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On Postone's Courageous but Unsuccessful Attempt to Banish the Class Antagonism from the Critique of Political Economy

I

Postone's important book engages in a 'fundamental reinterpretation of Marx's mature critical theory'. One of its objectives is to overcome the theoretical dichotomy of 'structure and action'.¹ He later admits that the 'relationship of structure and action' has not been fully explained and that a 'more complete account' of 'how value is constituted by people and can be operative' is required to elucidate this relationship fully.² This is a surprising statement at the end of a book devoted to the reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy.

He suggests that a fuller understanding of the relationship between structure and action would have to expound more strongly the implications of Marx's analysis, which, for him, 'implies that, although social actors are unaware of the essential structuring forms of capitalist society, there is a systematic relationship between these forms and social action'.³

¹ Postone 1993, p. 3.

² Postone 1993, p. 395.

³ Ibid.

An understanding of the dialectic between structure and action would thus require conceptualisation of the determining structure of capitalist society. This is, indeed, Postone's view. In his account, social action is embedded within, and derives from, abstract social forms.

His approach, then, implies that theoretical mysteries do not find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. Instead, he sees human social practice to be 'structured by, and embedded within, the social forms of the commodity and capital'.⁴ Critical reconstruction is thus not seen as an attempt at deciphering the human social content of economic forms. Throughout his book, human social practice is conceived as derivative and thus as a bearer of social and economic functions. His conception of the human being as an agent, actor or agency, is symptomatic, and leads him to a sociological reading of social action. Whereas efforts at a critical reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy associated with Backhaus and Reichelt argue that Marx's work amounts to a *reductio ad hominem*,⁵ Postone presupposes what needs to be explained: he presupposes the class-divided human being as a personification or a character-mask – that is, as a human attribute of things.

II

According to Postone, 'class conflict is a driving force of historical development in capitalism only because it is structured by, and embedded in, the social forms of the commodity and capital'.⁶ This view is reminiscent of Joachim Hirsch's contribution to the state debate of the 1970s. As he put it, 'the course of capitalist development is not determined mechanically or by some kind of law of nature. Within the framework of its general laws, capitalist development is determined rather by the actions of the acting subjects and classes, the resulting concrete conditions of crisis and their political consequences'.⁷ This quotation summarises Postone's position well. As he puts it, the 'characteristics of capitalist society cannot be grounded in the struggles of producers and appropriators per se'.⁸ Furthermore 'the analysis

⁴ Postone 1993 p. 314.

⁵ Adorno 1993.

⁶ Postone 1993, p. 319.

⁷ Hirsch 1978, pp. 74–5. For an assessment of Hirsch's account, see Holloway and Picciotto (eds.) 1978. See also, Clarke 1991.

⁸ Postone 1993, p. 319.

of value, surplus value, and capital as social forms cannot be fully grasped in terms of class categories'.⁹ Indeed, he is adamant that class struggle is tied to the 'capitalist system': it is an 'important factor in the spatial and temporal development of capital', and 'becomes a driving element of the historical development of capitalist society',¹⁰ and, as such an element, it 'represents capital-constituting, rather than capital-transcending, forms of action'.¹¹ The idea that class struggle is tied to capital, and is constitutive of its dynamic, is banal. There is no need here to argue at length that Marx conceived of capital as a social relationship of 'Man himself in his social relations'.¹² Postone's notion, however, that class struggle is merely a constructive force for the development of capitalism is an unquestionably useful, that is, consensus-creating and thus peace-making, deceitful publicity.¹³

Why is it that 'the significance of the category of surplus value cannot be understood fully in terms of exploitation'?¹⁴ The answer seems to lie in his differentiation between social antagonism and social contradiction. He argues that they 'are not identical'.¹⁵ However, this differentiation merely articulates the traditional view according to which society is divided between an objective framework of general determinations and the subjectivity of social antagonisms that is embedded within this framework. Hence his repeated insistence that 'the Marxian notions of class and class struggle acquire their full significance only as categories of an inherently contradictory and dynamic system'.¹⁶ This dynamic belongs to 'capital', and this would mean that labour is thus a mere mediating force, which exists solely within capital, that is, embedded within,

⁹ Postone 1993, p. 153, footnote 87.

¹⁰ Postone 1993, p. 319.

¹¹ Postone 1993, p. 371.

¹² Marx 1973, p. 600.

¹³ The characterisation of conflict as a constructive conflict is intrinsic to the notion of a pluralist society and has been influential in the study of a variety of fields such as industrial relations, theories of parliamentary democracy and new social movements. The understanding that conflict is endemic in a pluralist society does not mean that conflict should be provoked. It means that rules, procedures, and laws are invoked, which regulate conflict and through which conflict can express itself in constructive forms. A theory of the functionality of conflict is presented, for example, by Coser 1956, and has been developed within the Marxist framework by Poulantzas 1973. The charge of a deceitful publicity, draws on Kant's insistence, in his *Disputes of the Faculties*, that in order to discover the 'true character of the constitution' one has to go beyond the 'deceitful publicity' of the constitutional text and beyond the professions of its mystical proponents. For discussion, see Agnoli 2003 [1992].

¹⁴ Postone 1993, p. 316.

¹⁵ Postone 1993, p. 100.

¹⁶ Postone 1993, p. 153.

and derived from, its overarching framework. What, however, is meant by *system*? Marx's critical question is important here: 'why does this content [human social relations] take that form [the form of capital]'.¹⁷ This question entails research into the social constitution of economic categories, deciphering their human content.¹⁸ Thus, critique would have to demystify the autonomy of value and capital as an objective delusion. The objective delusion is fostered by the capitalist exchange relations themselves. They suggest that rationally acting subjects meet on the market to realise their rational interests, whereas, in fact, they act as executives in accordance with abstract social laws which they themselves have generated historically and reproduce through their rational behaviour and over which they have no control.¹⁹ Fetishism is real and, at the same time, it hides its social content.

Postone, too, sees labour as the central category of Marx's critique. As he puts it, 'the constituting centrality of labor in capitalism' explains the 'ultimate ground for the abstract structures of domination, the increasing fragmentation of individual labor and individual existence, and the blind runaway development logic of capitalist society and large-scale organizations that increasingly subsume people'.²⁰ Yet, however central, his account rejects 'critical reconstruction' as the 'return' of 'a *relation of objects to one another*', that is, of economic categories to 'relations between men'.²¹ Labour is merely mediating the abstract logic of capital. As he puts it, the structure of capitalist relations of production is constituted by the 'labor-mediated form of social relations'.²² What might this mean? On the one hand, he argues that capital can 'not exist without value-creating labor',²³ and thus cannot autonomise itself from labour. On the other, he argues that capital is a self-grounding and self-moving subject, and thus a 'subject' in its own right. Might he therefore be suggesting that value-creating labour is a mere economic resource?

¹⁷ Marx 1979, p. 95. The English edition of *Capital* (Marx 1983, p. 85) omits this sentence.

¹⁸ Bonefeld 2004.

¹⁹ Reichelt 2002, p. 143.

²⁰ Postone 1993, pp. 388–9.

²¹ Marx 1972, p. 147.

²² Postone 1993, p. 388.

²³ Postone 1993, p. 257.

III

Postone focuses on labour as 'the constituent source of domination in capitalism', and he argues that 'Marx describes [the system of social domination] as the domination of people by their own labor'.²⁴ This view has much to commend it. Unfortunately, he does not develop its insights. Were he to have done so, he would have had to analyse the genesis of this domination and, through it, the social constitution of its objective appearance as an autonomous force. He does neither. He claims that so-called primitive accumulation is merely a historical precondition for capitalist social relations and that, once large-scale industry has developed, this precondition is no longer 'structurally central'.²⁵ His acceptance, then, of capital as a subject is only logical. He argues that this subject has a directional dynamic, is self-grounding and self-moving,²⁶ and that its movement is 'without limit'.²⁷ In short, he sees the 'capital form of social relations as an alienated, abstract, self-moving Other, characterized by a constant directional movement with no external goal'.²⁸ As a consequence, Postone's reconstruction transforms Marx's programme of a 'general critique of the entire system of economic categories',²⁹ a critique that seeks to decipher the fetishism of the commodity-form on a 'human basis', into a theory of capital.³⁰

If, however, the separation of labour from its means is the precondition of capitalist social relations, would this not imply that it remains 'structurally central'? What would happen to capitalist reproduction were it not to reproduce the divorce of labour from its means – a divorce that constitutes the 'sine qua non of the existence of capital'.³¹ Would labour remain 'object-less free labor', or would the means of production transform into means of emancipation? Postone's transformation of the critique of political economy into a theory of capital separates the genesis of social forms from their constituted existence. Horkheimer's remark that 'human beings produce, through their own labour, a reality which increasingly enslaves them',³² is of key importance for the

²⁴ Postone 1993, p. 224.

²⁵ Postone 1993, p. 349.

²⁶ Postone 1993, p. 224.

²⁷ Postone 1993, p. 269.

²⁸ Postone 1993, p. 278.

²⁹ Marx 1972, p. 254, adapted from the German original, Marx 1976, p. 250.

³⁰ Marx 1979, p. 105, see Postone 1993, Chapter 7.

³¹ Marx 1983, p. 536.

³² Horkheimer 1992, p. 229.

issues raised here.³³ At first sight, the sentence provides a paradox. On the one hand, human beings are the subject of the sentence. They are active and creative. They produce their own reality. They are the essence of the sentence. On the other hand, they are merely the object of an enslaving reality. Human beings are reduced to functional actors who are directed by something that stands above them and which merely develops through their actions. How do we understand human activity: subject and, as such, essence of reality; or merely the object of reality? In other words, is human practice merely an innocent bystander (or functional actor) of a reality which determines social relations, as in Postone; or is human practice a productive power? Horkheimer's remark has a critical meaning: how can one understand the circumstance that human practice exists against itself in seemingly extra-human forms? How, then, is it possible to understand the situation in which human action is constitutive action at the same time as human beings appear to be ruled by already existing abstractions? Horkheimer rightly identified the separation between the genesis of social forms from their constituted existence as the blind spot of dogmatic thought.³⁴ Postone's reconstruction argues against the dogmatic tradition of Marxist thought – yet, it resists the critical understanding of Marx's abstractions as the 'constituted conceptuality'³⁵ of a class-divided social practice, a social practice that exists within, suffuses and contradicts, the things themselves. Postone's social theory assumes the 'objective appearance' of capital as the objective framework of social action, as if this framework were a subjective-objective thing apart. He calls this thing 'the capital subject'. In short, his approach affirms what needs to be negated.

In contrast to Postone, Marx's critique of political economy argues that the positing of the results of human labour as a force over and above the social individual, including both the capitalist and the wage-labourer, is founded on the continued separation of labour from its means. 'The means of production become capital only in so far as they have become separated from labourer and confront labour as an independent power'.³⁶ Marx conceived of capitalist accumulation in terms of the separation of labour from its conditions and the concentration of these in the hands of 'non-workers'.³⁷ In fact, he argued that

³³ This part draws on Bonefeld 1995.

³⁴ Horkheimer 1985, p. 84.

³⁵ Adorno 1971, p. 209.

³⁶ Marx 1963, p. 408.

³⁷ Marx 1978, p. 116.

this separation 'forms [*bildet*] the conception [*Begriff*] of capital'.³⁸ The human history of primitive accumulation is thus not only a constitutive presupposition but also the foundation upon which the constituted existence of capital rests. Primitive accumulation, in short, is the 'foundation of capitalist reproduction'.³⁹ The class struggle, then, that freed master from serf and serf from master is constitutive of the relation between capital and labour. As Clarke put it, class struggle is the 'logical and historical presupposition for the existence of individual capitalists and workers' and 'the basis on which exploitation' rests.⁴⁰ Were this not so, the understanding of history as a history of class struggle would make little sense. The divorce of labour from its means persists, within the capital relation, as its constitutive pre-positing action [*voraussetzendes Tun*].⁴¹ This 'Tun' lies at the heart of capitalism's reproduction: the pre-positing action of the separation of labour from its condition is not the historical result of capitalism but its presupposition, a presupposition which renders capital a social-production relation based on the separation of labour's social productive force from its conditions and, even more pronounced, confers on these conditions the power of applying labour rather than being controlled by it. Still, the systematic character of primitive accumulation subsists in suspended [*aufgehobene*] form in capitalist social relations.⁴² This is because the separation is now posited as the presupposition of capitalist reproduction. It no longer 'figures' as the condition of its historical emergence but, rather, as the presupposition of its fanatical bent of reproducing human relations as relations between commodity owners, that is as social categories of capitalist production of abstract wealth for the sake of abstract wealth. In short, capitalist 'accumulation merely presents as a *continuous process* what in *primitive accumulation*, appears as a distinct historical process, as the process of the emergence of capital'.⁴³

The terror of separation, of capitalism's primitive, or original, beginning, weighs like a nightmare on the social practice of human purposeful activity. The commodified existence of human social practice in form of wage-labour confronts its conditions as alien conditions, as conditions of exploitation, and as conditions which appear, and so exist, contradictorily, as relations between things.

³⁸ Marx 1966, p. 246

³⁹ Marx 1983, p. 585.

⁴⁰ Clarke 1982, p. 80.

⁴¹ See Psychopedis 1992.

⁴² On this, see especially Negt/Kluge 1981; see also Bonefeld 2002.

⁴³ Marx 1972, p. 272; see also Marx 1983, p. 688.

Man is confronted by things, labour is confronted by its own materialised conditions as alien, independent, self-contained subjects, personifications, in short, as *someone else's property* and, in this form, as 'employers' and 'commanders' of labour itself, which they appropriate instead of being appropriated by it. The fact that value – whether it exists as money or as commodities – and in the further development the conditions of labour confront the worker as the *property of other people*, as independent properties, means simply that they confront him as the *property* of the non-worker or, at any rate, that, as a capitalist, he confronts them [the conditions of labour] not as a worker but as the *owner* of value, etc., as the *subject* in which these things possess their own will, belong to themselves and are personified as independent forces.⁴⁴

The 'perverted form' of value⁴⁵ presents, in other words, the mode of existence of human purposeful activity in the form of impersonal relations, conferring on the human being the indignity of an existence [*Dasein*] as a personification of things. Thus, concerning the capital-labour relation, 'the worker produces himself as labour capacity, as well as the capital confronting him'. At the same time, 'the capitalist reproduces himself as capital as well as the living labour capacity confronting him'.⁴⁶ 'Each reproduces itself, by reproducing the other, its negation. The capitalist produces labour as alien; labour produces the product as alien'.⁴⁷ In short, 'the relation of every capitalist to *his own workers is the relationship as such of capital and labour, the essential relationship*'.⁴⁸ Postone's reconstruction fails to conceptualise this essential relationship, that is the antagonism between capital and labour. His account merely recognises constituted character-masks. He conceives of human social 'action' as something that is embedded within the framework of abstract social forms. This renders 'social action' a mere attribute of things. As a consequence, Postone conceives

⁴⁴ Marx 1972, pp. 475–6.

⁴⁵ Marx 1979, p. 90. In the English translation, the German *verrückte Form*, is translated as 'absurd form' (Marx 1983, p. 80). The translation is 'absurd'. In German, 'verrückt' has two meanings: *verrückt* [mad or crazy] and *ver-rückt* [displaced]. Thus, the notion of 'perverted forms' means that these forms are both mad and displaced. In other words, they are the modes of existence of social practice, in which 'subject and object do not statically oppose each other, but rather are caught up in an "ongoing process" of the "inversion of subjectivity into objectivity, and vice versa"' (Backhaus 1992, p. 60, quoting Kofler). In the following, 'perversion' or 'perverted' will be used in this double sense.

⁴⁶ Marx 1973, p. 458.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Marx 1973, p. 420.

of class struggle merely as a struggle between personifications or character-masks, that is between the subjective agents of an 'enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things'.⁴⁹

In contrast to Postone's view, this section has argued that Marx's critique amounts to a determinate negation of the constituted forms of capital as 'relations between humans'.⁵⁰ Adorno rightly saw this 'reductio ad hominem' as the essential core of Marx's critique of political economy.⁵¹ It deciphers the 'puzzling forms' of value as forms 'assumed by social relations between man and man'⁵² and reveals their social constitution in the peculiar social character of labour that 'becomes productive only by producing its opposite', i.e. capital.⁵³ In short, the objective appearance of capital hides 'its genesis'⁵⁴ and thus makes its human content invisible. The critique of political economy is thus subversive: its task is to make visible the hidden human content of economic categories so that humans gain consciousness of themselves as the producers of their own forsaken world.⁵⁵ 'The constitution of the world occurs behind the backs of the individuals; yet it is their work'.⁵⁶ The reified world of capital is thus not only dependent on labour as the substance of value. It is also always dependent on the reproduction of labour as 'objectless *free labour*',⁵⁷ and however much capital appears to have autonomised itself from human social relations, it remains a form of human social practice. In short, a reconstruction of Marx's work that does not decipher the human content of economic forms, and that therefore does not comprehend the forms of capital as perverted forms of social human practice, is condemned to conceive the bourgeois world only in the form of an objective-subjective thing.⁵⁸ Postone's notion of labour as a mediating force, and of class struggle as a means of capitalist development, is therefore apt.

⁴⁹ Marx 1966, p. 830.

⁵⁰ Marx 1972, p. 147.

⁵¹ Adorno 1993.

⁵² Marx 1983, p. 94.

⁵³ Marx 1973, p. 305.

⁵⁴ Adorno 1993, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Bonefeld 2000.

⁵⁶ Marcuse 1988, p. 151.

⁵⁷ Marx 1973, p. 508.

⁵⁸ See Reichelt 2000.

IV

Postone justifies the thrust of his reconstruction by arguing that Marx shifted his position 'from a theory of social relations understood essentially in terms of class relations to a theory of forms of social mediation expressed by categories such as value and capital'.⁵⁹ These categories cannot be grounded in the relations of exploitation. 'The categories of value and surplus value refer to objectified forms of social mediation and cannot be understood solely in terms of class relations of exploitation', and according to Postone, therefore, Marx shifted from a class analysis to an examination of capital as 'the historical Subject'.⁶⁰ This Subject

consists of objectified relations, the subjective-objective categorial forms characteristic of capitalism, whose 'substance' is abstract labor, that is, the specific character of labor as a socially mediating activity in capitalism. Marx's Subject, like Hegel's, then, is abstract and cannot be identified with any social actors.

It is a 'total Subject':⁶¹ the historical Subject 'is the alienated structure of social mediation that constitutes the capitalist formation'.⁶² Instead, then, of a critique of totality, he affirms that 'capital is "self-valorizing value"'.⁶³ He thus seems indifferent to the fact that Marx actually criticises the conception of capital as a self-valorising value as the 'fetishism of capital'.⁶⁴ The constitutive fetish of capital does indeed render its character as a social relationship 'invisible'.⁶⁵ Yet, critical social theory is not theology. Its task is not to derive social relations from the invisible but, rather, to derive the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'⁶⁶ from the self-contradictory social relations themselves. The task, then, is 'to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations'.⁶⁷ Marx's critique of fetishism focused on the 'relationships amongst the things themselves',⁶⁸ where 'all productive power of labour is projected as powers of capital, the same as all forms of

⁵⁹ Postone 1993, p. 79.

⁶⁰ Postone 1993, p. 314.

⁶¹ Postone 1993, p. 79.

⁶² Postone 1993, p. 81.

⁶³ Postone 1993, p. 308 referring to Marx.

⁶⁴ Marx 1966, p. 829.

⁶⁵ Marx 1987, p. 820.

⁶⁶ Marx 1983, p. 76.

⁶⁷ Marx 1983, p. 352, footnote 2.

⁶⁸ Marx 1976, p. 145, translated from the German original. In English, Marx 1972, p. 147.

value are projected as forms of money'.⁶⁹ All these projections, externalisations, and fetish-forms hide the fact that they are 'the product of a social relation, not the product of a mere *thing*'.⁷⁰ Against political economy's formidable attempt to theorise the invisible, Marx argued that each 'form', even the most simple form such as, for example, the commodity, 'is already an inversion and causes relations between people to appear as attributes of things'⁷¹ or, more emphatically, each form is a 'perverted form'.⁷² The most developed perversion, the constituted fetish of capitalist society, is the relationship of capital to itself, of a thing to itself.⁷³ Marx's programme amounts thus to a 'radical critique' of the hypothetical subject of political economy, as we shall see below.

Postone's conception of capital as an 'automatic subject'⁷⁴ renders the critique of capital as a definite social relationship impossible, unless of course the subject relates to itself as if it were a person apart. This seems indeed to be his position. His theory of capital presupposes that capital reigns supreme. The historical subject has to reign supreme – otherwise its determination as the historical subject would make little sense. However, and in contrast to Postone, Marx's conception of capital as the subject posits no more than the theoretical hypothesis of political economy.⁷⁵ If, however, capital really is the subject, then we are dealing with the 'invisible', and social theory would reveal itself as a secularised theology of the capital-thing as an extra-mundane subject. Yet, however perverted and reified, capital is a human form of existence. As indicated by Schmidt,⁷⁶ Marx's work is foremost characterised by the primacy of 'practice', and that his critique amounts to a conceptualised praxis [*begriffene Praxis*], that is, a theoretical understanding of the totality of human action which constitutes, suffuses and contradicts the perverted world of capital. Postone is right to argue that wage-labour is not an antagonistic subject. The standpoint of capital and wage-labour is the same.⁷⁷ In its simple

⁶⁹ Marx 1979, p. 634, translated from the German original. The English version is again misleading: Marx 1983, pp. 568–9.

⁷⁰ Marx 1966, p. 391; see also Marx 1972, p. 147.

⁷¹ Marx 1972, p. 508.

⁷² Marx 1979, p. 90.

⁷³ See Marx 1972, p. 515.

⁷⁴ In the German edition of *Capital* (Marx 1979, p. 169) uses the phrase 'automatisches Subjekt'. In the English edition, this phrase is translated as 'automatically active character' (Marx 1983, p. 152).

⁷⁵ On this, see Backhaus 1997, and Bonefeld 2001.

⁷⁶ Schmidt 1974.

⁷⁷ See Marx 1966, Chapter 48.

capacity, labour is purposive productive activity.⁷⁸ This activity exists against itself as a value-creating, abstract wealth-producing commodity (wage-labour). Purposeful human social practice exists against itself as a mere economic resource. Human social practice exists, then, through the constituted forms of capital: 'in-itself', as relations between things whose constituted form is the separation of human social practice from its conditions, and 'for-itself' because human social relations subsist in and through the relations between things, a world of things that is reproduced by 'active humanity' in and through its class-divided social practice. It follows that human social practice subsists also 'against-itself' as, on the one hand, a perverted social category and, on the other, as a power that makes history and is thus capable of leaving behind its own perverted existence.

V

Postone's characterisation of capital as 'the historical Subject' accords to labour the function of social mediation: labour mediates the 'relations among people as well as relations between people and nature.'⁷⁹ He sees his contribution as a critique, not of capital, but of labour. He argues that the core antagonism of capitalist society is contained in labour itself. He emphasises the dual character of labour as abstract labour and concrete labour and grounds the exchange-value and use-value dimension of the commodity-form in labour's dual character. In sum, Postone argues that 'labor is separated from its purpose and becomes a means toward a goal given by the alienated structures constituted by (abstract) labor itself'.⁸⁰ Capital, then, 'refers to a contradictory and dynamic structure of alienated social relations constituted by labor'.⁸¹ According to Postone,

⁷⁸ Marx 1966, p. 825.

⁷⁹ Postone's conception of 'mediation' is similar to Habermas's 'media', itself derived from Parsons. For an account of Marx's conception of 'mediation', see Gunn 1987, and Bonefeld 1987. In Marx, the term 'mediation' is not employed as a means of theorising the relationship between 'structure and action'. Rather, it is 'form-constitutive': mediation 'is generally the way in which real contradictions are reconciled', allowing antagonistic relations 'to exist side by side' without sweeping away the antagonism (Marx 1983, p. 106). Mediation thus gives 'social form' to antagonistic relations and these do not exist external to these forms but constitute and subsist in and through them.

⁸⁰ Postone 1993, p. 328.

⁸¹ Postone 1993, p. 308.

the function of labor as a socially mediating activity is what [Marx] terms 'abstract labor'. . . . What makes labor general in capitalism is not simply the truism that it is the common denominator of all various specific sorts of labor; rather it is the social function of labor which makes it general. As a socially mediating activity, labor is abstracted from the specificity of its product, hence, from the specificity of its own concrete form.⁸²

Abstract labour renders capitalist commodity production social and thus makes it possible for the commodity to exist in a social context.

The contradiction, then, is not between capital and labour but, rather, between abstract labour and concrete labour, between exchange-value and use-value. Both concrete labour and abstract labour, exchange-value and use-value, are constitutive of the commodity-form – leading to a conception of a contradictorily constituted social world. He thus juxtaposes 'the value dimensions of the forms (abstract labor, value, abstract time) and their use value dimension (concrete labor, material wealth, concrete time)'.⁸³ In this way, then, the fact that capital depends on the exploitation of labour is not unimportant. However, much more important is the contradictory relationship between use-value and exchange-value, between abstract labour and concrete labour. As Rakowitz notes,⁸⁴ Postone's conception of labour as estranged labour leads to the idea that the alienated structures of capital are constituted by abstract labour itself. It is therefore only logical that Postone sees emancipatory potential in the use-value dimension of the commodity-form.⁸⁵ As Postone sees it, 'the potential of the use value dimension, no longer constrained and shaped by the value dimension, could be used reflexively to transform the material form of production'.⁸⁶ He discusses this insight in terms of the crisis-ridden tension between social 'wealth' and capitalist 'value'. Postone does not develop this insight. This is unfortunate because its development might well have opened his interpretation to the political economy of labour, a political economy of struggle for human co-operation, solidarity, dignity, and the democratic organisation of social time. The time of class struggle entails a different conception of time to that which holds that time is money. Since, however, class struggle is conceived as capital-reproducing,

⁸² Postone 1993, p. 150.

⁸³ Postone 1993, p. 287.

⁸⁴ Rakowitz 2000, p. 103.

⁸⁵ On this see also Pohrt 1976, and Reinicke 1975. For critique, see Hafner 1993.

⁸⁶ Postone 1993, pp. 362–3.

his notion that use-value has to be emancipated from exchange-value remains without social foundation. What, in other words, is the 'social ground' upon which Postone's standard of critique rests? Postone recognises that the 'problem for social theory of the standards of critique is, of course, difficult' and his study does not deal with the 'question of the standards by which that which exists can be criticized'.⁸⁷ Is it really possible to supply a critique of capital, or a critique of labour, without a proper understanding of the standard of critique? In the Introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx rejects the idea of a different state form as a means for achieving a more just society by saying 'Poor dogs! They want to treat you like human beings!'.⁸⁸ Does Marx here indicate the standard of critique, or is it better 'grounded' in the insight that even the 'simplest form, the commodity for example, is already an inversion' and, that is, a perverted form?⁸⁹

VI

I agree with Postone that many of the 'explicit themes and concepts of the early writings (such as the critique of alienation, the concern with the possibility of forms of human activity not defined narrowly in terms of work, play, or leisure, and the theme of the relations between man and women) remain central, if implicit, in Marx's later works'.⁹⁰

Backhaus has shown that Marx's critique of political economy is fundamentally a critique of social constitution and therewith human social constitution in perverted forms.⁹¹ According to Backhaus, the value-form is conceptualised as a perverted form of human practice, whose existence appears, necessarily, as a thing in-itself as if it were a power unto itself. This is because social labour is constituted in such a way that it has no consciousness of itself, a consciousness that, instead, appears to be the property of the product of human purposeful activity: the life of the commodity. In order, then, to comprehend the social constitution of class struggle, of capital and wage-labour, one has to investigate the critical intention of Marx's argument that he deals in *Capital* with workers and capitalists only as 'personifications of

⁸⁷ Postone 1993, p. 219, footnote 115.

⁸⁸ Marx 1975a, p. 182.

⁸⁹ Marx 1972, p. 508. For an instructive account on the 'standard of critique', see Psychopedis 2000.

⁹⁰ Postone 1993, p. 138.

⁹¹ Backhaus 1997.

economic categories'.⁹² The critical dimension of Marx's critique of political economy is the return of the world of things to its human basis. Marx's announced this reduction when he argued that critique amounts to a '*ruthless criticism of all that exists*, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be'.⁹³ Marx wanted neither to construct nor affirm. Postone is therefore correct when he argues that Marx wanted primarily to negate. However, Marx does not negate for the sake of negation. Such endeavour is without standard and merely leads to the reconciliation with existing relations of power – the so-called negation of the negation. What then might the standard of critique be? Critique, Marx argued, has to demonstrate *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. 'To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for Man the root is Man himself'⁹⁴ and '*Man is the highest being for Man*' and all relations 'in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being' have to be overthrown.⁹⁵ The standard of critique is the human being, her dignity and possibilities.⁹⁶

There is no doubt that society's laws of motion abstract 'from its individual subjects, degrading them to mere executors, mere partners in social wealth and social struggle. The debasement was as real as the fact that on the other hand there would be nothing without individuals and their spontaneities'.⁹⁷ Reification, then, 'finds its limitation in reified Man [*Mensch*]',⁹⁸ and that is, the reality in which the social individual moves day-in and day-out has no invariant character, it is not something which exists independently from Man. Horkheimer's characterisation of Marx's critique of political economy as a 'judgment on existence' expresses the same fundamental idea. From this perspective, the so-called autonomisation [*Verselbständigung*] of capital stands for the autonomisation of the relations of production which, although rendering the human being invisible, exists in and through and rests on human social practice in its entirety.⁹⁹ However much capital appears to have autonomised itself, it presupposes human social relations as its substance. In sum, the

⁹² Marx 1983, p. 21.

⁹³ Marx 1975b, p. 142.

⁹⁴ Marx 1975a, p. 182.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ On Marx's 'mature', *ad hominem* critique of capital, see Backhaus 2004.

⁹⁷ Adorno 1990, p. 304.

⁹⁸ Adorno 1975, p. 25.

⁹⁹ Horkheimer 1992; Adorno 1993, p. 173.

critique of capital has to show the human content, however perverted and debased, of the capitalist constitution of social existence. Postone argues, rightly, that Marx's critique amounts to a theory of social constitution. However, he discusses social constitution merely in terms of the objective framework within which human social practice unfolds. The existence of sellers and buyers on the labour market presupposes, as Reichelt argues, the constitution of capitalist society and thus the class antagonism between capital and labour, an antagonism where the means of production are posited as capital and where human productive power is rendered a labouring commodity and, as such, an exploitable resource.¹⁰⁰ In capitalist society, individuals produce in and for society as social individuals. Yet, at the same time, their production appears as a mere means of objectifying their individuality as personifications of things. Thus, their existence as private persons in a social context entails that the social individual subsists as an individualised individual whose social existence appears to derive from the relations between the things themselves. In short, human social practice subsists through fetishised forms as if they were a person apart. Marx's work focuses on forms, at first on forms of consciousness (such as religion and law), then later on the forms of political economy.¹⁰¹ For Marx, the focus on forms was identical with the critique of the inverted forms of social existence, an existence constituted by human social practice. All these forms obtain as inverted forms of a 'community' that is external to the individuals, and from which they must emancipate themselves in order ever to be able to interact with one another 'as individuals'.¹⁰² This central idea is presented most emphatically in *The German Ideology*: 'The reality [*das Bestehende*], that communism creates, is precisely the real [*wirkliche*] basis for rendering it impossible that any reality should exist independently of individuals, in so far as this reality is only a product of the preceding intercourse of the individuals themselves'.¹⁰³ It is thus a matter of deciphering the appearance [*Schein*] of independence that this 'surrogate of community' posits,¹⁰⁴ and then of abolishing it so as to permit human beings to enter into relationship with one another, not as personifications

¹⁰⁰ Reichelt 2002 [1971].

¹⁰¹ This part draws on Reichelt 2000.

¹⁰² Marx and Engels 1962, p. 70.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Marx and Engels 1962, p. 74.

of economic categories, but as social individuals; not as categories of antagonistic class interests, but as 'communist individuals'.¹⁰⁵

VII

The human being is inseparable, that is, it cannot be separated, unless through force and violence, into, for example, an economic factor of production and, quite distinct, a human actor endowed with equal rights. In bourgeois society, however, this separation is real in practice: the separation of the human being from the means of production and the constituted existence of these as capital underlies the separation between the political and the economic. The 'logic of separation' is the 'real generation process of capital'¹⁰⁶ and 'the whole system of capitalist production is based on the fact that the workman sells his labour-power as a commodity'.¹⁰⁷ This separation of the labourer from her means is constitutive of the alienated existence of labour as a wage-labouring commodity. Any social theory which presupposes human social practice as an attribute of things, that is as acting human agents, amounts to an affirmative theory of separation. As a consequence, such social theory can do no other but to presuppose capital as a self-valorising value and thus as a subject. This, then, is the basis upon which Postone seeks to analyse the relationship of structure and action. Yet, the human being is inseparable. While, in other words, 'the subdivision of labour is the assassination of a people',¹⁰⁸ it consolidates the 'original' separation of labour from its conditions through further and further fragmentations of the social labour process. Yet, however fragmented social labour is, divided and subdivided, human co-operation remains 'the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production'.¹⁰⁹ Without human co-operation, there would be neither production nor exchange. This co-operation exists against itself in the commodity-form that integrates the 'assassination of a people' with the respectful forms of bourgeois relations of exchange: equality, freedom and liberty.

The understanding of 'class' hinges on the conception of social relations. In Postone's work, social relations stand removed from the class relations.

¹⁰⁵ Marcuse 1963.

¹⁰⁶ Marx 1972, p. 422.

¹⁰⁷ Marx 1983, pp. 405–6.

¹⁰⁸ Urquhart quoted in Marx 1983, p. 343.

¹⁰⁹ Marx 1983, p. 317.

He conceives of the working class as an economically constituted class. Class, he argues, is a 'relational category – classes are determined in relation to other classes'.¹¹⁰ Although his book seeks to reconstruct Marx's critique of political economy as a critical social theory, class relations are nevertheless perceived in economic terms; class is seen as a relationship between producing and appropriating social groups. In addition to this 'economic' relationship, 'other social strata and groupings' exist who are 'organized around religious, ethnic, national, or gender issues'.¹¹¹ This view is reminiscent of Giddens's idea that distinct social interests and conflicts correspond with specific structural relations such as 'economic relations' (characterised by 'wage labour conflict'), 'ecological relations' (characterised by 'ecological conflict'), 'ethnic relations' (characterised by 'racism'), 'gender relations' (characterised by patriarchy and sexism) and so on.¹¹² However, even if we accept that there are many distinct social groupings in society, should there not be at least, paraphrasing Bellofiori, the acknowledgement that individuals who accept the mutilation of themselves during a part of the day are marked throughout the whole of their daily activity? There is no reason to assume why this should be different for the whole of society. Besides, the categorisation of forms of social conflict according to distinct conflict-generating social structures does not enquire into the social constitution of these structures. Instead, it presupposes the explanandum in the explanation.

Postone's treatment of 'class' in terms of a theory of social groupings is disturbing but hardly surprising. As he sees it, 'the analysis of value, surplus value, and capital as social forms cannot be fully grasped in terms of class categories' and a Marxist analysis that does just that commits a 'serious sociological reduction of the Marxian critique'.¹¹³ This is because

overt and direct social relations do continue to exist, but capitalist society is ultimately structured by a new, underlying level of social interrelatedness which cannot be grasped adequately in terms of the overtly social relations among people or groups – including classes. The Marxian theory does, of

¹¹⁰ Postone 1993, p. 320.

¹¹¹ Postone 1993, p. 321.

¹¹² Giddens 1990.

¹¹³ Postone 1993, p. 153, footnote 87. There is much that has to be said in support of his view that the traditional analysis of class is indeed characterised by a sociological reductions, and Postone's own theory of social groupings might well be criticised in these terms. On the notion of class as a critical category, see Gunn 1987, and Bonefeld 2002.

course, include an analysis of class exploitation and domination, but it goes beyond investigating the unequal distribution of wealth and power within capitalism to grasp the very nature of its social fabric, its peculiar form of wealth, and its intrinsic form of domination.¹¹⁴

Are class relations really just an expression of the unequal distribution of wealth and power? Equally disturbing is his view that the struggle for the shortening of the working day is 'structurally intrinsic to capitalism' and hence 'an important constitutive element of the dynamic of that system'.¹¹⁵ It undoubtedly is. Yet, the struggle for the shortening of the working week is also a struggle over the organisation of socially necessary labour to meet human needs. The democratic organisation of social time by the associated producers themselves and the reduction of time to an abstract measure of wealth belong to two different worlds. However important, then, this struggle has been for the development of capital, 'the shortening of the working day is the basic prerequisite' for human emancipation.¹¹⁶ How much labour time was needed in 2003 to produce the same amount of commodities that was produced in 1993? Twenty per cent? Forty per cent? Fifty per cent? Whatever the percentage might be, what is certain is that labour time has not decreased. It has increased. At the same time, we witness ever more vicious conquests of atoms of additional labour time through means of labour flexibilisation and deregulation. Sennet has rightly argued that this conquest corrodes the character.¹¹⁷ Is resistance to this conquest really just constitutive to the development of capitalism? Besides, strike action, refusal to comply, and resistance take courage. Do workers strike as wage-labouring personifications of variable capital or do they strike because they have character? Yet, there is only one world, a world of class antagonism between the political economy of labour and the political economy of capital. This is the site of class antagonism and class struggle. In order to understand these things, one has to be within them. In short, 'already the simple forms of exchange-value and of money latently contain the opposition between labour and capital'.¹¹⁸

Postone's insight that capital 'refers to a contradictory and dynamic structure of alienated social relations constituted by labor',¹¹⁹ is important. If, however,

¹¹⁴ Postone 1993, p. 153.

¹¹⁵ Postone 1993, pp. 36–7.

¹¹⁶ Marx 1966, p. 820. On this see especially Negt 1984.

¹¹⁷ Sennet 1998.

¹¹⁸ Marx 1973, p. 248.

¹¹⁹ Postone 1993, p. 307.

'one speaks of labour, than one is dealing immediately with Man himself. The new positing of the question is already its solution'.¹²⁰ Postone's substitution of the critique of capital with a theory of capital and a critique of labour, belies this insight. The theoretical and practical consequences are formidable.

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¹²⁰ Marx 1959, pp. 73–4.

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