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Editorial Introduction: Rethinking Marx's Mature Social Theory

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

¹ One could take Laclau and Mouffe 1985, as the *locus classicus* of this first kind of response. See Goldner 2001, for an excellent Marxist discussion of the emergence of ‘postmodernism’ as the mainstream form of ‘radical thought’ in relation to the recent transformations of capital accumulation.

the most potent comprehension of the nature and movement of capitalist society and, therefore, with the necessary theoretical elements for its practical critique.

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

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

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

² Postone 1996, p. 3.

³ Ibid.

Alienation and the concrete historical subject of modern society

Writing in 2004, it is more than fair to say that the debate over the existence of continuity between Marx's early critique of alienated labour in the *Paris Manuscripts* and his mature writings such as *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* has been settled both from a theoretical and textual point of view. The existence of an inner unity underlying the different phases of Marx's intellectual project seems to be now part of the 'ABC of Marxism'. Yet, this consensus still begs the question of the precise meaning of 'alienated labour' in Marx's thought and, in particular, in his mature critique of political economy. As Postone shows, in the mature writings, the notion of alienation refers to the way in which the social relations of capitalist production give rise to the constitution of objectified forms of social mediation (the commodity, capital), which lead to the emergence of abstract social structures of impersonal domination.⁴ According to Postone, the fundamental core of social domination in capitalism does not lie in the direct relation of domination of people by other people (such as class relations) but in the all-too-real inversion between the objectified forms of social mediation and the human subjects whose activity that alienated social objectivity mediates.

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

⁴ Postone 1996, p. 30.

⁵ That is, not the individual capital or the capitalist class, but what Marx called the *total social capital* of society, that is, the alienated product of total social labour in its unity.

methodology. Rather, it necessarily follows from a consistently materialist understanding of the specifically capitalist inverted constitution of human practice underlying both the forms of objectivity and *subjectivity* of present-day social life. Clearly, as Postone points out, this ‘determination of capital as the historical Subject *may seem* to deny the history-making practices of humans’.⁶ However, this is far from being the case. What this does imply is that whatever transformative powers the political action of workers might have – *both* capital-reproducing *and* capital-transcending political action –, they must be an immanent determination begotten by the alienated movement of capital as subject and not external to it.

This, I think, is what a great number of Marxists seem unable to grasp. Thus, one might be tempted to say that even when they do come very close to the recognition of this determination, they eventually retreat before such a discovery and hasten to add that the alienated constitution of the materialised social relation into the social subject of modern society cannot be total; that there must be a moment of human existence that escapes it.⁷ That is, they end up postulating that there is an irreducible element of (abstractly free?) human subjectivity which remains external to the alienated forms of social mediation through which human beings reproduce social life, and that it is there that the ground for revolutionary practice is to be found.⁸ Emancipatory political subjectivity is thus conceived as ontologically or transcendently rooted.⁹ Conversely, Postone rightly argues that the question that critical theory faces is to discover emancipatory consciousness as socially constituted by the historical dynamic of capital itself.¹⁰ One could claim, however, that Postone’s idiosyncratic account of the social determinations of emancipatory subjectivity is highly problematical; in particular, the contentious logical grounds of his rejection of the determination of the working class as revolutionary subject – a point forcefully made by Arthur and Hudis in their respective contributions. Yet, it is to be noted that Postone’s argument about the socially and historically determined character of emancipatory subjectivity is completely independent from the other, unconvincing, one about the

⁶ Postone 1996, p. 80, my emphasis.

⁷ Postone himself seems to be hesitant about his own insight by always adding the prefix ‘quasi’ when referring to capital as subject. As Albritton notes in his paper, this only adds vagueness to the problem of ‘structure and agency’ that the notion of capital as alienated historical subject is meant to solve.

⁸ In their contribution to the symposium, Stoeltzer and Neary make a similar point.

⁹ Postone 1996, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

non-revolutionary character of the proletariat.¹¹ It only demands that the revolutionary subjectivity of the workers be grounded in their determination as ‘appendages of social capital’ and not in determinations which are ontologically or transcendently external to their subsumption under the alienated form of their social being. Unfortunately, one could argue that this is not the path that most critiques of Postone follow. In sum, I think that the need to develop a historical theory of revolutionary subjectivity, based on the specific forms of social mediation characteristic of modern society and their immanent dynamic throughout the course of capitalist development, still has to be taken very seriously by contemporary Marxism.

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

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

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

¹¹ So much so, that, in an earlier presentation of this question, Postone developed his argument as an investigation of the qualitative determinations of the revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat (Postone 1978). In that early work, he did not deny the condition of the working class as revolutionary subject. His argument only pointed to the rejection of the *unmediated* nature of revolutionary *class* consciousness. The latter, he argued, entailed the *mediation* of *qualitative* transformations in the material forms of productive subjectivity brought about by the real subsumption of labour to capital.

forms of the labour process as specifically capitalist.¹² Postone's original contribution in this respect is, in the first place, methodological. It consists in a necessary reminder that a rigorous treatment of the qualitatively different concrete forms of the real subsumption should be an essential moment of the systematic-dialectical presentation of the determinations of capital. The chapters of Marx's *Capital* dealing with the forms of production of relative surplus-value are not there simply for the sake of historical illustration. Rather, they are part and parcel of the dialectical unfolding of the immanent dynamic of self-valorising value. Their exclusion from the presentation can only result in a formalistic comprehension of the nature of capital, which posits as contingent the relation between the latter and historical transformations of the materiality of the production process of human life. As various contributions to the forthcoming symposium on Chris Arthur's book in the pages of this journal note, recent attempts at a dialectical reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy associated with the so-called 'new dialectics' run the risk of lapsing into precisely this kind of formalism.¹³

Secondly, and more importantly, Postone's analysis of real subsumption provides some insightful elements for the development of a historical-materialist theory of emancipatory subjectivity. As he pointed out in his earlier paper referred to above, the development of revolutionary consciousness is not a potentiality carried by the mere existence of labour-power as a commodity, that is, by the formal subsumption of labour to capital. These determinations can, at worst, lead to the development of 'trade-union consciousness'. At best, they can develop into the self-recognition of workers as the producers of surplus-value and, hence, into a 'communism of distribution'. But they cannot lead to a self-transcending alienated consciousness that discovers the essential nature of its alienated social existence.¹⁴

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

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

¹³ See Kincaid 2005.

¹⁴ Postone 1978, p. 781.

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

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

The symposium¹⁶

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶ The Editors would like to take this opportunity to thank Gregory Schwartz for his help in organising this symposium.

production. They also discuss the shortcomings of Postone's characterisation of labour in capitalism as self-mediating, a point made by McNally as well. In addition, McNally highlights the insufficiencies of Postone's alleged solution of the theoretical antinomy between meaning and material life.

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

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

¹⁷ Negri and Hardt, 2000.

¹⁸ See Clarke 1994, and Jessop 1994.

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