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The Death of the Death of the Subject

The conversion of the subject into the predicate, and the predicate into the subject, the exchange of that which is determined for that which is determined is always the most immediate revolution.¹

The movement born from the protest against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999 has placed new importance on reconstituting a Marxian critique of oppression and alienation that goes beyond targeting the personifications of capital. The way in which tens of thousands of workers, students, feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, and Third World activists came together in Seattle and at other protests since then reflects new opposition to capital's incessant drive for self-expansion and universality. This is not to say that everyone in this emerging movement has reached a level of self-understanding adequate to the implications posed by the protests. Many still define the problem as one that hinges on 'corporate greed', private ownership, or the lack of democratic control of multinationals by the nation-state. That the problem lies deeper, in

¹ *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Vierte Abteilung, Band 2*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1981.

the very nature of capital as a social relation, is by no means self-evident. Yet the depth and breadth of the protests unleashed by Seattle indicates that a movement has emerged with the potential to challenge capital's very existence as the prevailing form of social mediation.

Given this situation, a work that, firstly, targets capital as an abstract form of domination rooted in value-creating labour; that, secondly, criticises those who focus instead on private property, unequal forms of distribution, and the 'anarchy of the market'; and that, finally, presents Marx's work as a critique of value-producing labour rather than as a call to 'realise' it through planning, such a book, should have much to say to today. Yet Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination* is not simply an effort to subject 'Traditional Marxists' to critique for mistaking the object of Marx's critique – value-creating labour – for the principle of the new society. Nor does its originality lie in an effort to rescue Marx's work from such distortions (others achieved that quite some time ago). Rather, its distinctive feature is the effort to ground a critique of 'Traditional Marxism' in the claim that the logic of Marx's work shows that 'the working class is integral to capitalism rather than the embodiment of its negation'.² Since this claim grounds Postone's overall approach and argument, I will subject it to critical investigation by exploring: firstly, his critique of 'traditional Marxism'; secondly, his effort to subsume the worker as subject in Marx's *Capital*; and finally, his overall view of the Hegel-Marx relation.

The role of the 'subject' in 'Traditional Marxism'

Postone centres his critique of 'traditional Marxism' on its advocacy of a 'metaphysics of labor', that is, it attacks capitalism from the standpoint of 'labour' instead of developing a critique of the very nature of labour in capitalism. Labour is not, Postone rightly insists, the source of all material wealth; it is the source of all value. Labour takes on this role only in capitalism, where it has a dual character, as expressed in the split between concrete and abstract labour. Through the existence of abstract labour, 'labour' becomes a socially-mediating activity which dominates all social relations. Abstract labour is the substance of value and hence capital. Instead of criticising the historical specificity of value-creating labour, 'Traditional Marxism' conflates labour and value-creating labour and posits the latter affirmatively.

² Postone, p. 17.

As a result, the nature of value-creating labour ceases to be the object of critique. Postone writes,

[w]hen 'labor' is the standpoint of the critique, the historical level of the development of production is taken to determine the relative adequacy of those existing relations, which are interpreted in terms of the existing mode of distribution. Industrial production is not the object of the historical critique, but is posited as the 'progressive' social dimension that, increasingly, 'fettered' by private property and the market, will serve as the basis of socialist society.³

Such a standpoint can neither account for the failure of 'Soviet-type' societies to avoid the social problems characteristic of traditional capitalism nor explain their evolution towards 'free-market' systems. By mistaking the object of Marx's critique (value-creating labour) for the principle of a new society, 'Traditional Marxism' finds itself unable to explain the growing structural similarity between 'private' capitalism and the state capitalism which called itself 'Communism'. The matter is of extreme importance. As long as 'Marxism' remains identified with the social formations which ruled in Marx's name, and so long as 'Marxist' analyses fail to provide a convincing explanation of their development and collapse, it is extremely unlikely that large numbers of people will find Marxian ideas important enough to be re-examined in their own right.

Postone's effort to distinguish between a standpoint that proceeds from 'labour' (understood as value-creating labour) and one that proceeds from the standpoint of the critique of that labour is of crucial importance in any effort to reconstitute a genuine Marxian analysis. However, Postone burdens his analysis with the argument that, by viewing the proletariat as the subject of revolution, traditional Marxism tends to conflate 'labour' with value-creating labour. He writes,

[a]ny theory that posits the proletariat or the species as Subject implies that the activity constituting the Subject is to be fulfilled rather than overcome. Hence, the activity itself cannot be seen as alienated.⁴

Clearly, for Postone, there is no real difference between the workers and the mode of labour in which they are employed. To affirmatively promote the one is to affirmatively promote the other. What he calls 'Ricardian Marxism' –

³ Postone 1993, p. 65.

⁴ Postone, p. 82.

the tendency to focus on the difference between the value of labour-power and the value of the total product rather than on the ‘peculiar social character’ of value-producing labour – is seen by him as integral to viewing the proletariat as subject.

This view is very problematic. He is, of course, right that Marx did not simply ‘take over’ Ricardo’s labour theory of value. Marx showed that, while Ricardo analysed the magnitude of value, he left unexamined the kind of labour which creates value, as if it were simply a natural property of ‘labour’. In contrast, Marx considered the distinction between concrete labour (which creates use-values) and abstract labour (which creates value) as his original contribution. But the question is: why did Ricardo not conceptualise the kind of labour which creates value? What stopped him from grasping the historical specificity of value-creating labour? The answer is that his theoretical categories did not extend to the subjectivity of the labourer. Ricardo ended replacing the labourer for labour and looked at the labourer as a thing, as a commodity: even though Ricardo sensed the discrepancy between the value of labour-power and that of the total product, he never inquired into the difference between labour as commodity and labour as activity. Ricardo viewed value-creating labour transhistorically by not taking account of the subjectivity of labourers.

Marx’s critique of Hegel reveals a similar phenomenon. Hegel was surely aware of value-creating labour, writing in his *First Philosophy of Spirit*, ‘[t]he more mechanised labour becomes, the less value it has, and the more the individual must toil. . . . [T]he value of labour decreases as much as the productivity of labour increases’.⁵ Hegel even defined ‘labour’ as ‘absolute negativity’. As Marx saw it, Hegel stood on the basis of political economy. To Hegel, humanity’s process of objectifying itself through the process of ‘labour’ is a process of alienation and, therefore, the transcendence of alienation implies the transcendence of objectivity. This indicates that Hegel posed value-producing labour transhistorically. The question is: why did he pose labour transhistorically? Why did he ‘stand on the basis of political economy’? The answer is that the subjectivity of the labourer was out of reach for him. By focusing on ‘labour’, but not on the subjectivity of the labourer who performs that labour, Hegel failed to identify the ‘negative element’ with a corporeal subject; the ‘Subject’ remained self-consciousness (what Marx called ‘the lie of his principle’). Thus, whereas Ricardo acted as if the labourer were the

⁵ Hegel 1979, pp. 247–38.

commodity, instead of labour-power, Hegel acted as if the generative force creating value were 'labour', instead of a particular kind of labour. For both, labour was viewed transhistorically precisely because they kept their distance from the workers' 'individual subjectivity'.

The situation may appear different when we come to Marxism, for, unlike Ricardo and Hegel, 'Traditional' Marxists did conceive of the proletariat as a subject of revolution, but, of course, this appearance is deceptive. Postone does a fine job attacking the tendency in many Marxists – Maurice Dobb, Ronald Meek, Helmut Reichelt, Paul Sweezy, et al. – to view value-creating labour as that which 'comes into its own' under socialism once the 'fetters' of private property are overcome. He does a much poorer job demonstrating a necessary connection between their position and viewing workers as subject. Most of these 'Traditional Marxists' actually placed little emphasis on the subjective dimension of proletarian struggle. It could even be argued that they viewed workers mainly as objects. How else can one explain why so many of them adopted a largely uncritical attitude toward 'actually existing socialism', even when those régimes were pursuing policies of forced labour and totalitarian social control over the workplace? The proletariat may often enough have been heralded as force, as an objective factor that could 'bring down capitalism', but that did not mean the actual subjectivity of the labourer, its reason, reclaimed the attention of much 'Traditional Marxism' – especially insofar as it impinged on its struggles for a different kind of labour.

One figure who may seem to have been caught red-handed, as far as the connection between transhistorical views of labour and that of worker as subject is concerned, is Georg Lukács. Lukács, as Postone notes, went as far as to equate proletarian class consciousness with Hegel's identical subject-object. He, clearly, was also trapped in a transhistorical concept of labour, as seen in his contention that, instead of being specific to capitalism, 'socially necessary labour time' operates under socialism as well. Yet Postone's contention that this limitation in Lukács flows from an endorsement of the concept of worker as subject does not hold up to close scrutiny. Despite Lukács's over-emphasis on proletarian consciousness as representing the Hegelian identity of subject-object, or perhaps because of it, he ended up subsuming proletarian subjectivity. The problem that Lukács confronted in his theory of class consciousness was how to explain the apparent gap between present-day workers' consciousness and the goal of a future socialist society if the worker's consciousness is identical to Hegel's subject-object. Lukács

tried to answer this by developing his famous theory of reification. In essence, this held that capitalism reproduces itself not only through the transformation of labour-power into a commodity, but also through the commodification of thought. By applying the notion of reification of thought to the entirety of society, Lukács sought to explain the apparent gap between present-day proletarian consciousness and the idea of a socialist society. Yet this opened up an even more seemingly insoluble dilemma. For, if even our thought is reified, how are we to free ourselves? Lukács's answer is that the party would free us, by serving as the cunning of the proletariat. Lukács's posing of an immediate identity between proletarian consciousness and Hegel's identical subject-object drove him to pose the party as the form of mediation needed to overcome the gap between is and ought. It would, therefore, be more correct to say that the real subject for Lukács was not the proletariat but the party. This has ramifications that extend far beyond his position, since a great many Marxists after Marx were rooted in the fetish of the party.

Postone acknowledges that Lukács's theory of reification served as the ground for theories of one-dimensionality in the Frankfurt school. While his critique of the Frankfurt school is of interest, it hardly supports his claim that there is a necessary connection between posing workers as subject and having a transhistorical view of labour. Pollock's and Horkheimer's projection of transhistorical concepts of labour coincided with an explicit rejection of the proletariat as subject. A different position was suggested by the early work of Herbert Marcuse (to whom Postone refers to only in passing). In 1941, Marcuse affirmed the integrality of proletarian subjectivity and Hegel's dialectic in his *Reason and Revolution*. He argued that the key to Hegel, and his bridge to Marx, is found in Hegel's notion of Reason as Subject of History. This notion, Marcuse argued, is critically appropriated by Marx in his projection of the proletariat as subject of revolution. The proletariat as the 'realisation' of philosophy represents to Marx the embodiment of Hegelian rationality in the realm of social reality. In 1960, however, Marcuse published a new preface to *Reason and Revolution* which pointed to a decisive shift in his conception of the Hegel-Marx relation. Marcuse argued that, because 'those social groups, which dialectic theory identified as the forces of negation, are either defeated or reconciled with the system', the 'subject itself is apparently a constitutive part of the object . . .'.⁶ 'For reality has become technological reality, and the subject is now joined with the object so closely that the notion of object

⁶ Marcuse 1960, p. xiv.

necessarily includes the subject'.⁷ On this basis, he concluded, 'the notion of Reason itself is the undialectical element in Hegel's philosophy'. This is the unstated basis of Postone's position that proletarian subjectivity has become so integrated into the objective structure of capital that any affirmation of its subjectivity ineluctably assumes the 'naturalness' of value-creating labour.

Postone's contention that 'transhistorical' views of labour are tied to viewing workers as subjects becomes especially problematic in light of tendencies which he does not consider, such as the humanist interpretation of Marx. Long before Postone, Marxist humanists singled out the historical specificity of value-creating labour and projected it as the distinct stamp of bourgeois society. They also attacked the tendency among 'Traditional' Marxists to pose private property, the market, and forms of distribution as the *pons asini* of a postcapitalist society. Marxist humanists undertook a rigorous analysis of 'Soviet-type societies' as state-capitalist on the basis of the theoretical categories in Marx's *Capital*. All of this was achieved through an intense focus on the centrality of proletarian struggles for a new kind of labour at the point of production. The critique of the historical specificity of value-creating labour and the projection of the proletariat as subject of revolt was neither a theoretical inconsistency nor a matter of opposed determinations lying side by side. The critique of value-producing labour was achieved by *affirming* proletarian subjectivity.

As Raya Dunayevskaya wrote in *Marxism and Freedom*, back in 1958,

So hostile was Marx to labor under capitalism, that at first he called, not for the 'emancipation' of labor, but for its 'abolition'. That is why, at first, he termed man's function not 'labor', but 'self-activity'. When he changed the expression 'abolition of labor' to 'emancipation of labor', it was only because the working class showed in its revolts how it can through alienated labor achieve emancipation. Marxism is wrongly considered to be 'a new political economy.' In truth, it is a critique of the very foundations of political economy. . . . What Marx did that was new was to [show] what type of labor creates value and hence surplus value, and the process by which this was done. What kept others from seeing it, is that they had kept a goodly distance from the factory. They remained in the marketplace, in the sphere of circulation. . . . Marx's primary theory is a theory of what he first called 'alienated labor' and then 'abstract' or 'value-producing' labor. . . . Hence,

⁷ Marcuse 1960, p. xii.

it is more correct to call the Marxist theory of capital not a labor theory of value but a value theory of labor.⁸

Postone takes no notice of the humanist interpretation of Marx's theory of value. One can argue that he need not do so, since he makes no claim to present a comprehensive discussion of the Marxian tradition. However, the presence of the humanist interpretation of Marx's value theory poses an important conceptual problem for Postone's position. If it is true, as he repeatedly argues, that 'any theory that posits the proletariat or the species as subject implies that the activity constituting the subject is to be fulfilled rather than overcome', then it follows that theories based on class struggle and proletarian subjectivity must, of necessity, display an uncritical attitude toward 'labour' and an emphasis on the realm of distribution and private property as the determinants in overcoming capitalism. The existence of even a single body of thought which affirms proletarian subjectivity and class struggle without implying these characteristics of 'Traditional Marxism' calls into question Postone's central premise, namely, '[T]he idea that the proletariat embodies a possible post-capitalist form of social life only makes sense, if capitalism is defined essentially in terms of private ownership of the means of production'.⁹

This is not to deny that many have fallen into a transhistorical concept of labour, with all the deleterious characteristics cited by Postone, by holding to a certain notion of 'class struggle'. As Arjun Appadurai said of anarcho-syndicalism:

The syndicalists accept the general socialist position that society is divided into two classes, the capitalist and the proletariat, whose claims are irreconcilable; that the modern state is a class state dominated by the few capitalists; that the institution of private capital is the root of all social evils and that the only remedy for them is to substitute collective capital in place of private capital.¹⁰

Clearly, in this conception, the 'class struggle' involves, not the negation of the value-form of mediation, but, rather, its realisation through the creation of 'collective capital'. But it is not the concept of class struggle that is at issue here as much as a limited and narrow interpretation of it. The 'anarcho-

⁸ Dunayevskaya 2000, pp. 61, 106, 138.

⁹ Postone 1993, p. 73.

¹⁰ Appadurai 1978, p. 124.

syndicalist' concept of 'class struggle' as articulated by Appadurai is very far from the Marxian notion of class struggle. For Marx, the struggle of the proletariat does not simply involve a struggle over the distribution of value. It involves a struggle over the very existence of value.

By entering the factory, conceptually speaking, instead of just discussing 'labour' as a general social characteristic, Marx discerned a 'silent civil war' at the point of production, hinging on the alienation inherent in the very activity of labouring. What is alienated at the point of production is neither a pre-existing substance nor an abstract essence. What is alienated from me at the point of production is my capacity for conscious, purposeful activity. I am reduced to a cog in the machine, and I resist that. I become chained to the drive of capital for self-expansion. Human relations take on the form of relations between things because that is what they really are. My dissatisfaction with that situation, the resistance which I put up to it, is the one thing I can do to prove I am not totally absorbed into the object. I want freedom, not to revert to some pre-existing essence, but to learn how to appropriate the many social developments formed on the basis of my alienated activity. Yes, 'overcoming alienation', in other words, 'entails the historical Subject's realization of itself',¹¹ the realisation of my human capacities to be free, to be a subject, to be self-directed, rather than to be a mere means for the self-expansion of value. This does not imply that I want to posit my 'labour' as the principle of a new society. On the contrary, I want to get rid of it altogether. I want to be what I can become, a conscious, purposeful being at work, but by no means limited to work. I want it to determine all my human relationships, be it in working or loving, studying or playing. I demand that on the basis of who I am as a conscious, purposeful, human being.

This, it seems to me, is the focal point of 'class struggle' in the Marxian concept. It has often been passed over. The problem goes back to the formation of Marxism as an organised movement. Despite their voluble rhetoric about 'class struggle', the Marxists of the Second International based their outlook on the contrast between the 'anarchy' of the market and centralised planning. They paid scant attention to Marx's point, articulated in his critique of Proudhon, that, if the 'order' of the factory were extended to the whole of society, there would be complete totalitarianism.¹² Like the classical political economists, they treated the subjectivity of the worker as of little or no account,

¹¹ Postone 1993, p. 224.

¹² Marx 1975, p. 295.

transforming the dialectics of revolution into immutable objective ‘laws’ of history. By the time the Russian Revolution fell under the sway of Stalin, this iron-clad objectivism took on a new lease on life. The contrast of the ‘anarchy’ of the market and centralised planning became a veritable fetish. The disregard of the subjectivity of the labourer became reflected not just in the reproduction of the worst features of alienated labour, but in the overarching fetish that ‘The Party’ represents the ‘knowing’ of the proletariat. The move away from a dialectic of human subjectivity became the defining feature of post-Marx Marxism, taking in even those who fought Stalinism on a political level, such as Trotsky.

Far from placing too much emphasis on proletarian subjectivity, the problem of post-Marx Marxism, it seems to me, is that has undertheorised it. If Marxists had not so downplayed the subjective dimension, they would have been able to see that, while the class struggle initially focuses on the proceeds of labour, it ultimately centres on the very kind of labour the worker is forced to perform. Grasping that would also have placed Marxists in a better position to conceptualise the relation between class struggles and struggles against reified human relations by other social forces, such as women, youth and national minorities. Though Postone thinks his view that ‘the proletariat is an object and appendage of capital’ posits a critique of ‘Traditional Marxism’,¹³ we would have to conclude, on the contrary, that it reproduces some of the worst features of it.

The presence of the subject in Marx’s *Capital*

Any effort to properly evaluate Postone’s book needs to address his interpretation of Marx’s ‘mature’ theory, since that is its focus. Though it is not possible to provide a full treatment of this here, I will single out some aspects of Marx’s *Capital* which raise grounds for a very different interpretation from that offered by Postone.¹⁴

First, Postone is correct to criticise those who view value-creating labour ‘transhistorically’. But his critique of ‘transhistorical’ concepts of labour is somewhat confusing, because the ‘mature’ Marx did have a ‘transhistorical’ view of labour, though it was not the same as that which Postone criticises

¹³ Postone 1993, p. 276.

¹⁴ For my critique of Postone’s reliance on the *Grundrisse*, which colours much of his discussion of *Capital*, see Hudis 1995.

in 'Traditional' Marxism. Marx discussed this in *Capital*: 'labour is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of every form of that existence, or rather is common to all forms of society in which human beings live'.¹⁵

Though Postone indirectly refers to this passage several times, he never quotes it. If he had, it would be clear to the reader that there are two different, opposed senses in which labour is 'transhistorical'. One is the sense in which Marx discussed it above, where labour is 'the ever-lasting nature-imposed condition of human existence'. The other is the false hypostatization of value-creating labour as 'transhistorical', which is quite different from the above. By failing to clearly pose the relation between these two, distinct senses in which labour is 'transhistorical', Postone counterposes Marx's *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 to *Capital*. Postone alleges the former suffered from a 'transhistorical' concept of labour along the lines of 'Traditional' Marxism. It is true that, in 1844, Marx had not yet created his concept of the two-fold nature of labour. In some places, he used the word 'labour' to refer to labour as conscious, purposeful activity, while, in other places, he used the same word to refer to alienated, value-producing labour. It is also true that, in 1844, Marx sometimes speaks of 'labour' as that which has existed throughout human history. But that does not mean that he projects a 'transhistorical' concept of value-producing labour. Rather, the 1844 *Manuscripts* contain the same 'transhistorical' concept of labour as found in *Capital*.

More is at issue here than a mere external relation between texts. A proper understanding of the two, distinct senses of labour as 'transhistorical' is crucial for an adequate understanding of the relation between the labour process and the valorisation process. Postone writes, '[A]s capitalism develops, however, the labor process comes to be intrinsically determined by the process of valorization'.¹⁶ This is true. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the labour process is essentially annulled by or completely absorbed into the valorisation process. Even when the proportion of direct human relation at the point of production falls considerably, capital still confronts the 'transhistorical' presence of labour. It cannot be repeated often enough that Marx's entire analysis of the value-form of mediation characteristic of capitalism rests on his view that what the labourers sell is not their 'labour', but only

¹⁵ Marx 1977, p. 290.

¹⁶ Postone 1993, p. 325.

their capacity to labour, their labour-power. Marx's split in the category of labour between labour as activity vs. labour-power as commodity not only serves to explain the inherent duality of use-value vs. exchange-value which inheres in every commodity; it also points to the inherent tension between the drive for reification and the irreducible subjectivity of that which is not a thing, the human being. In other words, reification can never be total, because, if it were, capital would exhaust its supply of living labour and have no source of value left with which to reproduce the value of its accumulated capital. The inability of capital to completely reify the subject flows not from social and political aspects extraneous to the capital-relation, but from its very foundation. The split in the category of labour suggests that reification must be conceptualised in relation to the realm of resistance which resides within the capital-relation itself. It is often said that totalitarian political structures conceal tremendous tensions and contradictions at their base; I would argue that the same is true of capital, the most totalitarian economic formation ever known to humanity.

Marx did not subject capital to critique from the standpoint of 'labour'. He criticised it from the standpoint of the labourer. This enabled him to break from any notion that value-creating labour is 'natural' and 'transhistorical', because it brought him face to face with the subjectivity of the labourer who resists the alienation inherent in her very activity of labouring under capitalism. The difference between a standpoint that proceeds transhistorically from 'labour' (that is, value-creating labour) and a standpoint that proceeds from the labourer is of decisive importance in grasping the dialectical structure and content of Marx's *Capital*.

We can see this from the most abstract level of Marx's *Capital* and the discussion of commodity fetishism in its first chapter. With commodity fetishism, the value-form of a product of labour assumes a 'ghostly' character, starts to 'dance on its own initiative' and becomes 'an autonomous figure endowed with a life of its own'.¹⁷ We have reached the realm of the 'non-sensuous sensuous'. This is no mere realm of illusion; mere demystification cannot debunk this topsy-turvy world in which human relations take on the form of relations between things, because 'that is the way they really are'.¹⁸ It is hard to imagine a more total subsumption of human subjectivity by the dictates of the value-form. And yet it is here, at this most abstract level, that

¹⁷ Marx 1977, p. 290.

¹⁸ Marx 1977, p. 165.

Marx posed the self-activity of the human subject as pivotal. Since the fetish is all-pervasive, the very *Geist* of capital, no amount of ‘enlightened critique’ can strip away the fetish. The only thing which can is a form of praxis which combines practical action with the subjectivity of purpose: ‘[T]he veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e., the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control’.¹⁹ The human subject does not get washed out in Marx’s tracing out of the logic of abstract labour and commodity fetishism. Instead, the absolute epitome of alienation (commodity fetishism) is counterposed to an absolutely opposed form of human praxis, the struggle for a new kind of labour by ‘freely associated men’.

It is not just the phrase, ‘freely associated men’ which is proof of the presence of human subjectivity in Chapter One. The development of the very content of the section on commodity fetishism is proof of it. Remarkably, there was no section on commodity fetishism in the 1867 (first) edition of Volume I of *Capital*. It was only between 1872 and 1875, in revising *Capital* for the French edition, that Marx created a section entitled ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret’. Marx introduced crucial changes to his discussion of commodity fetishism in the French edition, which he said had ‘a scientific value independent of the original’. One of the most important changes concerned his effort to answer the question of ‘whence arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, once it assumes the form of a commodity’.²⁰ It is only with the French edition that Marx answered this to his satisfaction, by stating, ‘Clearly, from this form itself’. With this change, Marx makes it clear that what explains the mystery of the fetish is the very form assumed by the product of labour, the very nature of ‘the peculiar social character of the labour’ which produces commodities. This new formulation, as well as the new section on commodity fetishism as a whole, explicitly posed the abolition of fetishism as centring on the abolition of value-producing labour.

What intervened between the first German edition in 1867 and the French edition of 1872–5 which explains Marx’s reworking of the section on commodity fetishism? The Paris Commune. The changes introduced into the French edition reflected its impact. As Dunayevskaya wrote in *Marxism and Freedom*,

¹⁹ Marx 1977, p. 173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The totality of the reorganization of society by the Communards shed new insight into the perversity of relations under capitalism. . . . This was so clearly the absolute opposite of the dialectic movement of labor under capitalism, forced into a value-form, that all fetishisms were stripped off of capitalist production.²¹

The activity of the Communards thereby allowed for a new leap in thought. Commodity fetishism cannot be penetrated by enlightened critique which assumes a privileged standpoint outside the value-form; nor can it be stripped away by pointing to a hidden essence obscured by the 'illusion' of fetishism. Instead,

The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surround the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes as soon as we come to other forms of production.²²

The emergence a new form of association pointing to a transcendence of the value-form in 1871 provided the vantage point for penetrating the secret of the fetish. Marx's reworking of the section on commodity fetishism after the Paris Commune reveals the impact of workers' revolts on the creation of his central value-theoretical categories.

As Postone sees it, workers' revolts never point beyond capital but are always, of necessity, implicated in it. Yet how can this can so in light of the development of the value-theoretical categories in *Capital*? Marx's reworking of *Capital* under the impact of workers' struggles such as the battle against slavery in the American Civil War, the fight for the eight-hour working day, and the Paris Commune poses the sharpest of challenges to Postone's claim that

The universality represented by the proletariat ultimately is that of value . . . far from representing the negation of value, the proletariat essentially constitutes this abstract, homogeneous form of wealth.²³

In a word, although Postone accepts the conclusions that flowed from the impact of workers' struggles on Marx's thought (such as Marx's contention that the value-form of mediation instead of property forms, market relations, and forms of distributions must be the main object of critique) he does so by

²¹ Dunayevskaya 2000, p. 98.

²² Marx 1977, p. 169.

²³ Postone 1993, p. 368.

separating such conclusions from the process, the way in which Marx's concepts took shape through an active dialectic between theory and practice.

The result is a one-sided reading which fails to do justice to Marx's delineation of the dialectic of capital. Whereas Marx presented the struggles to shorten the working day as in advance of the declaration of 'the inalienable rights of man', Postone sees them as simply spurring capital to create new labour-saving devices. Whereas Marx said, '[w]hen the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species',²⁴ Postone says that co-operation simply means 'workers are subsumed under, and incorporated into capital: they become a particular mode of its existence'.²⁵ Whereas Marx called struggles against machinofacture 'revolts against this particular form of the means of production as being the material basis of the capitalist mode of production', Postone says '[a]t this stage of Marx's exposition, the capitalist process of production does not yet embody of possibility of its own negation'.²⁶ And, whereas Marx spoke of how 'the revolt of the working class' 'bursts asunder' the capitalist integument, Postone does not even bother discussing the crucial last parts of *Capital* in which this appears, on the 'absolute general law of capitalist accumulation'. His argument that 'the logical thrust of Marx's presentation does not support the idea' that workers' struggles embody the negation of capital separates what Marx joined together: an analysis of abstract forms of domination and a view that never takes its fingers off the pulse of human relations.

Hegel's dialectic: logic of capital or dialectic of transcendence?

This does not mean that Postone rejects the determinative importance of subjectivity. To Postone, the self-moving subject is not the worker, but capital. He centres his argument on the chapter 'The General Formula of Capital', where Marx writes of capital as 'an automatic subject', says 'value is here the subject', and calls value 'the dominant subject of this process . . .'.²⁷

Though it may appear that Postone has supplied textual evidence to support his claim that the logic of Marx's analysis presents capital as the subject, the

²⁴ Marx 1977, p. 477.

²⁵ Postone 1993, p. 328.

²⁶ Postone 1993, p. 336.

²⁷ Marx 1977, p. 255.

appearance is, once again, deceptive. It is above all crucial to keep in mind the context of this section of Volume I. In 'The General Formula of Capital', Marx was discussing the process of circulation, as embodied in the movement from money to commodity to more money (M-C-M'). This movement creates, of necessity, the appearance that value 'has the occult ability to add value to itself'. However, Marx later shows that this appearance is dispelled once we enter the labour process and encounter's capital's dependence on the living labourers. As Marx showed in the ensuing chapter 'Contradictions in the General Formula', value appears to self-expand on its own account so long as we restrict ourselves to the process of circulation. When we move to the labour process, however, we find that the appearance of value as self-moving subject encounters internal limits, flowing from the dual character of labour. Which is why Marx did not use the phrase 'value as subject' when he moved into the analysis of the production process of capital.

By conflating Marx's discussion of value as 'an automatic subject' at a specific point in the analysis of capitalist circulation with value as the absolute subject in Marx's analysis of capitalism as a whole, Postone contravenes his own argument against elevating the sphere of distribution above that of relations of production.

The development of Marx's *Capital* further undermines Postone's claim that Marx simply posed capital or 'dead labour' as the subject. Marx did not only revise the first chapter of *Capital* when he issued the French edition of *Capital* in 1872–5. He also revised Chapter Four, on 'The General Formula of Capital'. In the French edition, Marx removed all three references to capital and value as subject. As we noted earlier, the French edition was written under the impact of the new stage of workers' revolt reached with the Paris Commune. Unfortunately, we have yet to have an English-language edition of *Capital* that conveys all of the changes introduced by Marx into French edition.²⁸

Postone's argument that capital is the subject derives not just from his reading of *Capital* but from his interpretation of Hegel. As he sees it, Hegel's concept of the Absolute Subject bears a striking similarity to the Marxian notion of capital, in that it represents a self-moving substance which 'grounds itself'. Hegel's Absolute, as a self-referential entity, expresses, in his view, the logic of capital as self-expanding value.

²⁸ See Marx 1989, p. 124, for the way in which he revised the French edition of Chapter 4 in terms of the question of 'capital as subject'. See also Anderson 1993.

Elsewhere, I have raised a number of objections to Postone's reading of Hegel.²⁹ I would add here that, even if one were to grant Postone's argument that Hegel's *Logic* represents the logic of capital, it does not necessarily follow that Hegel's philosophy simply expresses the value-form. Capital, as Marx analysed it; is an inherently two-dimensional category, riven by an absolute contradiction between the drive to increase material productivity, on the one hand, and the drive to augment surplus-value, on the other. The former compels capital to constantly reduce the proportion of living labour at the point of production, while the latter makes capital dependent on such labour for its reproduction. The logic of capital presents us with a system imbued with such internal instability that capital intimates a realm beyond capital, wherein 'human power is its own end'. Likewise, Hegel's *Logic* is traversed by an internal duality: the absolute contradiction between the Theoretical and Practical Idea. The Absolute, Hegel says, 'contains the highest contradiction within itself'.³⁰ His tracing out of the logic of the concept does not lead to a space of restful abode in which all contradictions are annulled. On the contrary, the chapter on 'The Absolute Idea' in the *Science of Logic* ends by intimating a 'new sphere' which follows Logic, the realm of Spirit. Hegel says of this new sphere: '[t]he pure Idea, in which the determinateness or reality of the Notion is itself raised to the level of Notion, is an absolute liberation'.³¹ As Marx wrote in 1844, despite Hegel's 'estranged insight', and despite the fact that he 'stands on the basis of political economy', the self-drive of his dialectic is such that it points to the transcendence of alienation in a new society:

[T]he positive moments of the Hegelian dialectic [are]. . . . Transcendence as objective movement, withdrawing externalisation into itself. This is the insight . . . of the appropriation of objective essence through the transcendence of its alienation . . . the actual appropriation of his objective essence through the destruction of the alienated determinations of the objective world . . .³²

The clearest expression of Marx's view that Hegel's categories express not only the logic of capital but also a dialectic of liberation is contained in his use of 'the negation of the negation'. In the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx directly appropriated this Hegelian category, writing: 'Communism is the position as

²⁹ See Hudis 1995.

³⁰ Hegel 1929, p. 466.

³¹ Hegel 1929, p. 485.

³² Marx 1975, p. 341.

the “negation of the negation”’.³³ In *Capital*, he returned to it anew in writing, ‘capitalist production process begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation’.³⁴ Though it has become fashionable in some quarters to view Hegel’s dialectic as nothing but the expression of the logic of capital, that was neither what Marx concluded from his critique of Hegel nor, I argue, should we in light of the need to ground emancipatory struggles in a philosophy of liberation.³⁵

Postone, on the other hand, sees Hegel’s dialectic as completely confined within the value-form of mediation. This is clear from his very use of the word ‘mediation’, a key Hegelian category. Postone seems to view any socially mediating activity as necessarily alienating. He writes, ‘The function of labor as a socially mediating activity is what Marx terms abstract labor’.³⁶ It is true that abstract labour is a socially mediating activity. It is also true that ‘Value is a category of mediation’.³⁷ But is every mediation a category of value? Does labour become abstract labour by serving as ‘a socially mediating activity’? Marx spoke of labour as ‘the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature’. A ‘metabolic interaction’ implies some sort of mediation. Of course, the kind of mediation suggested by labour in this generic sense is radically different from the abstract labour characterising capitalism. Labour, in the sense in which Marx discussed it above, does not reduce the totality of social relations to the operation of a singular principle; it does not dissolve contingency and difference into a universal kind of activity. Rather, labour as ‘the metabolic interaction between man and nature’ mediates between discrete opposites, which retain their independence and contingency.

Postone, however, repeatedly equates the value-form of mediation with mediation itself. He conflates first- and second-order mediations. The root of the problem, I contend, lies in his tendency to read Hegelian categories exclusively in terms of the logic of capital. It is as if Postone thinks that ‘mediation’ in Hegel forever involves the exclusion of difference, the reduction of contingency to singularity, and the subsumption of particularity by abstract universality. He would do well to consider the implications of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza:

³³ Marx 1975, p. 306.

³⁴ Marx 1977, p. 292.

³⁵ For more on the crucial movement from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* to his *Philosophy of Spirit*, and its implication for contemporary freedom struggles, see Dunayevskaya 1989a and 1989b.

³⁶ Postone 1993, p. 150.

³⁷ Postone 1993, p. 154.

Substance . . . without preceding dialectical mediation . . . is only the dark, shapeless abyss, so to speak, in which all determinate content is swallowed up as radically null and void, and which produces nothing out of itself that has a positive subsistence of its own.³⁸

Beyond capital

Postone's claim that the 'logic' of Marx's analysis argues against posing the proletariat or humanity as subject is not supportable by Marx's own texts. Unfortunately, this limitation can easily obscure the importance of other aspects of his book. It contains an especially rich discussion of the central contradiction of capitalism: the drive to increase material wealth vs. the drive to augment value.

Postone shows that

[A]lthough a change in socially general productivity does not change the total amount of value produced per abstract time unit, it does change the determination of this time unit. The continuous 'redetermination' of socially necessary labor time creates a 'treadmill effect': the drive of capital to accumulate constantly in order to exist. Becoming is the condition of its being.³⁹

Because each new level of productivity is redetermined as a new base level, this dynamic tends to become ongoing and is marked by ever-increasing levels of productivity.⁴⁰

Yet capital's effort to reduce socially necessary labour time to a minimum constantly runs up against the fact that living labour remains its only source of value.

A growing disparity arises between developments in the productive power of labor (which are not necessarily bound to the direct labor of the workers), on the one hand, and the value frame within which such developments are expressed (which is bound to such labor), on the other. The disparity between the accumulation of historical time and the objectification of immediate labor time becomes more pronounced as scientific knowledge is increasingly

³⁸ Hegel 1991, p. 226.

³⁹ Postone 1993, p. 291.

⁴⁰ Postone 1993, p. 293.

materialized in production . . . a growing disparity separates the conditions for the production of material wealth from those for the generation of value.⁴¹

The result is a 'shearing pressure' which renders the system unstable and internally contradictory.

Postone's discussion of the double dimensionality of capital is of special importance in light of post-Seattle developments. It helps focus radical critique on the true problem, that is, the contradiction between the drive to increase material wealth vs. the drive to augment value, instead of on subsidiary issues such as 'corporate greed' or the lack of democratic control over corporate decisions. His discussion of how capital posits the material conditions for a higher form of society, through the achievement of vastly increased material productivity and the reduction of necessary labour time to a bare minimum, mitigates against romantic critiques of capitalism which look towards a nostalgic return to an idyllic past or which ignore the possibility of freely appropriating in the future that which is currently constituted in an alienating form.

Yet, by separating the contradiction of material form vs. value-form from the actual class struggles at the point of production and elsewhere, Postone leaves us with little sense of how to close the gap between is and ought, especially since, as he emphasises, there is no reason to presume any 'automatic collapse' of capitalism. He says that it has become superfluous to appeal to a living human agent to uproot the system, since capitalism is less and less dependent on human labour at the point of production and more dependent on 'socially constituted knowledge and practices' that do not involve the productive labourer. He fails to mention that such 'knowledge and practices' are more and more falling under the sway of commodified relations which characterise the traditional factory. This helps explain why many who are not directly involved in the production of surplus-value, from telephone operators to Boeing's engineers, are showing increased labour militancy. This is also true of those with no direct relation to the production process, like the permanent army of the unemployed, which rose up in Los Angeles in 1992.

Though none of these have Postone's ear, he does write, 'overcoming the historical Subject', that is, capital, 'would allow people, for the first time, to become the subjects of their own liberation'.⁴² Even Postone, for all his hostility

⁴¹ Postone 1993, p. 297.

⁴² Postone 1993, p. 224.

to the notion of masses as subject, finds it necessary to speak of liberation in terms of becoming 'subjects of our own liberation'. This is quite proper, for it is not possible to consistently posit a standpoint of liberation without affirming subjective self-development. Yet, by refusing to identify human subjects in the present which can help realise such a future possibility, it becomes hard to see how capital can actually be 'overcome'. Simply positing 'dead labor as the emancipatory alternative' by pointing to the 'shearing pressure' can hardly suffice so long as the notion of an automatic collapse of capitalism is ruled out of consideration.

Thus, despite Postone's efforts to trace out the 'trajectory of capital' in a way that presents the possibilities of the future as immanent in the forms of self-movement in the present, we are left with a sort of Kantian dualism between what is and what could be, short of an immanent principle that could reconcile them.

The originality of Postone's book does not lie in its opposition to the notion of the proletariat as subject of revolt. That attitude was endemic to the 'New Left' and gained a wider following with the tidal wave of postmodernism. What is original with Postone is his effort to argue that Marx's value-theoretical categories show that Marx did not consider the working class as subject. His book can be seen as an effort to 're-interpret' Marx on the basis of a specific attitude toward the working class held by a large section of the generation of 1968; it can also be seen as an effort to account for the postmodernist notion of the 'death of the subject' without succumbing to its pessimism and nihilism. Yet it is precisely these attitudes, I would argue, which are becoming increasingly anachronistic. No one today is reaching for a 'universal subject', be it the proletariat or anyone else, before which all should genuflect. The notion of a singular subject, or reducing all social struggles to the proletariat, belongs to a historical period which is behind us and which will not return. But the present moment does not disclose a rejection of proletarian subjectivity per se. On the contrary, many of the protests since Seattle – be they campus protests against sweatshops or new strikes at the workplace – centre on conditions of labour and the struggles against alienation in the workplace. Quite unlike the 1960s 'New Left', the 'Seattle generation' has sought to forge a unity between workers and students that was unimaginable, at least in the US, for decades.

Just as much of the 'Traditional Marxism' criticised by Postone has an antiquated ring to it due to its exaggerated focus on property relations and

its posing of ‘proletarian labour’ as the principle of a new society, so too, in light of the present, does Postone’s very critique of it. Seattle suggests that we may be nearing the end of the long night of the denigration of the subject in Western radicalism. It may not be too early for theory to take notice, by proclaiming the death of death of the subject.

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