of social changes in the organization of work and urban life in combination with that technology. The result is the uncoupling of a measure of worth in terms of abstract units of the time spent in laboring (value) from a measure based on the use of the products produced (material wealth). Although money, the circulation of commodities, and even certain forms of capital (e.g. merchant) can be found at an earlier period, true capitalism begins only with the full-fledged emergence of value based on the abstraction of labor as a totalizing force.

Yet with that emergence also comes the germ of its demise. According to Postone's Marx, although increased productivity based on technological advances does not multiply the value of the labor expended, it does increase material wealth. Capitalism's central contradiction is thus „that value remains the determining form of wealth and of social relations in capitalism, regardless of developments in productivity; however, value also becomes increasingly anachronistic in terms of the material wealth-producing potential of the productive forces to which it gives rise“ (197). The proletariat also becomes anachronistic; although its labor remains the source of value, it is no longer important for the creation of material wealth.

Because this contradiction has not been resolved, Postone concludes, the system is still dynamic and prone to instability, providing a ground for resisting the pessimistic conclusion of those like the early Frankfurt School who saw only a one-dimensional, administered world replicating itself ad infinitum. An immanent critique of capitalism's dialectical contradictions, and not one that merely pity ideals against their betrayal in reality, is thus, despite everything, still possible. Whether or not it leads to class conflict, whether or not it produces a new historical agent eager to overthrow the system, the contradictory essence of capitalism remains in effect. There may not be a logic to history in general – indeed, Postone explicitly claims Marx rejects this idea – but there is one in the specific social formation called capitalism. Its outcome is an ever-intensifying tension between the „*potential*“ of the species-general capabilities that have been accumulated, and their existent, *alienated form* as constituted by the dialectic of the two dimensions of labor and of time“ (360).

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Even this hurried synopsis of Postone's much richer and more complicated argument will give some sense of its ambition and scope. It is no easy task to respond to it on the level of theoretical sophistication that it demands. One question that can quickly be answered, however, concerns the accuracy of his reading of Marx. It can be answered by simply by-passing it. Unless one is caught up in the increasingly tedious game of discerning intentions and relying on their authority in legitimating arguments, it is irrelevant whether or not Postone's Marx is the „real“ one. Doubtless textual evidence could be produced to show that Marx did count on the proletariat to challenge capitalism or really did hold to a transhistorical notion of labor, but I'm not sure the results would be particularly helpful in dealing with the theoretical issues Postone raises. Certainly, 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. The more pressing question, however, is whether or not Postone's version of Marx's ideas can survive on their own merit.

A number of fundamental issues must be addressed here. The first concerns the theme of dominating abstraction, which is central to Postone's reading of Marx. Capitalism is particularly pernicious, he tells us, because of its dual abstraction of temporality and labor, which then produces an alienated system of social relations controlling humanity from without like a metaphysical Subject. In addressing the claims of earlier theorists like Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who noted the relationship between abstract philosophy in Greece and the rise of coinage and commodities, he argues that only with modern capitalism does the domination of abstraction become genuinely total. In prior systems, he claims, social relations were more explicit and immediate. According to Marx, „capitalism's social relations are unique in that they do not appear to be social at all. The structure of relations constituted by commodity-determined labor undermines earlier systems of overt social ties without, however, replacing them with a similar system. Instead, what emerges is a social universe that Marx describes as one of personal independence in a context of objective dependence“ (259). As Postone puts it elsewhere, „capital-

ism differs fundamentally from other societies in that its characterizing social relations are not overt but are 'objectively' constituted and, hence, do not appear to be socially specific at all' (273). To give a final example: the crisis of capitalism, he claims, begins „when the alienated social totality that is greater than its parts could no longer be understood solely in terms of the individuals immediately involved in its constitution“ (336).

Is it the case, however, that earlier societies were not dominated by alienated abstraction, but instead more overtly revealed their social relations as constituted by individuals, or at least concealed them in less problematic ways? Although Postone's claim about the relative importance of abstraction in the Greece examined by Sohn-Rethel and modern capitalism is hard to gainsay, the existence of commodities, money, and abstract philosophy in the earlier society suggests only a difference in degree, not in kind. There are, moreover, other sources of abstraction, which may also dominate the humans subject to them, that Postone never adequately considers, perhaps because he does not see them as producing genuine domination. Certainly monotheism, whose invention is traditionally attributed to the Jews, provides a salient instance of abstraction with a vengeance. 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.

Nor can that no less fundamental human invention, language, which necessarily employs abstract signifiers to signify an infinity of different phenomena. Postone's critique of Habermas's linguistic turn accepts perhaps too easily the notion that language is primarily a medium of intersubjective communication, and neglects instead its inevitably abstracting function, its existence as an always already existing system no one has consciously constructed. His own stress on the reifying power of abstract labor prevents him from confronting head-on the implications of the linguistic theories that were so influential in the rise of structuralist and post-structuralist thought.

Postone's inclination to subordinate all forms of prior abstraction to those of capitalism – or at least to consider only capitalist abstraction as truly dominating – is perhaps nowhere as evident as in his brief consideration of Durkheim's dualistic sociology: „[Durkheim's] oppositions of society and the individual, soul and body, the abstract, general and the concrete particular – whereby only the first, abstract term of each opposition is understood as social – can be grasped as hypostatizations and projections of the commodity form“ (225). Although one might plausibly argue that Durkheim's polarity between social and non-social may reflect the dominant ideology of his day, itself somehow a reflection of commodification, his central distinction between the sacred and the profane cannot. Additionally, insofar as the sacred is a category of virtually all religions, it is hard to conclude that alienating differentiation is a function of capitalism alone.

The sacred, to be sure, may not be precisely equivalent to the abstract – indeed, in certain respects it is the opposite – but it does suggest that precapitalist social relations were less overt, less transparent, than Postone avers. In fact, the very category of „the social“ was not available for explicit thematization until the industrial revolution. Prior to that time, social relations were generally cast in natural or theological terms; what, after all, was the powerful metaphor of the Great Chain of Being, which was so fundamental to feudal society? To contend that only under capitalism does the alienation of the social first occur is thus problematic, although it may well be construed as occurring in new and more sinister ways.

If Postone's conceptualization of precapitalist societies can be questioned for underestimating their sources of abstraction, so too can his implied image of an alternative after capitalism. That image is implied because he tries to follow the traditional Marxist injunction against depicting the realm of freedom as the realm of necessity. Instead, he argues that the contradictions of capitalism point towards possibilities whose realization cannot be foreseen, „the *potential* of the species-general capabilities that have been accumulated“ (360). Still, Postone throws out sufficient hints to allow the reader to piece together a sense of what the post-capitalist order might be. First, he explicitly eschews a normative vantage point based on a romantic notion of immediate unity and plenitudinous de-differentiation, a society in which all work would become play. Although he wants the abolition of abstract social domination, he is also wary of its simple negation in the name of „life“ or „the concrete“ (the type of program that often fed romantic anti-capitalism of the right). Somehow it is the overcoming of the abstract/concrete dichotomy, as well as other comparable oppositions (agency/structure, subject/object, manual/mental labor, etc.), that is his tacit goal.

Second, although he wants to free Marx from the image of a productivist advocate of industrial development, he still accepts the idea that consciously and deliberately „making“ the

world is the definition of socialism. There is in his thinking none of that Heideggerian inflected invocation of „unworked,“ „inoperative“ or „unavowed“ communities that inspire other critics of productivism like Jean-Luc Nancy or Maurice Blanchot, none of the hostility to the valorization of *poesis* in the realm of action as in the work of an Arendt. „Marx’s conception of the overcoming of capitalism,“ Postone insists, „can be understood in terms of people gaining control over such quasi-objective developments, of processes of ongoing and accelerating social transformations, which they themselves have constituted“ (384).

Such „people“ are not, however, to be understood as a meta-subjekt, nor are they identified with any specific social group such as the proletariat; although Postone makes a few half-hearted gestures towards new social movements, he frankly acknowledges that „no existing social form represents the determinate negation of capitalism“ (358). As a result, the possibilities he detects in the contradictions of capitalism remain themselves problematically abstract, and what he says of Habermas – „it is not evident why the appeal to practical reason could be more than an exhortation“ (241) – can be turned against his own appeal to immanent contradictions that lack any practical embodiment. Showing that structural conditions for change exist is a far cry from explaining the motor of the change itself.

Indeed, there is a danger in assuming that such immanent contradictions necessarily or even tendentially produce the motivation – subjective or objective – for their overcoming. Marx’s opposition, as Postone presents it, between abstract value and material wealth operates on the premise that the latter is an absolute alternative of the former, that one is dominating and the other liberating. Yet might it not be possible to see them as mutually entailed, the one needing the other as its antithesis? Postone recognizes this in his discussion of the relationship between the varieties of value, in which he refuses to juxtapose use value or value based on labor as completely innocent alternatives to exchange value, but when it comes to the couplet value/wealth, the lesson is lost. Instead, „wealth“ becomes a marker for a postalienated state in which abstractions and differentiations would still exist, but in purely benign ways intended by conscious human action

In a re-cent commentary on the Utopian Marxism of Fredric Jameson, Steven Connor has made a point that could just as easily be directed to Postone: “In defining value [in Postone’s case, wealth] so utterly and absolutely in terms which go beyond exchange-value, Jameson is in fact evacuating it of all force or human relevance. Far from embodying the possibility of value as *such*, the universe of absolute incomparability which Jameson sees as coming before and, presumably, after the era of exchange-value, would in fact allow for no possibility of value at *all*, since a universe in which nothing could be compared with anything else by any shared scale of measurement would be a universe of absolute inertness, or valuelessness.”²

Put in the terms of Postone’s reading of Marx, some abstraction is necessary to provide the commensurability needed to make wealth a meaningful category. In political terms, the same point holds. According to Postone, postcapitalist democracy would require „the abolition of the abstract social compulsions rooted in the social forms grasped by the Marxian categories“ (41). Yet other abstractions would have to fill the gap, for how, after all, can any democracy operate without such categories as „the people,“ „popular sovereignty,“ „citizenship,“ „one person, one vote,“ etc., all of which require some sort of abstraction. Even the most doggedly anti-representative notion of direct democracy must depend on a radical egalitarianism that levels difference; Although such political abstractions may not have the dominating effect of that of labor, they too may inadvertently exclude and marginalize some groups deemed outside their reach.

In short, once the abstraction of labor is overcome, assuming it can be, what is to prevent other abstractions, perhaps equally totalizing, from merging to take its place? At one point in his argument, Postone chastises Habermas for failing „to allow for a distinction among forms of abstractions“ (257), a criticism which shows Postone recognizes the possibility that not all abstractions are to be subsumed under the domination of labor. In general, however, the version of Marx he presents relies on a strong notion of a master abstraction, that of labor, which determines or at least overwhelmingly mediates all the rest in capitalism. Although he successfully undermines the inverted implication of this claim – that in post-capitalist societies, unalienated, concrete labor will provide the basis for a liberated humanity – his argument still implies that a qualitative transformation will occur when capitalism’s master abstraction is somehow undone. Yet no amount of redescribing Marx’s project will avoid raising the question of whether or not others will arise in its place. The dialectic of abstract and concrete, like that of the other antinomies of bourgeois thought and life, may well be harder to master than

² Steven Connor. *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 153.

Marx imagined. Emancipation, whatever that exalted word may mean, may well entail freedom from the belief that we can ever gather in all the alienated abstractions that have defined human culture well before the onset of that totalizing meta-subject called capital. Postone has deftly alerted us to the larger issues raised by Marx's remarkable work, but he has opened more questions than he has answered. For Marx to remain a reliable guide into the next millennium, it is these questions that his self-critical defenders will have to address. Postone has cleared a great deal of ground, but the foundations for a new and stronger edifice are still to be constructed.