

Introduction

Reconfiguring Historical Time *Moishe Postone's Interpretation of Marx*

Since the fall of the state-socialist regimes in 1989 and China's turn towards market-capitalism shortly after, socialism and Marxism seem to be things of the past. Societies that once appeared to be resisting capitalism and provided hopes for an alternative have all capitulated and their success is now often measured with respect to the extent to which they can develop market capitalism. For example, while Russia is criticized for falling into mafia-like politics and corruption, scholars, and even Chinese leftists, have praised China for making a successful transition to capitalism or developing an alternative form of market-organization.¹ On the whole, Marxists have had a difficult time coming to grips with the transformations that have taken place from the late 1960s to the present. In particular, they have been unable to grasp critically both the socialist-bloc and capitalist societies as part of a larger global form of domination. Indeed, explicitly or implicitly, Marxists have often thought of the socialist-bloc as a type of alternative.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the absence of an alternative encouraged many former Marxists to abandon Marxism and affirm theories such as post-structuralism or deconstruction. Such theories seem to have the advantage of giving up totalizing narratives and

1. See for example, Zhiyuan Cui and Roberto Mangabeira Unger, "China in the Russian Mirror," in *New Left Review*, Vol. 208, Nov. 1994, 78–87. This essay argues against "institutional fetishism" when dealing with China and Russia, thus claiming that we should go beyond the dichotomies of plan and market. While this is helpful, the essay fails to offer categories to make sense of China and Russia's different responses to the large historical transformations in capitalism.

grandiose projects of human emancipation. They offer the possibility of criticizing totalization, rationalization and bureaucratization (often understood under generic terms such as “violence” or “power”) regardless of whether they occurred in ostensibly socialist states or permeates the neo-liberal capitalism that pervades our world today. Although such theories have some critical purchase, they are in general unable to make sense of the historical trajectories of twentieth and twenty-first centuries and because proponents of post-structuralism usually do not think of domination or liberation in terms of global dynamics and structures, their ideals and their critiques of violence result in little more than some form of liberalism.

The opposition between post-structuralist historical indeterminacy and traditional Marxists’ narrow focus on economic domination has thus led to an impasse. On the one hand we have Marxists who emphasize concrete power-relations, but are unable to make sense of larger global dynamics of domination that pervaded both state-socialism and capitalist societies. At best, traditional Marxists focus on class relations in actually existing socialist states to develop an extremely localized critique. From this perspective, socialist domination appears to have nothing to do with capitalism. On the other hand, post-structuralists gesture in a fruitful direction by attempting to grasp larger problems related to totalization. However, the critical standpoint of post-structuralism (one could add here other posts, such as post-colonialism) comes at a significant price, namely an inability to deal with the historical specificity of capitalism. To develop their arguments post-structuralists often invoke some type of quasi-ontological and often transhistorical concept, such as *différance*, the repressed other, specters, the list is almost infinite. As a result, they are unable even to pose the question of whether totalization and rationalization are integrally related to capitalist modernity. Following Martin Heidegger and Friederich Nietzsche, we often find post-structuralists tracing problems of totality and metaphysics to Plato and Aristotle and locating violence in categories such as presence and representation. With such assumptions, it becomes impossible to examine whether totality and rationalization are constituted in relation to a historically specific dynamic, namely capitalism.

Moishe Postone's interpretation of Marx's mature theory of capitalism is significant precisely because it provides a path out of this impasse. Through a close reading of Marx's *Das Kapital*, Postone develops a theory of capitalism at a level of abstraction sufficient to analyze not only the logic behind state-socialism and post-war state and economic formations in the so-called North-Atlantic democracies, but more importantly, his framework allows us to grasp the reproduction of a certain core dynamic during different phases of capitalism, such as the liberal-phase, the fordist-phase and our contemporary neo-liberal phase of capitalism. In fact, from Postone's perspective, both the state-socialist regimes and the post-War welfare state mode of capitalism belong to the same period of state-centric capitalism, also known as the Fordist period of capitalism (from the 1930s to the 1970s). This response to capitalism became obsolete beginning in the 1970s, with the emergence of the neo-liberal mode of capitalism, which is now itself running into a serious crisis.

If Postone stopped at providing a theory to understand our present world as part of a larger dynamic of capitalism, he would have made a great contribution, but it would be largely academic— a framework with which to interpret the world, rather than to change it. But at the heart of Postone's work is precisely an imperative to change the world and provide for the first time the possibility of freedom. Postone contends that the possibility of human emancipation is both precluded and enabled through capitalism. To understand this point it is helpful to situate his work in relation to traditional Marxists and the theories associated with Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt school. Since Postone develops his position largely in response to traditional Marxism and builds on the Frankfurt School's critique of traditional Marxism, I begin with a brief sketch of traditional Marxism and the position of the Frankfurt School. Then, I will introduce certain central aspects of Postone's work, focusing more specifically on how he develops a theory of historical time and human emancipation by critically engaging Georg Lukács' work. In passing, I briefly assess recent criticisms of Postone's work by Peter Osborne and Christopher J. Arthur.

Traditional Marxism and the Possibility of Socialism emerging out of Capitalism

During the late 19th and early the 20th century, Marxists generally described history as consisting of a sequence of stages including slave society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and communism. They contended that socialism would emerge out of the contradictions of capitalism and more specifically from the conflict between workers and capitalists. On this view, capitalism differs from previous modes of production because in capitalist society overtly political ties or hierarchies binding people are dissolved. For example, in the West, the positions of serf and lord were overthrown and with the emergence of capitalism, people had to satisfy their needs by buying and selling commodities in exchange for money. The majority of people in capitalist society have nothing to sell except their labor power and they sell this to capitalists who own the means of production. The capitalist makes surplus-value by buying labor on the market and then selling the products of this labor for a greater price than what he paid for the labor. S/he drives to increase profits and thus aims to squeeze as much labor out of workers as possible. According to this basic reading of Marxism, eventually, workers will not tolerate being exploited and when they realize that they have nothing to lose but the chains that force them to sell their labor, they will revolt and create a new society, in which the means of production are collectively owned by workers.

From the above perspective, the possibility of socialism is contained in the contradictions of capitalism. There are a number of reasons for this. For example, it is only in capitalism that there emerges a class that is at once free from the transparent hierarchical bonds and yet systematically exploited. Moreover, in order to increase surplus-value, capitalists greatly develop technology and science, but this requires a new mode of production (or new relations of production), namely socialism.

This view of the movement of socialism posits a transhistorical subject, namely labor, which is supposed to be the basis of productivity in all societies, but gains self-consciousness in capitalism because

the workers are freed from overt hierarchical ties. Indeed, on this view, the evolution from one mode of production to another is largely made necessary due to labor's increasing productivity. Thus from the perspective of orthodox or traditional Marxism, the transition from capitalism to socialism is basically the same as the transition from any other mode of production. Of course, the significance of negation of capitalism greatly outweighs previous shifts in the mode of production because the abolition of capitalism represents the realization of the historical subject, namely labor, and this realization is synonymous with human emancipation, which is the goal of history.

The Response of the Frankfurt School and Postone's Reading of Marx

The Hungarian Marxist, Georg Lukács, in his early work, and especially the scholars of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, made an innovative contribution to Marxist theory by delinking capitalism from a narrow framework of class analysis and broadening their analysis to include what Max Weber would call rationalization. Hence Marxism could now account for the huge bureaucracies that emerged after the Great Depression around the world. Their theories would differ from many Marxists of the time, who would champion the bureaucracies in socialist countries by claiming that such regimes countered capitalism and represented the working-class. In Adorno and Horkheimer's view, the bureaucracies that enveloped the world were actually expressions of one logic namely that of the commodity-form or capitalism. In other words, following Lukács, they argue that both modern legality and the exchange-value side of the commodity form entail the same type of indifference to particularity. From the standpoint of exchange-value, any commodity can be exchanged for another, since they all represent quantities of value; thus commodities' specific use and particularity are negated. Similarly, in a modern legal system, the law functions independently of individual particularity. They contend that with the emergence of large bureaucracies, this indifference to particularity had become increasingly totalizing. However, this left them with a problem, name-

ly they could not explain how a post-capitalist society was possible. Because Adorno and Horkheimer had renounced labor as the transhistorical subject, they were left with little or only vague standpoints from which to resist the totalizing rationalization of capitalism, such as Adorno's ideas about radical negativity. The insights of the Frankfurt school, like those of the Poststructuralists might be useful, but only when connected to the contradictory dynamic of capitalism itself. In Postone's view, a key part of this analysis involves a return to the role of labor in capitalism.

Postone returns to the work of Marx to formulate a theory that is able to follow Adorno and Horkheimer in grounding modern rationalization in capitalism, but he echoes Lukács in making labor a central part of his analysis. In other words, through his reading of Marx, Postone shows the way in which the abstract nature of modernity is grounded in a new type of mediation by labor. The very first line of Marx's *Das Kapital* tells us that the wealth in capitalist societies appears as an immense agglomeration of commodities. Everything in our life, such as the clothes we wear, the food we eat and the homes we live in are purchased or rented as commodities. These commodities are products of other people's labor which we must buy with money that we earn through our own labor. This is one sense in which life in capitalist society is mediated by labor.

While orthodox Marxists conceive of labor transhistorically, Postone stresses that labor in capitalism is historically specific and that labor itself, rather than being the standpoint of critique, must become the object of critique. In other words, in Postone's view, labor did not always perform this universally mediating function. In pre-capitalist society, hierarchical ties were often more important than direct labor. Moreover, although there is no denying that capitalists and workers are involved in a number of significant struggles over conflicting interests, the logic of capital and the commodity form operate at a deeper level and provide the conditions for the possibility of this struggle. Put simply, when the proletariat struggles for greater wages or a shorter work-day or even for greater benefits, they battle within an arena of generalized commodity production and against capitalists who are aiming at increasing profits. The terms of such struggles are

determined by the value-form and do not in-themselves point beyond capitalism. Moreover, Postone asserts that by affirming their identity as laborers, the proletariat actually re-affirms the fundamental characteristic of capitalism, namely mediation by labor and the creation of a class of laborers. We will return to this point towards the end of this essay, but now we should note that according to Postone, what makes capitalism unique is not the formation of a capitalist class, but the emergence of a proletariat and a society mediated by labor. Thus Postone leaves us with an interesting twist to Marx's famous phrase in the Communist Manifesto, namely "The history of all society up to now is the history of class struggle."² In Postone's view, the Marx of *Das Kapital* did not hold such a transhistorical view of class. From the perspective of the later Marx, class struggle becomes a central part of history only in capitalism. In other words, precapitalist modes of life are not characterized by a totalizing dynamic and class has a different function in such cases. Thus the term history itself must be differently understood when analyzing capitalist society.

The Temporality of Relative Surplus-Value and the Possibility of Human Emancipation

Postone's remarks about the proletariat do not lead him to a mere pessimism about the prospects of creating a post-capitalist society. He does not simply ground the possibility of post-capitalist society in a proletarian movement; he locates the potential for historical transformation in the contradictions of capitalism related to the production of relative surplus-value. Readers of Marx will be familiar that with the idea of surplus value and the famous formula $M-C-M'$, where M refers to the money with which the capitalist buys commodified labor-power and M' refers the money that the capitalist gets by selling the products produced through labor. The capitalist seeks to maximize the difference between M and M' or surplus value and he mentions two ways to do this. One way is by creating "absolute surplus value," which involves increasing the length of the work-day, but this runs into certain natural limits. Hence the more salient way to create surplus value is by increasing by speed at which laborers produce. Capitalists do this

2. Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" *Later Political Writings*, Terrel Carver ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

by implementing new modes of organization and developing the use of machinery and technology, in short, the creation of relative surplus-value.

The creation of relative surplus value involves a dialectic between two sorts of time, abstract-time and “historical-time.” In capitalist society, wage-laborers are paid by the hour and in so far as every hour is 60 minutes, we are dealing here with abstract time, or in Postone’s terms, time as an independent variable. Postone distinguishes this idea of time as an “independent variable” or abstract time from concrete time or time as a “dependent variable.” For the most part, time as a dependent variable refers to time in pre-modern societies, where time was a function of concrete changes, such as the changes in the seasons or the movement of the sun.

However, he claims that capitalism itself has a peculiar type of concrete time, which Postone calls historical time. Here is how Postone describes this movement in his groundbreaking book, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*:

The movement resulting from the substantive determination of abstract time cannot be expressed in abstract temporal terms; it requires another frame of reference. That frame can be conceived as a mode of concrete time. Earlier, I defined concrete time as any sort of time that is a dependent variable—a function of events and actions. We have seen that the interaction of the two dimensions of commodity-determined labor is such that socially general increases in productivity move the abstract temporal unit “forward in time.” Productivity, according to Marx, is grounded in the social character of the use-value dimension of labor. Hence, this movement of time is a function of the use-value dimension of labor as it interacts with the value frame, and can be understood as a type of concrete time. In investigating the interaction of concrete and abstract labor, which lies at the heart of Marx’s analysis of capital, we have uncovered that a feature of capitalism is a mode of (concrete) time that expresses the motion of (abstract) time.³

3. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Criti-*

Concrete time as historical time refers to the following phenomenon: because of the development of technology, a single hour can become denser—the amount that one can and must produce in an hour increases. These increases in technology are linked to the production of relative surplus value and such increases reflect the use-value side of labor or the way in which labor produces wealth. Postone specifically refers to the following passage in Marx, which is worth quoting in full because it helps to explain a crucial point, namely the distinction between value and wealth.

In itself, an increase in the quality of use-values constitutes an increase in material wealth (*stofflichen Reichtum*). Two coats will clothe two men, one coat will only clothe one man, etc. Nevertheless, an increase in the amount of material wealth may correspond to a simultaneous fall in the magnitude of its value. This contradictory movement arises out of the twofold character of labour. By “productivity” of course, we always mean the productivity of concrete useful labor; in reality this determines only the degree of effectiveness of productive activity directed towards a given purpose within a given period of time. Useful labour becomes, therefore, a more or less abundant source of products in direct proportion as its productivity rises or falls. As against this, however, variations in productivity have no impact whatever on the labour itself represented in value. As productivity is an attribute of labour in its concrete useful form, it naturally ceases to have any bearing on that labour as soon as we abstract from its concrete useful form. The same labour, therefore, performed for the same length of time, always yields the same amount of value, independently of any variations in productivity. But it provides different quantities of use-values during equal periods of time; more, if productivity rises; fewer if it falls. For this reason, the same change in productivity which increases the fruitfulness of labor, and therefore the amount of use-values produced by it, also brings about the a reduction of value of this increased total amount, if it cuts down the total amount of labour-time necessary to produce

cal Theory, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 293.

the use-values. The converse also holds.⁴

When increases in technology are sporadic and limited to one firm or even a few firms, the average is not affected to a significant degree and thus the firms with advanced technology can capitalize on their ability to produce more quickly and increase their surplus value. They are able to exploit more labor-power in a given hour than their competitors. However, in Marx's view, the tendency in capitalist society is for the average labor-time necessary to produce a given commodity to decrease because the other firms will need to increase their rate of productivity to remain in business and compete with capitalists who have greater technological capabilities. In this case, the value of individual commodities decreases, since the average necessary labor time required to produce them decreases. As a result, the total value produced tends to remain constant, since one is required to produce more in every individual hour. Since the average speed of production increases and, as a consequence, firms must produce more just to exist and produce the same amount of value, Postone calls this the "treadmill effect" or the "treadmill dynamic."

Historical time refers to the constant increase in productivity created by machines and improved technology. Although the total amount of value produced tends to remain constant, the amount of wealth or use-values produced increases. At first, one might wonder why the increased technology is called "historical time," but we must keep in mind that in Postone's view, the vast historical changes in capitalism from liberal, to fordist to neo-liberal modes of capitalism are driven by this dialectic between increases in productivity and the reconstitution of the standards of the labor hour. Specifically, as productivity and the speed of production increases it causes crisis related to, among other things, overproduction and the inability to realize value on the market. To deal with such crisis states often initiate new forms of political organization.

Such crisis are often related to the difference between abstract and historical time, which in turn reflects the gap between value, which is

4. Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, Ben Fowkes trans. (London: Penguin, 1990) 136–137.

measured in terms of average necessary labor time, and wealth, which refers to the concrete products or use-values produced (and which must be purchased/consumed to reproduce the M-C-M' cycle). Marx expressed the distinction between wealth and value in the above cited passage by distinguishing the use-value side of labor and the production of value. Notice that an increase in productivity increases material wealth (*stoffliche Reichtum*) but will decrease value because less labor-time is expended. In Postone's view, this dialectic between wealth and value or historical and abstract time embodies a contradiction, which ultimately points the way to a new future. In other words, as technology improves, wage-labor becomes obsolete, but at the same time, the capitalist mode of production is organized around the exploitation of wage-labor; value is measured in terms of labor-time. Because of this dynamic based on exploitation, increased productivity from technology does not simply benefit the worker or the people at large, but often leads to economic crisis and unemployment. Within capitalist society, as technological advances make wage-labor less necessary, the natural result is unemployment. However, such technological developments also make capitalism—a society organized around factory-oriented labor, capitalists and surplus value—obsolete and this makes it possible for people to delink technological advances from the logic of surplus-value and democratically organize productive power for the benefit of humanity, rather than for the creation of surplus-value. In such a case, history ceases to be “an alienating treadmill dynamic” that controls the lives of people; in post-capitalist society, for the first time, collectively make history.

However, the realization of this possibility is not a natural outgrowth of capital society; it is a political project that must negate the link between historical time and abstract time that is unique to capitalism. We will return to this problem when we deal with Postone's critique of Lukács in final section of this essay. But first I will turn to a recent critique of Postone idea of historical time, since through responding to this critique, we can understand more fully the goals and parameters of Postone's project.

Peter Osborne's Critique of Postone

Recently Peter Osborne criticizes Postone's concept of historical time, in the following manner:

Postone is equivocal (at worst, simply contradictory) about historical time. On the one hand, it is on occasion treated synonymously with concrete time, as the time of events; on the other hand, it is considered the result of the dynamic relationship between abstract time (as the universalizing time of capital) and concrete time. In neither case is it situated in the context of the complex ontology of the human; or theorized in relation to the concept of time itself.⁵

Osborne's criticism becomes clear once we return to the above cited passage from Postone's book: "We have uncovered that a feature of capitalism is a mode of (concrete) time that expresses the motion of (abstract) time." Osborne refers to an ambiguity in Postone's text between two types of concrete time, namely concrete time in pre-capitalist societies, where time is a function of concrete changes and concrete time as historical time in capitalist society. In short, he claims that Postone has two definitions of historical time in capitalism: it is both concrete time as the time of events and the result of a dynamic relationship between abstract and concrete time.

In the last sentence of the above cited passage, Osborne suggests that Postone has failed to situate concrete or historical time in the ontology of the human or the concept of time itself. This remark shows that Osborne has misunderstood Postone's project and hence it is helpful to begin by responding to this last demand and then work back to the semantic complexities in Postone's formulations. Postone's project explicitly avoids ideas such as "the ontology of the human" or "the concept of time itself," since his main aim is to historicize the production of ontology and the concept of time as well. He would of course not deny that there are elements that now appear universal to the human condition, but these elements are not the standpoint of a

5. Peter Osborne, "Marx and the Philosophy of Time" *Radical Philosophy* 147 January/February 2008 15–22, 19.

critique of capitalism. Moreover, Postone would ground this appearance and the type of continuity that it presupposes in the concepts of time produced by capitalism.⁶

Both historical time and abstract time are unique to the dynamic of capitalism rather than being part of a transhistorical ontology of the human. In Postone's view, there is no totalizing historical dynamic before capitalism and hence one cannot speak of historical time at that point. Moreover, while one might argue that there were sporadic instances of abstract time, such as the time of Aristotle's *Physics*, such a concept of time was not generalized and did not develop into a system of social domination before the advent of capitalism. Thus, in Postone's view, not only is it incorrect to refer to a universal concept of time for the whole of humanity, it is probably misleading to assume that pre-capitalist societies had one concept of time governing their various ways of life.

Hence to understand the ambiguities associated with Postone's use of the term concrete time, it is helpful to focus on the process to which he refers. What distinguishes historical time is precisely that it is linked to an increase in productivity that capitalists bring about through the production of relative surplus-value. Historical time or the time of relative surplus value is concrete in the sense that it cannot be grasped by mere abstract determinations such as the hour; rather it refers to the way in which the hour itself becomes denser with increases in technology and general productivity. However, this type of concreteness is unique since the movement of the hour depends on mediation by abstract-time. Without abstract-time, there would be

6. Peter Osborne's misreading is surprising since his writings often bear an uncanny resemblance to Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. In particular, he also seems to want to historicize the production of continuity in time. In his book, *The Politics of Time*, he criticizes "historicism" for the "re-establishment of an abstract continuity with the past in a naturalized and merely chronological form." *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 140. He also discusses this form of continuity by making an analogy between the money in capitalism and abstract time. Invocations of a concept of time itself seem to presuppose precisely such an abstract continuity. Moreover, like Postone, Osborne does not ground the possibility of human emancipation in a transhistorical dynamic related to the working-class, but in the difference between value and wealth. See, Peter Osborne, "Marx's Philosophy of Time," op. cit., 21.

no treadmill dynamic associated with the compulsions related to the standard of average necessary labor-time. This abstract standard compels firms to either go out of business or increase productivity.

So, when we read Postone's phrase, the movement of time "can be understood as a sort of concrete time," it is important to emphasize what "sort of" concrete time this is. In short, the sort of concrete time in capitalism and in pre-capitalist societies are qualitatively different. First of all, in precapitalist societies, concrete time does not refer to a totalizing dynamic, nor does it refer to a reflexive attempt to grasp such a society. Indeed, when we use the term "concrete time" to describe practices associated with pre-capitalist society, we do so from a standpoint outside that society in order to highlight the historical specificity of capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies, concrete time often was connected to various symbolic systems, which give meaning to events and actions, such as seasonal changes. Historical time in capitalism, on the other hand, is concrete when compared to abstract time in capitalism, but this concreteness is not really a function of events. Rather, the concreteness of historical time in capitalism lies in a process of increasing productivity and this type of time is blind and not innately connected to a symbolic world. Moreover, unlike abstract time with which we interact everyday and use to set our appointments, historical time is a dynamic that shapes our lives without our usually taking note of it as such.

Historical time in capitalism is always already mediated by abstract-time, since in capitalism, wealth is mediated by value. Postone discusses historical-time as the qualitative side time in that it represents the production of use-values. However, historical time appears to us in quantitative terms, as an increase in the quantity of use-values or as an increase in the speed of production. But this gap returns us to the possibility of human emancipation. Postone notes that the above dialectic need not always govern our lives. He claims that one can produce wealth without the mediation of value.

The dialectical dynamic [between abstract and historical time] does, however, give rise to the historical possibility that production based on historical time can be constituted separately from production

based on abstract present time—and that the alienated interaction of past and present, characteristic of capitalism, can be overcome.⁷

As in the case of his discussion of concrete time in the passage cited above, in this passage, one must be careful to avoid being led astray by the semantic ambiguities associated with the term “historical time.” In Postone’s view, there is no historical time prior to capitalism and in capitalism historical time is precisely mediated by abstract time. In this case, what would production based on historical time separate from production based on abstract time be? Indeed, when historical time is separated from the compulsion related to abstract time it would cease to be historical time as we know it. History would no longer be a runaway dynamic related to the production of surplus value; it would become production for use that is mediated by people collectively controlling production. In such a case, history ceases to be a totalizing and alienating dynamic that controls people; in post-capitalist society people create history together.

Moreover, the possibility that people collectively reconfigure historical time and bring it under their control emerges through the alienating dynamic of capital, which for the first time introduces a mediation that connects people around the world. Reconfiguring historical time involves a type of re-mediation of social relations through democratic alliances rather than through a blind interdependence that goes on behind the producers’ backs. There are a number of conditions that must be met before people can reconfigure history. For example, people would need to create new forms of identity that facilitate cooperation beyond nation-states, which have conditioned history in the past few centuries. To some extent, the foundations for such new forms of identity have already been laid because capital is already a transnational dynamic, which acts like the subject of history. But here again, in order for people to negate capitalism, they must take what is given to them in alienated form and bring it under conscious control. This would of course involve establishing new institutions that would facilitate the type of coordination required to foster and

7. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 301.

develop collective control on a large scale. These are all issues that go beyond the scope of this introduction, but I will now return to a major issue in Postone's reading of Marx, namely the role of the working class in negating capitalism as the subject of history.

*How Does One Negate Capitalism?:
Postone's Critique of Lukács and the Role of the Working Class*

Postone's theory of capitalism shows us how the contradictions of capitalism produce the possibility of different type of society, one which is not mediated by labor and the treadmill dynamic. However, it is unclear what type of political practice would be required to realize such a society. Postone spends much time distinguishing himself from traditional Marxists, who uphold the working class as the revolutionary subject of history. His main aim is to grasp the role of the working-class in relation to the nature of history in capitalism. In a recent essay on Georg Lukács, he focuses specifically on the problem of history and time in relation to human emancipation. He voices his criticisms of Lukács by citing the following passage from Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*:

This image of a frozen reality that nevertheless is caught up in an unremitting ghostly movement at once becomes meaningful when the reality is dissolved into the process of which man is the driving force. This can be seen only from the standpoint of the proletariat because the meaning of these tendencies is the abolition of capitalism and so for the bourgeoisie to become conscious of them would be tantamount to suicide (Lukács, 1971, p.181).⁸

Postone contrasts Lukács' position to Marx's in the following manner.

The form of mediation constitutive of capitalism, in Marx's analysis, gives rise to a new form of social domination—one that subjects

8. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectic*, Rodney Livingstone trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 181.

people to impersonal, increasingly rationalized structural imperatives and constraints. It is the domination of people by time. This temporal domination is real, not ghostly.⁹

The problems in interpreting the above passage in Lukács and Postone's critique of it are compounded by infelicities in the English translation of Lukács. The above passage by Lukács would probably be better translated as

This image of continuous moving and spectral stillness becomes meaningful when this stillness is dissolved into a process of which man is the driving force.¹⁰

Based on this translation of the passage, Lukács wants to criticize both the moving and frozen dimensions of capitalism from a standpoint from which man is the driving force. But how should we understand the question of whether this temporal domination is real or spectral? A closer look at the passage shows that Lukács would probably agree with Postone that temporal domination in capitalism is both real and spectral.

By translating "gespenstischen" as ghostly, the translator buries the way in which Lukács draws on a specific passage in Marx's *Das Kapital*. Lukács begins the first section of his essay, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" with the following remarks.

The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "spectral objectivity" (*gespenstige gegenständlichkeit*).¹¹

9. Moïse Postone, "The Subject and Social Theory: Marx and Lukács on Hegel," in this volume.

10. Geörg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, in Geörg Lukács, *Werke, Frühbeschrieben 2* Berlin: Herman Luchterhand Verlag GmbH, 1968, 367. The original German reads „Dieses Bild einer sich ununterbrochen bewegenden gespenstischen Starrheit loest sich sogleich ins Sinnvolle auf, wenn ihre Starrheit sich in den Prozess, dessen treibende Kraft der Mensch ist, auflöst.“

11. Lukács, Eng, 83, Ger., 257. The English translation of Lukács can be confusing

Here the term spectral objectivity refers to a passage in Marx's *Das Kapital* which notes that once we disregard the use-value of the commodities,

all that remains in each case is the same spectral objectivity (*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*), a pure jelly (*eine bloße Gallerte*) of undifferentiated human labor.¹²

This undifferentiated labor is precisely what Postone describes as abstract-labor, which is the form of labor that mediates capitalist society. “‘Abstract labour’, as a historically specific mediating function of labour, is the content or, better, ‘substance’ of value.”¹³ In this context, that we can argue that Lukács’ basic point overlaps with the above cited passage from Postone’s book, where he claims that historical time can be constituted separately from abstract time. After all, this would be a situation in which humanity becomes the driving force of history for both Lukács and Postone. The difference between the two lies in the fact that in Postone’s view people become the driving force of history only when they abolish proletarian labor, while from Lukács’ perspective, the proletariat realizes this goal of humanity.

Postone stresses that abstract labor is both the form and the content of value and so contends that labor is inextricably linked to capital. Moreover, in Postone’s view because capital’s fundamental characteristic is mediation by labor, one cannot simply rely on the working-class to negate capitalism. Thus rather than realizing the subject of history as labor, in Postone’s view, Marxists should aim to negate the subject of history, namely capital.

In other words, in Postone’s view, rather than labor, capital is the

because the translator does not consistently translate the term *gespenstige*. In this passage, he translates it as “phantom-like,” which is accurate and does correspond to the translation of the relevant passage of Marx’s *Capital*, but we lose the connection with Lukács’ later use of the term.

12. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, (Berlin: Dietz, 2007), 52.

Chris Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital*, 171.

13. Postone, “The Subject and Social Theory: Marx and Lukács on Hegel”

subject of history. Postone explains this point by making a comparison to Hegel's Spirit:

For Hegel, the Absolute, the totality of the subjective-objective categories, grounds itself. As the self-moving "substance" that is "Subject," it is the true *causa sui* as well as the endpoint of its own development. In *Capital*, Marx presents the underlying forms of commodity-determined society as constituting the social context for notions such as the difference between essence and appearance, the philosophical concept of substance, the dichotomy of subject and object, the notion of totality, and, on the logical level of the category of capital, the unfolding dialectic of the identical subject-object.¹⁴

In some sense, this is Marx's true turning Hegel on his head, since unlike Lukács who replaces Hegel's transhistorical subject, namely Spirit, with the working-class, Marx historicizes Hegel's dynamic of spirit by claiming that the logic that Hegel describes is actually the logic of capital. Moreover, according to Postone, capitalism is unique in having a totalizing immanent logic and later thinkers and social theorists often anachronistically transpose this logic to other periods in order to develop an overarching "theory of history."

From Postone's perspective, capital is a historical subject which behaves in many ways like Hegel's spirit; however, unlike Hegel's spirit, capital is blind, moving towards increasing productivity. It is a subject but does not have subjectivity, knowledge, self-consciousness or a *telos*. Recently, Christopher J. Arthur has explained how something such as capital, which does not have subjectivity could still be a subject. He explains:

From a Hegelian point of view, the most abstract capacity of a subject, that which makes possible its freedom, is the capacity to range things under their universal concept and treat them accordingly. It is the way heterogeneous commodities are posited by capital as bearers of value and surplus-value, the universal substance of capital, and the

14. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 156.

way the production process is shaped so as to maximize valorization, that means were are faced with a ‘Subject’ here, albeit of a logical kind rather than a flesh and blood one. Moreover, the complementary moments of consciousness, knowing etc. are secured insofar as this structure of valorization imposes its logic on the personifications of capital, namely owners and managers.¹⁵

Arthur’s comments are helpful in explaining how Postone conceives of capital as a subject, but he criticizes Postone for not recognizing that the working class is the counter-subject of history, which can negate capitalism.¹⁶ We have seen that Postone rejects Lukács vision of the

15. Christopher Arthur, “Subject and Counter-Subject” *Historical Materialism: Research in Marxist Theory*, Volume 12.3, 93–102, 95–6.

16. There are other aspects of Arthur’s critique that go beyond the scope of this essay. However, because some of Arthur’s criticisms overlap with those of others in volume 12.3 of *Historical Materialism*, which was devoted to Postone’s book, I will briefly deal with one of Arthur’s criticism in this footnote. Arthur summarizes Postone’s work in the following manner:

He introduces the notion of abstract labour in a different way from Marx, who brings it in as the substance of value. Rather, Postone argues that, in generalized commodity exchange, labour is abstract in the sense that, while its own activity is concrete and produces a specific product, it appears socially as a means of acquisition of any and every product through the exchange mechanism; hence its concrete specificity is displaced, and it takes on a form of abstract generality. It is only because all labours taken thus are integrated in a special social totality that their products take the form of value.

This argument strikes me as similar to putting the cart before the horse. In an exchange economy as such, labour certainly does not have the form of a means of acquisition in general, but only partially so, if one can find that interlocutor who happens to have a particular need for what one offers. It is only in a money economy that labour becomes a means of acquisition in general. The conditioning sequence does not run: abstract labour→value→money, but the reverse. Money posits all commodities as values, and their positing of value brings about the abstract identity of the labours embodied in all products. (*Historical Materialism*, 12.3, 2004, 99)

First, we have seen that Postone explicitly claims that labor is the substance of value. But more specifically, here, rather than Postone, it appears to be Arthur who is putting the cart before the horse, since he bestows money with the power to posit all commodities as values. But we must ask why is it that money never performed this function in previous societies? This is precisely the question that Marx asks in the first chapter of *Das Kapital*, when he discusses Aristotle’s inability to derive the value-form. Recall that

working-class as the transhistorical subject-object. Nonetheless, we should pause before concluding, as many readers of Postone do, that Postone's rejection of labor as the transhistorical subject implies a complete rejection of the working-class' role in the negation of capitalism. Indeed, given that the proletariat is the primary producer of value, it would have to play a crucial role in transforming capitalism. In his book, he suggests that in order for a movement concerned with workers to point beyond capitalism,

it would both have to defend workers' interests and have to participate in their transformation—for example, by calling into question the given structure of labor, not identifying people any longer in terms that structure and participating in rethinking those interests.¹⁷

This passage shows that when we read Postone's work, we should not leap from his denial that the proletariat is the subject of history, to the conclusion that he refuses the proletariat an essential role in a political movement that would gesture beyond capitalism. The problem of course is that the proletariat must participate in a paradoxical movement that negates itself and points to a world not dominated by proletarian labor. They must realize that they are part of the solution only to the extent that they acknowledge that they are part of the

the reason that Aristotle could not derive the value-form, was not that he did not have a concept of money, but that he did not have a concept of value, in which all things could be reduced to a homogenous substance, namely labor. This homogenous substance cannot be concrete labor, but, as Postone, points out, a type of abstract labor, that is specific to capitalism. Hence Arthur misleads readers by opposing labor as the subject of value and the idea that labor appears socially as a means of acquisition of any and every product. It is precisely because abstract labor is the substance of value that labor is the means of acquisition of use-values in capitalist society

Arthur's criticism is further confusing, because by accusing Postone of betraying Marx's original theory, Arthur conceals the way his own theory of money departs for the one Marx outlines in *Das Kapital*. In his recent book, which presents, on the whole, an extremely helpful reading of Marx, he explicitly criticizes both Hegel and Marx because "neither of them understood just how 'peculiar' a money economy is." [Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 9]. In short, Arthur intends to give money a greater function and more power than Marx endows to it in *Das Kapital*.

17. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 372.

problem. However, it is precisely because they are a fundamental part of capitalism that they must be an integral part of any attempt to overcome capitalism.

Conclusion

Postone's book, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* was first published in 1993 a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and, since then, the relevance of the ideas in this work and of Postone's theory in general have become more apparent. As I write this introduction, people around the world face a crisis in global capitalism. Explanations for this crisis vary, but given the increase in layoffs and unemployment, it seems clear that the contradiction that Postone repeatedly highlights, namely that of the dynamic of capital making proletarian labor at once necessary and obsolete, plays an important role. The question for the future remains how a political movement could seize the opportunity in such crisis to transform the dynamic that dominates our lives and makes a mockery of ideals such as democracy and freedom. Postone's work shows that the hope for democracy does not lie in mere institutional reforms, but in political action to negate the un-democratic processes that propel and destroy contemporary organizations. Such a call may appear utopian, but it is in fact necessary. As Christopher J. Arthur has pointed out, the dynamic of capitalism constantly exploits both nature and human labor and thus it will eventually be overcome in the short run through revolution or in the long run through ecological collapse.¹⁸ The latter result would in some sense be the ultimate triumph of heteronomy, since the conditions for human life would no longer exist. Postone's work represents an attempt to lay the groundwork to realize the former possibility and create a path out of heteronomous history.

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18. Christopher J. Arthur, "Subject and Counter-Subject," op. cit. 99.