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## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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owes a lot to comments by Lars Stubbe, Hamburg and Christine Achinger, Nottingham, on earlier drafts, and the latter's unpublished presentation on Postone (Achinger 1999).

### 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

In commodity-determined society,<sup>5</sup> the same labour appears twice, as *concrete* useful labour and as *abstract* value-creating labour. Abstract human labour is considered the 'social substance'<sup>6</sup> common to all particular forms of productive activity. This overall commonality *appears* to be the 'expenditure of human energy in (any) physiological form',<sup>7</sup> 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'.<sup>8</sup>

*Concrete labour* is understood hereby as any intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion; *abstract labour* is the *function* of such labours

<sup>2</sup> Postone 1993, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Postone 1993, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Postone 1993, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> All the following is, of course, based on the concept of the commodity-form in Marx 1976, Chapter One.

<sup>6</sup> Postone 1993, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Wording by I.I. Rubin.

<sup>8</sup> Postone 1993, p. 157.

as *socially mediating* activities as specific to the capitalist mode of production, a mediation based on the assumed commensurability of all labour activities.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> In traditional social formations, such as feudalism, labour is *bonded*, or 'fettered', as protagonists and apologists of bourgeois revolutions complained.<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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,<sup>14</sup> 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'.<sup>15</sup> 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

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Postone 1993, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Postone 1993, p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> Postone 1993, p. 357.

<sup>13</sup> Postone 1993, p. 318.

<sup>14</sup> Postone 1993, p. 319.

<sup>15</sup> Postone 1993, p. 321.

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concrete, 'positive' classes as social strata.<sup>16</sup> 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',<sup>17</sup> 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*:<sup>18</sup> 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 '[w]hile class analysis remains basic to the Marxian critical project',<sup>19</sup> 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'.<sup>20</sup> 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,

<sup>16</sup> Postone 1993, p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Postone 1993, p. 323.

<sup>18</sup> Postone 1993, p. 321.

<sup>19</sup> Postone 1993, p. 153.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

and the productive, innovative, and virtuously “active” elements who sprang from the indigenous people’.<sup>21</sup> 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*)<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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’<sup>24</sup> 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,<sup>25</sup> is a crucial contribution to explaining some discriminatory practices and ideologies within the labour movement, such as socialist antisemitism.<sup>26</sup> The latter arise whenever and to the extent that the labour movement is not a proletarian

<sup>21</sup> Comninel 1987, p. 116; note the ‘racist’ implications of this concept.

<sup>22</sup> Marx 1976, p. 279.

<sup>23</sup> Comninel 1987, pp. 68–115.

<sup>24</sup> Comninel 1987, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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 ‘[b]ourgeois 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.<sup>27</sup> 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<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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

<sup>27</sup> Postone 1993, p. 195.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> 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'.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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'.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to see that Postone and Reinicke seem to equate here the concepts of 'class struggle' and 'revolutionary practice',<sup>34</sup> which implies that in this earlier text, 'class struggle' does not generically refer to the daily

<sup>30</sup> Postone 1993, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup> This is of course true only on a societal level; on the individual level, the opposite may be true.

<sup>32</sup> Postone and Reinicke 1974, p. 137.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> A term that does not reappear in Postone 1993.

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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'.<sup>35</sup> 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'.<sup>36</sup>

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'.<sup>37</sup> 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,

<sup>35</sup> Postone 1993, p. 163.

<sup>36</sup> Postone 1993, p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Postone 1993, p. 201.

true and mathematical time (which) flows equally without relation to anything external'.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup> 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*.<sup>40</sup>

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 re-inforced the monetarisation of some sectors of medieval society and caused also the concept of productivity to become a central category of production.<sup>41</sup> 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

<sup>38</sup> Postone 1993, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> Postone 1993, p. 207.

<sup>40</sup> Postone 1993, p. 209.

<sup>41</sup> Postone 1993, p. 210.

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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'.<sup>42</sup>

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'.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> Postone 1993, p. 213.

<sup>43</sup> Postone 1993, p. 292.

<sup>44</sup> Postone 1993, p. 289.

An increase in productivity makes the social labour hour more 'dense' in terms of the production of goods.<sup>45</sup> 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':<sup>46</sup> one hour of labour time today is – in the abstract – one hour of labour time five years ago,<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.

<sup>45</sup> Postone 1993, p. 292.

<sup>46</sup> Postone 1993, p. 293.

<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> Postone 1993, p. 294.

### 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'.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup>

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

<sup>49</sup> Postone 1993, p. 278, quoted in Arthur 1994, p. 151.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur 1994, p. 151.

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.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>52</sup> Arthur rejects Postone's argument that 'overcoming capital cannot be based on the self-assertion of the working class':<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup>

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*).<sup>55</sup>

Arthur claims that 'Postone cannot locate his critique socially; he can only retreat to "possibilities" that might or might not be grasped "subjectively"'.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> See Horkheimer's definition of the term 'critical theory' in Horkheimer 1972.

<sup>53</sup> Postone 1993, p. 371, quoted in Arthur 1994, p. 152.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur 1994, p. 152.

<sup>55</sup> Adorno 1990.

<sup>56</sup> Arthur 1994, p. 152.

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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.<sup>57</sup> 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'<sup>58</sup> 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'.<sup>59</sup> 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

<sup>57</sup> Arthur 1994, p. 152.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Jay 1993, p. 183.

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 *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'.<sup>60</sup>

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'.<sup>61</sup> 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'<sup>62</sup> 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

<sup>60</sup> Jay 1993, p. 185.

<sup>61</sup> Jay 1993, p. 186.

<sup>62</sup> 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'.<sup>63</sup> This decisive claim is based on Marx's distinction between overt and socially mediated, apparently natural and non-social, 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'.<sup>64</sup> 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

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Jay 1993, p. 187.

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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup>

### 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

<sup>65</sup> 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.

<sup>66</sup> 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.

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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'.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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

<sup>67</sup> Marx 1976, p. 510; Postone 1993, p. 338.

<sup>68</sup> 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',<sup>69</sup> 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'.<sup>70</sup> 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<sup>71</sup> 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',<sup>72</sup> that is of abstract labour, which would imply a 'fundamental restructuring and resignification of social life in general'.<sup>73</sup> 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

<sup>69</sup> Postone 1993, p. 312.

<sup>70</sup> Postone 1993, p. 313.

<sup>71</sup> Postone 1993, p. 362.

<sup>72</sup> Postone 1993, p. 363.

<sup>73</sup> Postone 1993, p. 364.

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.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> Inevitably, though, they developed reservations about equality and universality – as in ‘Liberty, Equality, Property and Bentham’<sup>76</sup> – 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 ‘indigenesness’, 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*<sup>77</sup> 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

<sup>74</sup> Pashukanis 1989.

<sup>75</sup> Postone 1993, p. 369.

<sup>76</sup> Marx 1976, p. 279.

<sup>77</sup> 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’,<sup>78</sup> 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,<sup>79</sup> that is the totalisation of the bourgeois mode of production, the ‘real subsumption’<sup>80</sup> of society under it. Marx gave expression to this tendency in his ironic<sup>81</sup> hymn to capitalist society, the *Communist Manifesto*.

Postone differentiates three forms of ‘critique and opposition in capitalism’,<sup>82</sup> 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

<sup>78</sup> Hobbes 1977, p. 151.

<sup>79</sup> Pashukanis 1989.

<sup>80</sup> Marx 1976, p. 1034.

<sup>81</sup> I mean ‘ironic’ in the strong sense of the word, such as in ‘romantic’ or ‘Hegelian irony’.

<sup>82</sup> Postone 1993, p. 392.

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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'.<sup>83</sup> 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'.<sup>84</sup> 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'.<sup>85</sup>

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.

<sup>83</sup> Postone 1993, p. 370.

<sup>84</sup> Postone 1993, p. 372.

<sup>85</sup> Postone 1993, p. 396.

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