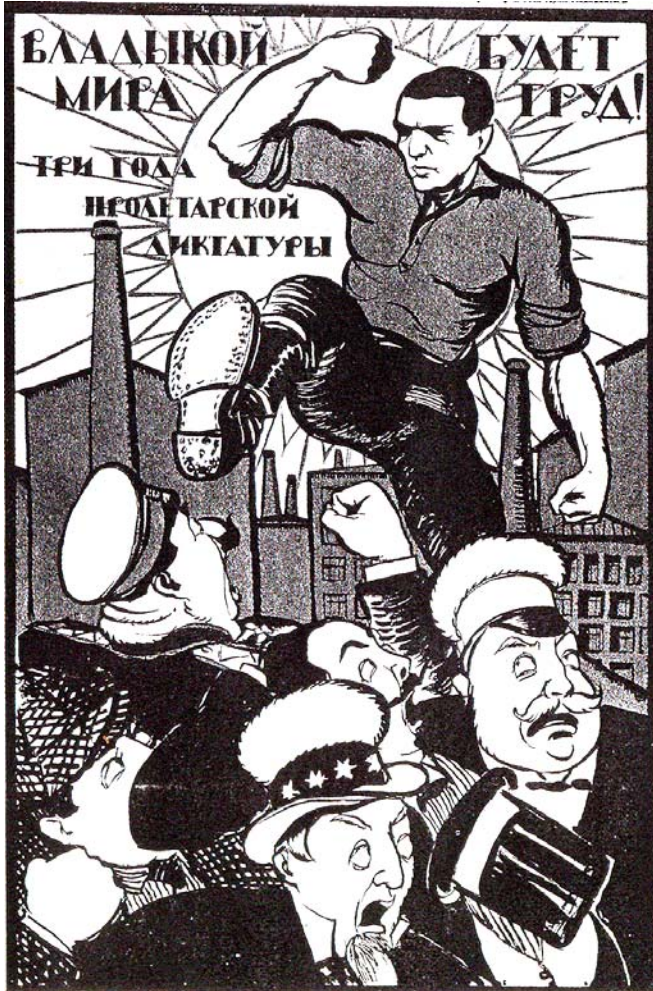


# Capital beyond class struggle?

Review: *Time, labour and social domination*

Moishe Postone (Cambridge University Press, 1996; first published 1993)



## Introduction

In Germany Moishe Postone is best known for his work discussing anti-Semitism in terms of the commodity form.<sup>1</sup> However, elsewhere he is perhaps far better known for his radical re-interpretation of Marx as ‘critical social theory’. This radical re-interpretation of Marx was originally sketched out in a series of articles written in the 1970s. It was then published in a greatly extended and revised form as *Time, labour and social domination*<sup>2</sup> in the early 1990s.

Beyond a few rather restricted circles of radical intellectuals and academics, it cannot be said that *Time, labour and social domination* is particularly well known or even influential. This is perhaps not surprising. For the

uninitiated, Postone’s work may appear as not only obscure but also rather annoying. Indeed, it must be said that the book is exasperatingly repetitive, giving the impression that it is seeking to impose its arguments on us by nailing them into our heads with a hammer. This book also tends to unnecessarily use shorthanded abstract (and annoyingly ‘learned’) expressions to indicate concrete concepts. For example, the result of competition on the market, with all the subtleties due to its relation to class struggle, becomes, simply, the ‘reconstitution of social labour time’ (Postone, p. 292). Or the revolution, however one imagines it *in concrete*, becomes ‘the reappropriation of accumulated time’.<sup>3</sup> And so on. The result of this method is a book that turns all aspects of (concrete) reality into abstract big words and toys with them.

More irritatingly for the reader, *Time, labour and social domination* proposes counterintuitive and politically dodgy arguments such as: classes and class struggle are not really ‘essential’ in capitalism. What is worse, it presents them as ‘what Marx really meant to say (but which somehow no previous reader has ever realised)’. In order to prove this is the case, Postone cuts out and reassembles *ad hoc* quotes from Marx’s work, picking and interpreting words with the same zeal that a Renaissance alchemist would apply to decoding the *Book of Revelation*. Thus the reader is teased by finicky questions such as: what did Marx actually mean when he mentioned ‘the foundations’ of value? What did he mean by ‘labour’? Is it more correct to say that a commodity *has* value, or that it *is* value? Is it more correct to consider our movement *in* time, or the movement *of* time? Undoubtedly, reading this book requires dedication and self-sacrifice, but it has a reward - if you have read it from page 1 to page 399 you must belong to the elect few.

Last but not least, many readers, even those who are very ‘learned’, are disappointed by the fact that Postone never tries to apply his abstract construction to facts. A new theory cannot just borrow authority from a previous sacred text, and claim it to be true only because ‘that is what Marx really meant to say’. It needs to confront reality to sustain its feasibility. Postone’s theory claims to explain the USSR or late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism. Yet he provides no concrete analysis, or even any observations of those systems. There is no attempt to struggle with empirical details. As a consequence, *Time, labour and social domination* presents itself as a rather fragile construction standing on words and interpretations of words; it is a bit like the first little pig’s straw house, whose constructor himself knows it’s better not

<sup>1</sup> ‘Anti-Semitism and National Socialism’, *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes, New York, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1996; first published 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Or: ‘the constitution of another non-“objective” form of social mediation’ (p. 361); ‘the historical negation of capitalism’, ‘the abolition of the totality’ (p. 79); etc. Or even more abstractly, ‘the abolition of value’ (p. 362).

to expose it to any challenge from the big bad wolf, i.e. the concrete world.

In the light of all this, we have little doubt that the immediate reaction of many of our readers, after having read a few pages, would be to conclude that *Time, labour and social domination* is a load of intellectual Marxological waffle and promptly chuck it in the recycling bin.

Nevertheless, for the few who are prepared to persevere with *Time, labour and social domination*, it is certainly evident that Postone is an erudite and clever writer. In presenting his reinterpretation of Marx, Postone draws on the vast literature, which has developed in recent decades, that has sought to return to the Marx before the interpretations of Stalin, Lenin and even Engels. In doing so Postone rigorously and competently re-presents many of the familiar themes of this 'return to Marx': the importance of Hegel for understanding the nature and method of Marx's theory; how Marx's theory is not a body of positive scientific knowledge, but a 'self-grounding critique'; the central importance of Marx's concepts of alienation and commodity-fetishism, and so forth. Postone skilfully weaves together these themes and teases out their implications to provide what would seem to be a sound theoretical grounding for the now well recognized critique of traditional Marxism.

As many have pointed out, traditional Marxism sees the overcoming of capitalism in terms of the suppression of the anarchy of the market and private property and their replacement by rational planning and the socialisation of the means of production under a workers' state. However, for Postone, this is merely the 'critique of capital from the standpoint of labour', which ends up merely affirming labour as labour. The failings of this 'critique of capital from the standpoint of labour' being epitomized by the USSR – which for Postone remained an essentially capitalist society. Against this failed critique of capitalism offered by traditional Marxism, Postone counterposes the 'critique of labour in capitalism'. Postone argues that labour in the capitalist process of production is more fundamental for capital than those aspects which were central in traditional Marxism: specifically, private property and the market. Thus, as he said as early as 1978, 'the overcoming of capitalism must involve a transformation of the mode of production and not merely of the existing mode of distribution'.<sup>4</sup>

In drawing upon the literature that has sought to 'return to Marx', which has been very influential for us, and by developing his 'critique of labour in capitalism', which would seem to resonate with our own criticisms of the productivism of traditional Marxism and the ideas that have arisen from the 'refusal of work', Postone's *Time, labour and social domination* might well appear as being in accord with our own theoretical project. Certainly, for the less critical readers of Postone – particularly those committed to a critique of the productivism of traditional Marxism and who are well versed in Hegelian Marxism – *Time, labour and social domination* may well appear as both a fascinating and

persuasive book.<sup>5</sup> As such, we can not ourselves simply dismiss Postone out of hand. Thus we have felt it necessary to review *Time, labour and social domination*.

Yet, as we shall show, for all its erudition, for all its cogent arguments, and for all the invocation of the 'right-on authorities', the instinctive reaction, which perhaps most of our readers would have on casually perusing Postone's book, is essentially correct. As we shall show, by privileging what is abstract as what is more 'essential', Postone leads his readers from Hegelian Marxism to what we may term a 'Marxist Hegelianism', which sees capital as a closed identity and class struggle as merely an ancillary element in capital's quasi-mechanical development. If Marx sought to invert Hegel's dialectic to find the 'rational kernel within the mystical shell', Postone seeks to invert Marx in order to re-mystify capital all over again. As a result, despite all his protestation to the contrary, Postone ends up with a rather pessimistic conservatism. As such, Postone is very pertinent for us, not because he is somehow in accord with our theoretical and political project, but on the contrary, because he brings to the fore the dangers and pitfalls of critical and Hegelian Marxist theory, which arose out of the 'return to Marx' over recent decades, that we may have otherwise overlooked.

This review article is therefore a structural survey of Postone's house, testing its methodological body and political foundations. In Part 1 we will first consider Postone's methodology, which turns anything concrete into abstractions, and see how this process serves to sweep under the carpet key concrete aspects of capitalism: e.g. the experience of dispossession – and show that methodology is related to an already assumed view of society as essentially classless. In part 2 we will show how this methodology leads to a closed view of capital as a totalising identical subject-object. Finally, in Part 3, we will see how Postone tries to solve a riddle: where is revolutionary consciousness rooted in such a closed reality? And we will see why he can't solve

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, taking each sentences of his book in isolation from the context, we may easily agree with the 85% of them. One has to be certainly very attentive to spot the clever twists and turns of Postone's line of argument. One of Postone's favourite tricks is his use of the seemingly innocent expressions 'but not only' and 'not fully', which by sleight of hand come to mean 'but instead' and 'not at all'. For example, as Postone's apologist Marcel Stoetzler has pointed out (in 'Postone's Marx: A Theorist of Modern Society, its Social Movements and its Imprisonment by Abstract Labour', *Historical Materialism*, Volume 12, Issue 3, 2004, pp. 261- 284.), Postone does not deny the place of classes (defined as 'sociological groupings') or private property in a Marxist theory – he only says that an understanding of capitalism cannot be based *only* on, or be understand *fully* by, these concrete concepts, but should look *also* at the abstract power of capital behind them. Written this way, nobody would object to this. But by turning his 'but also' into a 'but instead', and his 'not fully' into 'not at all', Postone is able to deny the conceptual and 'essential' relevance of classes and private property at all, to the point of using the category of 'people' throughout his book instead. This was noticed by Chris Arthur in 'Moishe Postone, Time, labour and social domination', *Capital and Class* n. 54, Autumn 1994, pp. 150-155: 'Postone argues that capital cannot be explained 'fully' as a class relation whose inner development is predicated on class struggle 'alone'... his fatal mistake is to go from 'capital cannot be explained *fully* in terms of class struggle *alone*'... to a complete rejection of the significance of class struggle for socialism'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Necessity, Labour and Time: A reinterpretation of the Marxian critique of capitalism', *Social Research* 45, Winter 1978, pp. 739-788. As we will note in the main text, here Postone confuses the concept of 'mode of production' with production or, as he calls it, 'mode of producing'.

this riddle. In answer to Postone's hopeless theory, we will show finally that in order to explain the emergence of revolutionary consciousness as historically necessary, if we are to overcome capital, one has to consider class relations, relations of property etc. *i.e. all that Postone overlooks as 'inessential'*.

## 1 Abstracting away dispossession

### 1.1 Postone's methodology: from 'essence' to 'mystifying appearances'

In this section we examine Postone's peculiar interpretation of Marx's 'method', which he follows himself in his book. In doing this, we do not mean to (simply) do 'Marxology' and argue whether or not, or to what extent, Marx really did follow this method. This would be fine for an academic work, but not for *Aufheben*. In fact, there is more than an issue of Marxology in this exploration: the thinker's methodology is the way the thinker's perspectives rationalise themselves - it is the end point of an intellectual trip that starts from the thinker's living perspectives. This article would therefore be incomplete if it stopped at a finicky Marxological level. After section 1.1, which deals with Postone's reading of Marx, we will explore Postone's political and social grounds and show how these appear as *the logical consequences* of his method but are in fact *its preconditions*. In doing so we will reveal what Postone's political standpoint and perspectives are, and will show that his method is one that abstracts away all issues of property relations, and therefore class struggle, from this theory.

Postone seems to be a bit sheepish about his approach. Only in Chapter 4 does he finally reveal to us his central assumption about Marx's general method: *in Capital, Marx proceeded from 'essential' categories to categories of (mystifying) appearances*. In Postone's words:

The movement of Marx's presentation from the first to the third volume of *Capital* should... be considered not as a movement approaching the "reality" of capitalism but one approaching its manifold forms of surface appearance. (p. 134)

In order to 'prove' this Postone quotes Marx's preface to *Capital*, Volume 3, where Marx writes that he is now examining 'the forms which [the various forms of capital] assume on the surface of society, in the action of the different capitals upon one another, and in the ordinary consciousness of the agents of production'.

Postone therefore says that according to Marx the 'essential' categories for grasping capital are those presented in the first chapter of *Capital*; they are capital's 'deep structure'. Class relations and wage labour, as prices, are instead forms of appearance which mystify our 'ordinary consciousness'. The 'ordinary consciousnesses' remain 'bound to the level of appearances' and are mystified by the appearances of the deep structures into reproducing capital: 'Everyday action and thought are grounded in the manifest forms of the deep structures and, in turn, reconstitute those deep structures and everyday actions and thoughts' (pp. 135-6). Postone's theory offers a salvation from the blindness of 'ordinary consciousnesses' by embracing, and clinging to, the real 'essences' behind mystifications, which are,

specifically, the categories presented by Marx at the very beginning of *Capital*.

The mystification operated by the 'deep structures' is associated by Postone to the 'veil' that Marx mentions in his section on commodity fetishism. This way Postone's theory appears to have taken onboard Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

Postone's presentation of 'Marx's methods' has many attractive aspects, one of which is that it promises the light that the 'ordinary consciousness' can't see. This no doubt appeals to those who have a weak spot for mystical political theory. Also, this presentation allows Postone to dismiss Volumes 2 and 3 as appearances of capital as it was in Marx's time. Is this crucial? Yes, as for example McNally notices that it is in Volume 3 that Marx 'thoroughly deconstructs [the] myth of self-birthing capital [presented in Volume 1] - a myth that is the central argument in Postone's work! In Volume 3 in fact Marx demonstrates the insurmountable dependence of capital on wage labour'. Postone's theory is however able to defuse any criticism on the basis of this volume, as it is coherently able to explain why *Capital* Volume 3 is not about 'essential' concepts, but 'surface appearances'!

The intellectual coherence of Postone's theory is indeed fascinating. By warning us against the most concrete as the most mystifying, it provides a perfect theoretical self-justification for its own abstractedness. Postone's extreme abstract construction makes itself invulnerable to any critique which refers to concrete things such as property relations or class relations. It is a straw house that intimidates any bad wolf by dismissing anything that is not made of straw like itself as 'inessential', or even 'mystifying'!

However, as we have remarked earlier, this house stands up only insofar Postone can claim that Marx's sacred texts 'actually' say what he says. Going to the core of methodology, our question then becomes: *did Marx really proceed from 'essence' to appearances?* We can read the answer in Marx's writings. As early as in the *Grundrisse* Marx clarifies to himself what's wrong with the bourgeois theoretical approach and how a 'scientific' theory should proceed. In the introduction, speaking about the method of political economy, Marx writes:

It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete... with e.g. the population... However, on closer examination, this proves false. *The population is an abstraction* if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest, e.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presupposes exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then... move analytically towards even more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards *ever thinner abstractions until I have arrived at the simplest determinations*. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I have finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a *rich totality of*

many determinations and relations. (*Grundrisse*, p. 100)

Marx here does not mean that the concrete is mystifying or obfuscates 'the ordinary consciousness'. *What is mystifying for Marx is the process of abstraction, which is however necessary in human thought.* The human mind isolates abstract concepts out of complex reality: whatever we define with words is already an abstraction. Thus saying 'let's start from something concrete, such as *the population*' is misleading because the population is still, at this stage, an abstract concept, void and too thin. The problem with bourgeois knowledge is that it tends to rest on such abstractions and assumes them as more 'essential' than reality itself. Thus 'population' can be assumed as a valid starting point, forgetting to explore what it actually means. Or, for an empiricist, the immediate perception of senses can be assumed as a valid starting point, forgetting to explore the complex social and material context of our perceptions and their meanings for us.

Hegel realised that there is a problem here - all abstract concepts are partial - and devised his dialectical method to reconstruct concreteness of thought. However, Hegel still posited an abstraction when he suggested that the spirit, which is the most complete understanding of the universe, *is* the universe itself, e.g. the product of thought is the real:

Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought... unfolding itself out of itself... whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought reappropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. (*Grundrisse*, p. 101)

Thus, Marx says, in order to achieve concrete thought I must at first go down to 'ever thinner abstractions'. Why! To avoid abstraction, I have to go to 'ever thinner' abstractions! Because, by starting from abstractions that are clearly and consciously held as abstract, we can then clearly and consciously 'retrace our journey' to more concrete determinations. This is the way in which our thought abolishes its own limitations and poverty; so, coherently, the best, richest knowledge is not provided by the thinner abstractions we start from, but by the most concrete and richer outcome. This is why Marx goes from abstract to concrete in *Capital*.

But does this mean that Marx proceeded from 'essence' to (mystifying) 'appearances'? If for 'essential' we mean something that is necessary, it is true: at the beginning of any new discipline the most abstract starting concepts are essential in order to proceed in knowledge. The most abstract concepts are necessary (so essential) in the same way as the alphabet is for communication. However, if for 'essential' we mean 'truthful to the real' (as opposed to 'mystifying'), the most abstract concepts are as far from rendering reality as the alphabet is far from rendering Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.

Postone assumes that since Marx's initial abstract categories *will* develop into a full 'grasp' of capital in the course of *Capital*, they can give us this 'full grasp' as they are - the other chapters of *Capital* were only written, he says, to confirm the truthfulness of the beginning. We object

to this. The development of categories from *abstract* to *concrete* is a (conceptual) 'aufhebung', a supercession of concepts that preserves the more abstract categories but involves a leap: a qualitative change in understanding from inferior to superior.

Proceeding from abstract to concrete is different from proceeding from essence to appearance. Essence and appearance are aspects in which the mind grasps reality *at any level of abstraction*. In *Capital* Marx shows how (conceptualised) reality has always both essence and appearance, and he does this at every stage of his journey towards ever deeper concreteness. As early as in Chapter 1 the most abstract concept of value is an appearance, whose essence is the very most basic and abstract concept of labour time. Going to higher concreteness, Marx shows for example how the *more concrete* concept of prices is an appearance, whose essence lies in a *more concrete* conception of capital, so far developed. The movement between essence and appearance in *Capital* is not from one end to the other, but back-and-forth - because it is precisely the tension between essence and appearance that compels the mind to overcome a particular level of abstraction and climb to the next level, of superior concreteness, and this process is never ending.

Convinced that Marx proceeded from 'essence' to mystifying appearances, Postone then holds Marx's categories of Chapter 1, Volume 1 of *Capital* as the most truthful to reality. On this basis he starts a systematic work of re-reading Marx's more developed categories in the light of those basic concepts. This re-reading divests Marx's categories of 'inessential' factors, such as property relations or class relations. Capitalist production, for example, is reconceptualised in terms of categories as shockingly basic as 'the double character of the commodity'. This is not an enrichment of knowledge, but a reduction! Postone's re-reading of Marx amounts to a systematic work of dismantling Marx's hard work to reproduce the concrete in the mind: Marx started from straw (the abstraction of simple exchange) and painfully ended up with bricks (the more concrete understanding of capitalism he could get). One by one, Postone changes Marx's bricks back to straw - thinner, purer, more 'essential'

In the next section we'll explore the political implications of this approach and show that they are in fact *Postone's ideological presuppositions*.

## 1.2 The consequences of Postone's methodology: labour as a means of acquisition... or dispossession?

We have seen above that Postone re-reads Marx's categories in terms of those 'essential' categories of the very beginning of *Capital*. At the beginning of *Capital* Marx does not dive head down into things such as capitalist production or wage labour, because they are too complex to begin with. He starts from a very abstract conception of exchange between individual producers, who produce and exchange in order to acquire goods for themselves: this has been called the abstraction of 'simple exchange'.

Marx began with simple exchange because it was where *the bourgeois economists had finished*. Many bourgeois ideologues would be happy to equate capitalism with a society made of free owners, free sellers and buyers - 'people'. Marx exposes this bourgeois delusion as being just a partial truth, by developing a theory of capitalism as a class

society, where freedom/equality and unfreedom/inequality necessarily imply each other.

In order to do this, Marx moves from the abstract to the concrete. Starting from simple exchange he identifies very basic categories such as value, the two aspects of the commodity (use value and exchange value), the two aspects of labour (concrete labour and abstract labour). Then he shows how the division of labour in capitalism is regulated by an 'objective' property of products, which appears 'stamped upon them' (value and its laws), and which is independent of the will or actions of individual producers.

This very abstract theory of commodity fetishism is the starting point for Marx's increasingly concrete view of what we call 'the ontological inversion of capital and human being'. Value's abstract power on individual producers in simple exchange in fact will appear to have a more concrete aspect later in the book. This power can be understood only by considering the real subsumption of labour in a wage-work relation, which implies the standardisation and dullification of our labour. In the ontological inversion, the more capital acquires intelligence, science, productive capacity, etc., the more dull and uncreative the worker's activity becomes. The concept of commodity fetishism, defined in Chapter 1, is then increasingly enriched throughout the book.

Let us notice that simple exchange is not to be understood as a wrong model of capitalism, to be corrected by further approximations. In fact simple exchange is not a 'wrong model'. It describes aspects of capitalism *correctly* – only, too abstractly. *This is why Marx needs to write the rest of the book.*

But what is missing in simple exchange? At this stage of abstraction, we can say a lot about the capitalist sphere of circulation, but not so much about the sphere of production. In *Capital* Marx can start explaining production more appropriately only with Chapter 7, when he enters the sphere of production and leaves that of circulation.

It is true that simple exchange, considered at the beginning, includes production, but this production is done by independent producers who own their own means of production. In this condition, the result of the producers' labour belongs to themselves; the aim of their own labour is to produce commodities to sell in order to acquire goods (use values) made by others. This means that the producers' labour is a *means of acquisition* of others' use values through exchange.

This abstract concept of production can illuminate our understanding of the nature of value, restricted to the sphere of circulation, but it cannot render the reality of capitalist production. The fine line between production in simple exchange and capitalist production is the reality of bourgeois property relations: *capitalist production is such that the producers don't own their means of production.*

In this, more concrete, view of capitalism, the abstract concept of labour in simple exchange is superseded by something else, totally different from the labour done by an independent producer. Crucially, in capitalism no labour is done as a means of acquisition of use values as Postone asserts; neither for the capitalists, for whom production is not aimed at acquiring use values for themselves; nor for the workers, as the result of their labour does not belong to them. It is not a case that Marx insists on exchange, not on 'labour as a means of acquisition' as a social mediation:

indeed, he knows that his category of labour will evolve in the course of the book. In claiming that the concept of labour as a mode of acquisition is 'essential' for Marx, despite the fact that Marx never said it, Postone thinks to have found something that Marx meant but did not write. In reality Marx simply did not write what he did not mean because he knew it would be wrong at a more concrete level.

It can be clear now then where Postone's assertions that classes and property relations are 'inessential' for capitalism come from: from considering a too-abstract concept of capitalism (simple exchange) as containing the essential truths about capitalism. In fact all concepts presented by Marx in simple exchange have to be revised:

- At the stage of abstraction of simple exchange, *the concept of classes* is irrelevant as we are in the presence of a society of equal producers: here we can speak of 'people' and 'individuals'. Had classes to be considered in the abstract realm of simple exchange, these would only be extrinsic sociological groupings. *And this is precisely how Postone conceptualises classes in his book!*<sup>6</sup>
- In simple exchange *value* is simply the alienated form of a social interaction between free independent producers, a matrix of social relations. Value has, truly, the potential to self-expand (as some money can be even more money) but no mechanism that makes this self-expansion a necessity.
- In simple exchange *alienation* is simply the alienation of independent producers' social relations. At the level of simple exchange, capital doesn't confront the producer as the alien and hostile machine, since the free producer's tools are not alien to him. In capitalism the concept of alienation acquires a more concrete form for the producer: not only does he face a formal alienation, the abstract domination of the market, of value and its laws; the worker now faces a concrete alienation. Dispossessed of the means of production, and producing in exchange for a wage, the worker creates a world of commodities *as an alien world*.<sup>7</sup> This alien world faces him as his enemy, as capital, as the machine that commands and subsumes his labour, according to the objective laws of value, to the dynamic of capital.
- In simple exchange *labour* is a means of acquisition of others' use values. This cannot hold in capitalism, as in capitalism labour is not done for exchange of its products, but for a wage. As such, for the producer, labour produces goods that belong to alien others and

<sup>6</sup> We are not the only ones who have noticed this liberal perspective. In 'On Postone's courageous but unsuccessful attempt to banish the class antagonism from the critique of political economy' (in *Historical Materialism*, op. cit., pp. 203-123), Werner Bonefeld says that Postone's treatment of 'classes' in terms of a theory of social grouping is 'disturbing'.

<sup>7</sup> In the course of the book, and even at the 'level' of capital, Postone never mentions the concept of *constant capital*, (the machine!), as this implies the alienation of the producers from the means of production as value and private property.

reproduces his dispossession, as well as producing the producer's enemy: capital. In a paradoxical twist, going from the abstraction of simple exchange to a more concrete conception of capitalism, labour loses its character of a 'means of acquisition' and becomes, rather, *a means of dispossession!*

- Finally, in simple exchange *the commodity* is only a two-folded commodity produced by the independent producer. The horror hidden in labour power as a commodity different from others, which is in the worker's experience of the real subsumption of labour, can't appear at this level of abstraction. What we can say about production can't be reduced to the double aspect of the labour of an independent producer.

But Postone is adamant. He insists that the 'essential' categories of Chapter 1 are the key to grasp reality, fundamental also to a 'full grasp' of capitalism. He only concedes, when we leave the 'logical level' of simple exchange and move to the 'logical level' of capital, two conceptual developments.

1. Labour. Postone is not an idiot. He knows that it would be ridiculous to insist that labour is a 'means of acquisition' 'at the logical level of capital', i.e. *outside simple exchange*, since it is plain that's not true! So, will he drop the concept? No. He can't, unless he admits that there is a problem with the 'essential' categories of the beginning of *Capital*, and that they can be 'essentially' inadequate! Thus Postone retains this concept, but he makes it more abstract, so that its inadequacy is not obvious anymore. If, in Postone's logic, our labour is 'a means of acquisition', labour is an activity done with the result of relating with others – then it is 'a social mediation in lieu of overt social relations' (Postone, p. 150). This latter concept is derived from the first so it retains the 'essential' truth of the first – but since it is so abstract, it can be applied to 'the logical level' of capital without problem. Clever.

Yet, we have an objection. In capitalism, when the producers lose track of the result of their products as these don't belong to them, the labour done is not for them a social mediation. Their social mediation is simply realised by exchange – exchange of labour power for a wage, exchange of money for commodities.

2. Capital. Capital, like value, is a 'labour-mediated form of social relations', 'a matrix of social domination' created by the labour of 'all people' and acting on 'all people'. Only, at the 'logical level' of capital it now, somehow, becomes self-expanding, i.e. acquires 'a life of its own' (Postone, p. 158). In his words: 'The mediation, initially analysed as a means [of acquiring others' products], acquires a life of its own...' (Postone, p. 158). According to Postone, the circuit M-C-M' results from the concept of value in simple exchange: as value can be more value, production of commodity 'logically' implies self-expansion of value.

3. Alienation. At 'the logical level' of capital, alienation is intended as 'a process in which the social character of labour... becomes an attribute of the totality [and]... is opposed to, and dominates the individual (Postone, p. 350) and as 'the accumulated labour time' (or the social knowledge behind production, which reaches the individual worker 'in alienated form'. Yet this concept is only an elaboration of the concept of alienation in simple exchange, and does not include 'inessential' factors such as the real experience of dispossession of the worker. Thus we read:

'[Alienation and objectification are not] grounded in factors extrinsic to the objectifying activity – for example in property relations... alienation is rooted in the double character of commodity-determined labour, and as such is *intrinsic* to the [double] character of labour itself' (Postone, p. 159).

or

'[The individuals'] *products*... constitute a socially total mediation – value. This mediation is general not only because it connects *all producers*, but also because its character is general – abstracted from all material specificity as well as any overtly social particularity [i.e. classes!]' (Postone, p. 152)

The above reduction of capitalism sees 'people' or 'the individual' facing capital as an impersonal 'matrix of social domination'. In this view, the subjective side of the contradiction of capital is something that the bourgeois shares with the proletarian, i.e. the tension between the formal freedom and the 'objective' constraints dictated by the law of value (Postone, pp. 163-4). Capital, as a matrix of social relation, compels 'all individuals' into work and work ethics. For example:

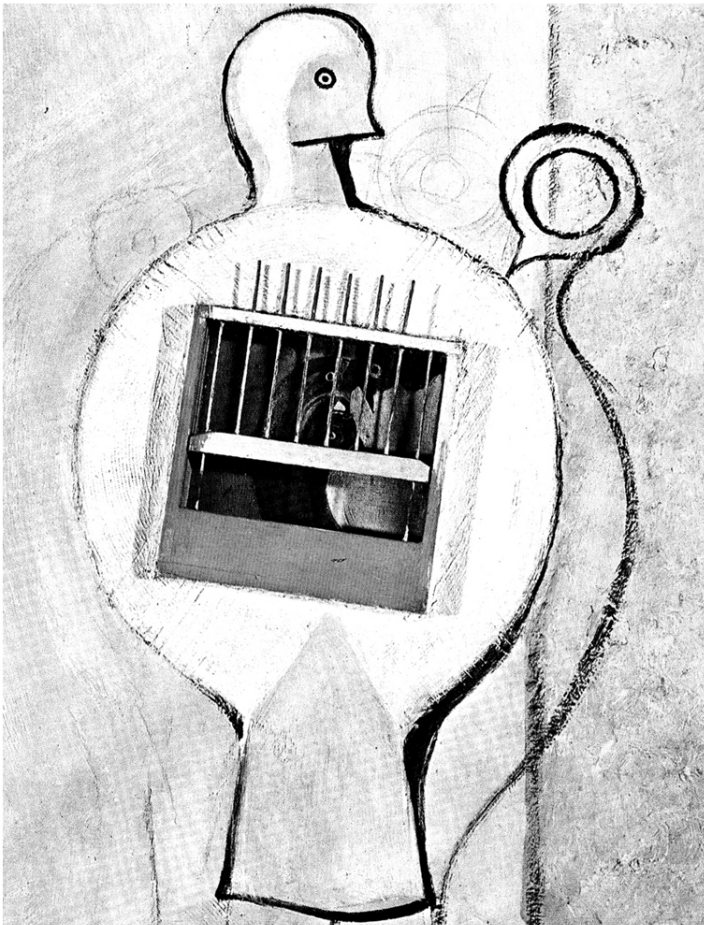
'The initial determination of such abstract social compulsion is that *individuals* are compelled to *produce and exchange* commodities in order to survive. This compulsion is not... direct... rather, a function of "abstract" and "alienated" social structures and represents a form of abstract impersonal domination' (Postone, p. 159)

The result is a theory in which capital is a cross-class enemy, a 'matrix of social domination' that rules on 'all *producers and exchangers*' – undifferentiated 'people'. It is no surprise that such a view attracts cynical remarks such as those from Chris Arthur: 'Which people? Industrialists? Bureaucrats? Bishops? Scientists? Workers?'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Arthur, op. cit., *Capital and Class*. In 'Subject and counter-subject', *Historical Materialism op. cit.*, pp. 93-102, Arthur adds that in order to consider capital as a Subject one has to consider the elements of consciousness and knowledge: these, he says 'are secured insofar as [capital's] structure of valorisation imposes its logic on the personifications of capital, *namely owners and managers*'.

With his stress on capital as impersonal domination Postone appears to many as a breath of fresh air against those vulgar Marxists who insist on personalising capitalist relations, so that the villain in the class struggle is the fat capitalist with a tall hat, and the hero is the worker with greasy blue overalls. However, we are not impressed. Since the '60s and '70s, sophisticated re-readings of Marx have exposed such banal views of classes. Capital needs a class of capitalists, who personify it. These can be individuals but also groups, or state bureaucrats. Postone does not critique the vulgar Marxist concepts of classes but adopts them himself. As those concepts are inadequate to explain the USSR or even concrete capitalism, Postone ends up rejecting the whole concept of classes altogether, throwing the baby out with the bath water.<sup>9</sup>

Equally, Postone's theory may also appear as a breath of fresh air to those sick and tired of traditional Marxist productivism, as he poses the question of capital compelling us to work, and the issue of the work ethic. However, we are not impressed: a theory that cannot distinguish between the 'compulsion to work' experienced by a top manager, a shopkeeper and a waged worker is not adequate to explain the subjective aspects of capitalism. Understanding this difference is more important than telling us that we are all equally victims and slaves of 'the matrix' of domination. We need theory to understand how to act in our struggles, to choose what to do, understand whom we can ally with, etc.



<sup>9</sup> On page 153 Postone groups together kinship relations with the relations between the capitalist and the worker, as 'direct'. In fact, the relation between the capitalist and the worker is not 'direct' as they act as personifications of capital and labour power. The worker does *not* relate to the capitalist as I do with my cousin.

To this purpose, Postone's theory which labels anybody as undifferentiated 'people' is pretty useless.

But, as we have seen above, the main criticism of this theory is its inherent structure. The result of this theory is its presupposition – starting from the abstraction of simple exchange, where classes and the dispossession of a class have no place, Postone tautologically proves what he has already assumed. The 'logical consequences' of Postone's theory are then his political presuppositions.

Postone achieves a 'critique' of capitalism which is not, for sure, 'from the standpoint of labour' i.e. the worker in a wage-work relation, who lives real dispossession and real alienation, the harshness of property relations. All this concrete experience is relegated as logically inessential. Instead, what Postone's theory says about capitalism and its evils makes sense as a critique of capital from... the standpoint of the petty bourgeoisie. The petty bourgeois is the only one for whom the concept of labour as a means of acquisition still makes sense, as he relates to the whole of society as an independent producer. The petty bourgeois experiences the most universal (and abstract) form of alienation in capitalism, formal alienation: the objective constraints of the market. For the petty bourgeois capital is principally a self-expanding monster, which obliges him into a desperate amount of work through the abstract force of competition.<sup>10</sup> The petty bourgeois can conceive 'people' as all producers and exchangers like himself. And for the petty

bourgeois the best theory in the world is one which does not make too much fuss about the issue of private property!

Last but not least, going into fine Marxology, only a petty bourgeois theory would mix up the value of labour power and necessary labour time and write for example: '[time in capitalist society] is a category that... determines the amount of time that producers must expend *if they are to receive the full value of their labour time*' (Postone, p. 214). In fact the waged worker does NOT receive the full amount of their labour time at all: the secret of exploitation in capitalism is veiled by the petty bourgeois mystification that this is true. And this mystification makes sense to the petty bourgeois, as it is true for himself.

It is however not good enough to say that a theory sounds petty bourgeois. Equally, it is not good enough to say that we are not interested in a theory that blurs interesting things such as classes and property relations, or which seems to be superseded by other theories. In the next section we will show that Postone's theory is not just petty bourgeois or a bit useless, but it is *wrong*. We will show that bourgeois property relations are fundamental for capital to exist as 'a matrix of social domination' and to have a life 'on its own', for real alienation to exist; and for the compulsion to work on the producer to be a real compulsion – they cannot be 'external features' or logically unnecessary. Dooming for Postone's house, we will also show that this is, truly, 'in Marx's view'.

<sup>10</sup> Brighton's Green Party expresses such petty bourgeois antagonism with capital, complaining in their publications about small local shops being threatened by supermarket chains.

### 1.3 Property relations and capital

In his critique of bourgeois political economy Marx makes clear that production in capitalism, which the bourgeois economists assume as 'natural' or 'universal', is in fact intimately connected to capital and its laws, thus historical. This is, also, if we don't err, the main argument of *Time, labour and social domination*.

In the most central and interesting parts of his book Postone attacks traditional Marxists' view of production as neutral and potentially independent of capitalist relations, and that has to be rescued from those relations – i.e. from the constraints of the market and private property. Objecting to it, Postone shows how production is, in its very organisation, aims, products, etc. one with capital's dynamic. It cannot be separated from capital: 'the use value dimension [of labour] is moulded by value' (Postone, p. 364).<sup>11</sup> And it cannot be glorified, because, Postone adds, Marx said so in *Capital*,<sup>12</sup> p. 644 (Postone, p. 356) – Marx said it's a 'misfortune' to be a productive worker. We cannot but agree with what Postone says and even recognise in it some of our own arguments against Negri's view of immaterial production.<sup>13</sup> However, our sympathy has a limit.

It is true that production and concrete labour are 'moulded by value and its laws', but when we say this we imply the existence of given social relation behind value and its laws. But Postone makes it clear: for him production and concrete labour are moulded only *by value and its laws*, not any 'real' social relation 'behind' them. Value is an alien quasi-objectivity with a quasi-life on its own, and, having ultimately a social nature, is the 'social reality' of capitalism that moulds production. Crucially, Postone makes clear that in the dynamic of value and its laws, concrete factors such as property relations and class relations are 'extrinsic' and non-essential.

Enthusiasts of fine abstract thought would have nothing to object to this. But we are not enthusiasts of fine abstract thought, and Marx was not either! We want to see, a bit more concretely.

When Marx attacks the bourgeois concept that capitalist production is 'natural' or universal he doesn't consider abstractions such as value and its laws – but shows, first of all, that production is one with *bourgeois property relations* – something very concrete indeed. In the *Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx connects production to distribution in this way:

... Before distribution becomes the distribution of products it is 1) the distribution of the instruments of production and 2) which is another dimension of the same relation, the distribution of the members of society among the various types of production (the subsumption of individuals under definite relations of production). It is evident that the distribution of the products is merely a result of this distribution, which is comprised in the very process of production and

*determines the very process of production.* To examine production apart from this distribution which is included in it, it is obviously an empty abstraction... (*Preface*, Section 2 [General Relations of production to distribution...], subsection b [Production and distribution], Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1976, p. 26).

In this passage Marx says that capitalist exchange is shaped by capitalist production, because the distribution of products is determined by the way *the distribution of the means of production has already shaped production*. Or, 'which is another dimension of the same relation', capitalist distribution is shaped by a class relation. Capitalist production is such only through, and because of, the propertylessness of the worker. Marx is adamant: the fact that in the bourgeois mode of production the worker does not own the means of production (and so any product) is a *fundamental condition* for capitalism. This distribution, the private property of the means of production, is an aspect of our relations of production. In his words:

The workers' propertylessness, and the ownership of living labour by objectified labour, [that is] the appropriation of alienated labour by capital... are fundamental conditions of the bourgeois mode of production, in no way accidents irrelevant to it. These modes of distribution are the relations of production themselves *sub specie distributionis*. (*Grundrisse*, p. 832)

In fact, how can we possibly speak of capital as value valorising itself, without our fundamental propertylessness? The general formula of capital, money M becoming more money M' through production of commodities C (M-C-M') can be a reality only insofar as our dispossession of the means of production obliges us to work for a wage. Then capital (through the capitalist as its personification) can appropriate the products of our labour and expand as an alien objectification with a life of its own'. Disposessed, we can only sell 'labour power', that is our capacity to do work for alien others: for the owners of capital – if we put our hands on the means of production and use them for our own needs, what we would do would be ours and not alien. It would cease to have a 'life'.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, how can we explain the fact that we are obliged to work for capital without our fundamental propertylessness? It is true that the commodity form, as analysed by Marx in simple exchange, implies the 'objective' need to exchange values in order to survive. However, this does not necessarily mean that one needs to work! As everyone knows, the capitalist does not need to work to survive. The secret that makes the workers work is our propertylessness - our inability to put our hands on the means

<sup>11</sup> Or: 'Capital is the alienated form of both dimensions of social labour in capitalism, confronting the individual as an alien (Postone, p. 351).

<sup>12</sup> Vol. 1 of course.

<sup>13</sup> *Aufheben* # 14, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Also Arthur notices that Postone misses something in considering the circuit M-C-M' as self-sustaining, which is the process of real subsumption and adds: 'on my view, capital is self-mediating albeit on the basis of the exploitation of labour' ('Subject and counter-subject', op. cit.). We add that this is possible only within capitalist property relations.



to reproduce our lives without begging for a job. In doing so, the worker reproduces his propertylessness and the power of capital and of the commodity form. The secret of this power is safely buttressed by walls, barbed wire, fences, security guards, police and armies, without which the solidity and 'objectivity' of the commodity form would surely wobble!

Finally, how can we explain real alienation in separation from bourgeois property relations? While formal alienation, the alienation implied by the commodity form, is experienced by all people, real alienation *tells a class from the other*. It is true that the capitalist is a victim of the power of value as the objectification of social relations – formal alienation. Obligated to act as a personification of capital, the capitalist has to give up his will to alien powers, to capital and its laws. However, as long as this alien power tends to enrich his own capital, the capitalist's alienation is one with his own enrichment and power. For the worker, formal alienation and real alienation give make to each other, as they reflect the production of an alien world, a world that does not belong to him in the most obvious and concrete meaning – it belongs to the bourgeoisie.

It is now clear how there's no way to speak about value, capital, alienation, as well as capitalist production, without assuming the concrete relations of production and class relations as their *fundamental conditions*. Only these conditions make it possible for us to even imagine, for example, capital as self-valorising value, let alone being *really* subsumed by it, and really work for it, day in day out... Property relations and class relations are then not at all 'extrinsic' factors in a theory of capital. And it is plain that, as we anticipated, Marx wrote it - and meant it. Indeed, we have just shown that classes and private property are fundamental for Marx in the conceptualisation of capital as an abstract domination. Looking only at abstractions as 'essential' means to enact a fetishism of capital, which is apotheosised in separation from the social relations which sustain it.

But Postone would not flinch. Challenging us who dare to stress the importance of classes and property in capitalism, he would ask us: what about the USSR, where private property was abolished? If property relations were essential for capital, how can you explain the USSR? We simply answer: in the USSR the dispossession of the workers was not abolished – this dispossession was managed by bureaucrats, but it remained a reality. The workers were still alienated of their product and labour. The workers still needed money to buy use values to survive. As we said earlier, Postone has accepted uncritically the Stalinist narrow definition of property relations as the private property of fat men with a top hat. This means to accept that the USSR can be thought of as 'a mode of producing under public rather than private ownership', without questioning the nature of what he calls 'public ownership'. In turn this means to look for a theory where property relations are 'inessential' for capitalism.

But how could Postone possibly get round Marx's words? Fascinatingly, he has his own reading of Marx's quote from the *Grundrisse* above. Take a deep breath and have a look:

[Marx describes] ... the workers' propertylessness and the appropriation of alien labour by capital... as "modes of distribution that are the relations of

production themselves, but *sub specie distributionis*"... These passages indicate that Marx's notion of the mode of distribution encompasses capitalist property relations. They also imply that his notion of the "relations of production" cannot be understood in terms of the mode of distribution alone, but must also be considered *sub specie productionis*... If Marx considers property relations as relations of distribution, it follows that his concept of the relations of production cannot be fully grasped in terms of capitalist class relations, rooted in the private ownership of the means of production and expressed in the unequal distribution of power and wealth. Rather, that concept must also be understood with reference to the mode of producing in capitalism. (Postone, pp. 22-23)

Let's explain what Postone means. Following Marx, he says that the workers' propertylessness appears as a form of distribution (of wealth) while in fact it derives from the relations of production itself. Then the workers' propertylessness is inessential to grasp capitalism, as it can be explained by the relations of production. Conveniently confusing 'relations of production' and 'mode of producing' (production), Postone concludes: forget property relations or exchange relations - production, that is labour, is what we need to grasp capitalism. Property relations are then inessential 'for Marx'.

To a certain extent, this is true. If we looked at *capitalist* production, how it comes about, why it is organised the way it is, what it produces and for whom, why the producers work at it, etc. we would rediscover again, hidden in it, the workers' dispossession, as well as the consequent bourgeois relations of exchange.

*But now there is the big twist.* When Postone turns his back on property relations and distribution and focuses on production, he does *not* focus on capitalist production – but on his own concept of production based on simple exchange.<sup>15</sup> Simple exchange, we have seen before, considers a production done 'essentially' by independent producers and is abstracted from class relations. In *this* abstract concept of production there is nothing that holds classes and property relations as relevant at all. There we go: surprise surprise, Postone's theory, which starts by getting rid of classes and property relations in his key concepts, ends up 'proving' that classes and property relations are not 'essential'! This is not a discovery, rather the realisation of what Postone already implied when at the very beginning he laid down his methodology.

#### 1.4 Conclusion to Part One: Abstracting away wage labour and labour power – and the consequences

We have seen that, following his peculiar methodology, Postone reduces all aspects of capital to the 'essential' categories that Marx presents in Chapter 1, Volume 1 of *Capital*. With this reduction, his view of capitalist

<sup>15</sup> For example, we read: 'If ... the process of alienation [of the social dimension of concrete labour] cannot be apprehended adequately in terms of private property... [it] must be located on a *structural deeper level*... [i.e.] the double character of the commodity form [as defined in the first chapter of *Capital*]' (Postone p. 350).

production is reduced as well. Production *sub specie distributionis*, i.e. our propertylessness, our need to sell our labour power in order to live, cannot have a role here, as the simple world of Marx's 'essential' categories is a world of equal owners, equal producers. This concrete social relation of property is what shapes the concrete form of production, in order to squeeze out of us as much labour as possible.

Postone's view also misses something crucial, which will have relevance in the next sections of this article: if we focus on 'the two aspects of the commodity form' in simple exchange, for us labour can be considered as that of an independent shoemaker. But labour in capitalism is *not* labour of independent producers – it's labour done by sellers of a *special* commodity – not shoes, but the capacity to work, labour power.

Postone has a sophisticated way of justifying his avoidance to speak about labour power. Since, he says, the commodity form becomes universal only when labour power becomes a commodity (Postone, p. 270), simple exchange expresses the truth of capitalism, which *includes* the sale and purchase of labour power. The result of this sophism is that we don't need to speak about labour power at all: it is enough to speak about 'the double aspect of the commodity form' as considered in Chapter 1 of *Capital*. Therefore, Postone stops bothering too much about the nature of labour power. He conceptualises labour power as a commodity (with no further determinations or specifications) and wage labour as a mere 'sociological' category, with no fundamental relevance for capital (Postone, p. 272).

In Part 2 we will analyse how this reduction prevents Postone from seeing how in capitalism subjectivity and objectivity interplay, since the subjective elements of capitalist production come out only from our concrete experience of real alienation, waged labour and the sale of labour power – all relations that his theory holds as 'non essential'. This will lead him to see capital as the One Identical Subject-Object; and see all of us as the cogs of capital's dynamics, identical object-subjects. While Part 1 has questioned whether Marx 'meant' what Postone said he did, discovering that Postone's straw house has a problem with its fundamentals, Part 2 exposes his house to the blow of concrete reality – will it stand or will it fall?

## 2 Flattening life into a capitalist Meccano

### 2.1 Abstractions as more real than life?

We have seen that Postone's certainty that what is abstract is essential and what is essential is more truthful to reality leads him to dismiss dispossession and real alienation as non-essential. In Postone's view, we have seen, the pain implied by the sale of labour power disappears. Abstract concepts become more real than life. Value acquires the status of our real social relations, while class relations, i.e. real social relations, are called "real" - in inverted commas:

'The quasi-objective structures grasped by the categories of Marx's critique of political economy do not veil... the "real" social relations of capitalism (class relations)... rather, those structures *are* the fundamental relations of capitalist society' (Postone, p. 78, his emphasis).

Does the reader wonder how it is possible that something defined in simple exchange *are* our real social relations? This, Marx would say against Hegel, is 'characteristic of philosophical consciousness, for which conceptual thinking is the real human being, and for which the conceptual world as such is thus the only reality' (*Grundrisse*, Introduction, p. 97).

Indeed, as early as in *The German Ideology* Marx had found his recipe against the bourgeois predilection for abstractions, which he applied in his theory of commodity fetishism. His recipe is not to start with any abstract conceptualisation (such as culture or ideas) but with 'the real individual and their intercourses'.

Using this recipe, when Marx writes *Capital*, he reveals the concrete roots of his categories of value, abstract labour, etc. in 'the real individuals'. Thus for example he shows that under the (still very abstract) category of value there is the concrete practice of exchange as a generalised social mediation among the individuals. So behind value and its laws there is a specific form of social reality, a material relation among people, mediated by social relations among their products.

In a more advanced and concrete view of capital, it is true that capital presents itself as a self-sustaining entity, the subject of history, progress, creativity, initiative, productivity, progress, etc. But such a power is based on our social relations, or, better, on the propertylessness of the worker. Due to this propertylessness, the worker's capacity to work is useless without capital and the worker is obliged to abide by its power. This is how capital's power becomes real.

Although the power of capital is real, so understanding it would not change it, there is an advantage in understanding its origin. The advantage is to make clear that capital is not a power 'out there' that is unreachable and unchallengeable, but the result of our social relations, or better, the result of an unstable social process that is continually challenged by struggle and continually in need to be reaffirmed as 'objective'.

In saying that value does not 'veil' but *is* our social relations, Postone turns Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and the revelation of its 'secret' upside down. While Marx shows that capital is based on our social relations, Postone tries to convince us that our social relations are based on capital.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.2 Fetishisation and defetishisation

Let's see in detail how Postone proceeds in this refetishisation on pages 145-151. Incredibly, Postone starts by affirming Marx's theory of commodity fetishism! Introducing his definition of labour 'as a social mediation', he seems to agree with Marx that, behind abstract labour (objectified as value), there is 'a specific form of social reality' (Postone, p. 146). But: what does he mean by 'social reality'? Since, labour done for exchange<sup>17</sup> creates value and

<sup>16</sup> Bonefeld (*op. cit.*) notices like us that Postone inverts Marx's efforts to reveal capital as a relation between humans, specifically a relation based on private property and dispossession, which implies the separation of labour from its means, the necessary basis for capital to exist.

<sup>17</sup> Or what he calls 'commodity-determined labour'.



FIG. 1. KARL MARX INSPECTS POSTONE'S STRAW HOUSE

its laws, since value and its law constitute the mechanism which distribute labour in society, then labour constitutes our 'social interrelation'. *Ergo*, labour is a 'social mediation' (Postone, p. 149-150).<sup>18</sup> Postone looks at the social division of labour constituted by value - a partial aspect of our social relations - and ends up calling it a 'specific form of social reality'. The conclusion is the 'specific form of social reality behind value' *is not us and what we do*, but value and its laws. It is no surprise that the next step closes the loop: value is the 'social reality' behind itself, or, in Postone's words, 'labour in capitalism becomes its own social ground' (Postone, p. 151).<sup>19</sup> But why do we need to mention society if labour constitutes its own social grounds? In an urge of minimalist idealism, Postone summarises: 'labour and its product mediate *themselves*'. (Postone, pp. 150-1)

In this reduction that has substituted us with the mechanism of already subsumed labour, our history and life can be conflated to the dynamic of capital itself: 'People in capitalism constitute their social relations and their history by means of labour.' (Postone, p. 165) Capital becomes the essential distillate of our existence, which 'constitutes us' as subjects and objects (e.g. p. 157). The reduction now is complete.

Class struggle has been erased from Postone's concept of 'essential' social relations. Labour has been equated to capital.

Of course, what Postone writes sounds somehow correct. It is true that CAPITAL IN CAPITALISM MEDIATES ITSELF. In capitalism, capital is self-mediating, since it expands itself within capitalism, through the interplay of exchange and (capitalist) production. Postone rewords this as: LABOUR IN CAPITALISM MEDIATES ITSELF. This seems to be a legitimate development of the same concept - in reality, it implies a conflation of life with capital.

<sup>18</sup> Abstract labour is then 'the function of labour as a socially mediating activity' (Postone, p. 150).

<sup>19</sup> Or: 'labour in capitalism does constitute its society' (Postone, p. 157)

It is true that CAPITAL IS A TOTALITY, but it is an abstraction as well. As a totality, nothing can exist outside it. Yet, as an abstraction, capital is an aspect of concrete reality, but it is not concrete reality itself: capital is like the crust of a cake: it encompasses the whole cake, expresses the form of the cake but it is not reducible to it - and it *needs* the cake in order to exist or even be conceived.

It is true that the COMMODITY, VALUE AND ITS LAWS ACT ON US BY CREATING A SOCIAL INTERDEPENDENCE, and that this is an aspect of our social life. But what is this 'interdependence'? Is it our 'social interrelations' *tout court*?<sup>20</sup> Our social 'interdependence' is a division of the aggregate labour of society which is realised through a relation based on freedom and equality (exchange) and appears as the result of 'objective' necessities' (those of the market). Leaving behind us the abstraction of simple exchange, this means:

- for the capitalist, the 'objective necessity' to invest their capital into certain markets without being directly obliged by any person
- for the worker, the 'objective necessity' is first of all that of exchanging values as a condition for one's reproduction. For the worker being dispossessed and a seller of labour power, the social division of the aggregate labour means the 'objective necessity' to do this or that alien labour for a wage (jobs available on the labour market); the 'objective necessity' to live according to certain standards dictated by the housing, food, clothing market etc.; without being obliged by anybody directly.

This social interdependence established by exchange of things is a real result of our social interrelations, but it is *not identical to them*. We could only conflate our social

<sup>20</sup> This conflation is achieved by a banal semantic mix-up and not at all justified!

intercourses with this interdependence only if we assumed that we acted at unison with the above ‘objective necessities’, as automatons of capital and its laws, without resistance – but this would be one-sided to claim. Instead, those ‘intercourses’ emerge out of our concrete experience of subsumption and our resistance to subsumption: strikes, occupations, sabotages, riots, phoning-in sick, occupying, squatting, etc.

In the same way as Postone reduces the subject into an element of capital as ‘identical subject-object’, he reduces class struggle, in its concreteness, to a set of actions and thoughts that harmonise with value and its laws – we are, and unquestionably see ourselves as, essentially free buyers and sellers. Class struggle then is reduced to the abstract acts of commodity owners who abide to the sacred rules of the market. Thus Postone sees ‘collective’ workers’ struggle as simply union negotiations, already subsumed by capital and its logic. These negotiations legitimate the collective worker as ‘bourgeois’ owners of the commodity labour power. Labour power is reduced to a commodity like all others, coherently with the reduction of capitalism to simple exchange. This is how we act as automatons of capital. It is true that, as long as we live in capitalism, our social intercourses eventually settle as relations of exchange and class struggles are recuperated into union negotiations; but as the result of a continual conflict.

Finally, it is true that CAPITAL OFFERS THE POSSIBILITY OF AN OBJECTIVISTIC READING. Marx himself started from the commodity form and its mechanism of social mediation and did not clearly include class struggle in his theory; yet his approach, his identification of a social reality behind value, is coherent with a more concrete and developed view that eventually includes antagonism and class struggle.<sup>21</sup> If we start from the individuals and their intercourses we keep our theorisation open to consider, for example, the concrete context in which exchange and labour for exchange exist. Postone does not keep his theorisation open, he closes it off.

In summary, in applying his reduction, Postone has:

- 1) *Abolished* our social intercourses as the origin of the commodity form and started directly from the commodity form (commodity-producing labour) as already unproblematically established.
- 2) *Sneaked in the assumption that we act as automatons of capital*. This assumption is sneaked in when Postone conflates the ‘interdependence’ realised by the commodity form with the whole of our ‘social interrelations’. When Postone later ‘derives’ that capital is a totality and we are part of it, this is not a logical conclusion, but, coherently with his whole ‘methodology’, an ideological presupposition.

Subtly, in the above process, Postone starts from what is apparently his adhesion to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism and works backwards, reaffirming step-by-step, a blind fetishism of the commodity. The distracted reader who reads the beginning of Postone’s arguments on page 145 may think Postone takes Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism onboard. But only because you see someone with a brick in his hands it does not mean that he is actually

building a house of bricks - it may mean he is trying to dismantle it. Although caught with the brick in his hand, Postone denies criminal damage. Incredibly, he insists that his own fetishisation of the commodity is an example of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism! On page 138, he quotes Marx on commodity fetishism:

It is in reality much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosised. (p. 138, from *Capital* Vol 1, p. 494)

Here Marx says one has to start from ‘the actual, given relations of life’ to develop their fetishised forms. But Postone reads the above quote this way:

An important aspect of Marx’s method of presentation that he develops from value to capital – that is, from the categories of the “actual, given relations of life” – the surface forms of appearance (cost, price, profits, wages, interest, rent, and so on) that have been “apotheosised” by political economists and social actors. (p. 138)

That is, Postone’s version of the theory of commodity fetishism is: behind the mystification of concrete reality, which is an appearance, there is a social relation: this is value, as value *is* our ‘actual, given relations of life’. Marx proved it, he claims: when he said that value reflects ‘our real social relations *as they actually are*: material relations among people and social relations among commodities’!<sup>22</sup>

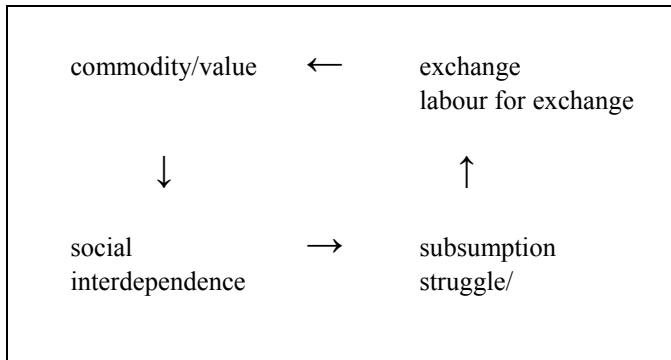
### 2.3 Object and subject as part of a subjective-objective mechanical machine<sup>23</sup>

Postone’s abstractions and conflations have an important consequence when it comes to consider the objective and subjective aspects of capitalism. If we try to express graphically Postone’s conflations, we see that he has effectively squashed something like this:

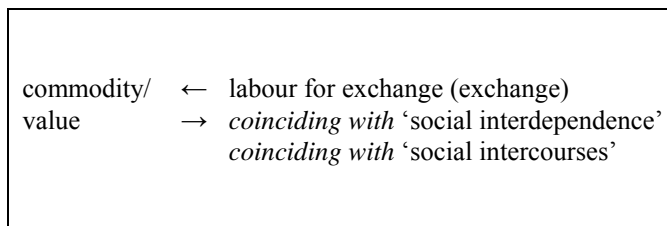
<sup>22</sup> In the same way, Postone fetishises time as something that is able to ‘organise much of social life’ (Postone, p. 216). In fact time can be conceived as it is today *because* our social relations are organised as they are. This is commodity fetishism in another version. As we will see in Box 1, Postone’s preference for a conception of history as the ‘movement of time’ instead of *our* movement in time, fetishises time (which is capital) as active and us as passive.

<sup>23</sup> One of the most interesting critiques of Postone is ‘The Death of the death of the subject’ by Peter Hudis (in *Historical Materialism*, op. cit., pp. 147-168). Hudis shows how Marx differs from Ricardo and Hegel precisely because his standpoint is the (subjective) experience of the worker – i.e. labour, *but not already subsumed*.

<sup>21</sup> F.C. Shortall, the *Incomplete Marx*, Avebury 1994.

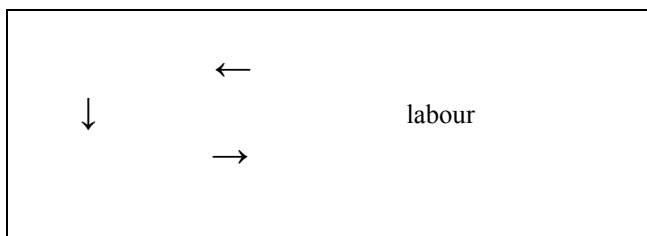


into something like this:



'COMMODITY-DETERMINED LABOUR AND ITS PRODUCT  
MEDIATE EACH OTHER'

In the first view, the process of subsumption of labour involves the subsumption of a subject that is posited as external to capital. Capital can only develop because of the helping hand of the human, the object needs to feed on the subject as a vampire – but at the same time, it faces the perpetual and inevitable problem of its subsumption. In this view, the objective and the subjective interplay as opposites in unity: they oppose and are necessary to each other. In the second view, the commodity is not conceived as an objectification of our social relations, but a result of an *already objectified* commodity-producing labour.<sup>24</sup> Here the subject is an aspect of the object, conflated ('identical') to the object. We have reached the logical point where the abstract snake of the commodity form bites its tail. The commodity (or commodity-producing labour) justifies its existence through itself in a vicious circle: 'commodity-determined labour and its product mediate each other'. Or, more compactly:



'LABOUR IN CAPITALISM MEDIATES ITSELF'

Postone's 'compression' where labour appears as grounding itself, or mediates itself by itself, has attracted a choir of

objections.<sup>25</sup> Arthur notes that Postone fails to explain how labour becomes capital, and misses the important issue of



real subsumption.<sup>26</sup> Kay and Mott argue that the missing link between 'labour as grounded' and 'labour as grounding' is commodity exchange – Postone, they observed, 'supplies the missing link by... endorsing the activity of production with the immediate capacity to function as a mediation', and noted that the result of this compression is to shift the focus away from considerations of property.

Under exchange and consideration of property, we have seen, there is the complexity of class struggle, the interrelation of object and subject. The immediacy of labour and capital is not obvious, but the result of a work of conflation.<sup>27</sup> Postone is unable to see capital as the result of a process of objectification, which implies class struggle.<sup>28</sup>

In Postone's view life is then flattened into one dimension, *the dimension of the object*. In Postone's vision everything becomes a quasi-objective, and, we would add, quasi-mechanical circuit that happens to have *also* a subjective aspect. Despite in our concrete experience subject and object really oppose each other, Postone can see them as harmonising in the One and Only Subject of History. This way Postone deludes himself to have 'solved' the dilemma of bourgeois thought: the dualism of subject and object. But we are not very impressed.

Now Postone can go for the whole totalising hog and proclaim that capital as identical subject-object, constitutes the totality of our relations, constitutes 'forms of everyday practice' (Postone, p. 154), society's subjectivity (Postone, p. 154; 269) etc. The truth that capitalism is a dynamical system, due to the dynamic of capital as self-valourising

<sup>25</sup> Kay and Mott, op. cit.; McNally, op. cit. Arthur, 'Subject and Counter-Subject', op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur (ibid.) also notes that Postone compresses labour into capital while subsumed labour is a moment in the self-mediation of capital.

<sup>27</sup> Postone is aware of his confluences but he blames capitalism for them. For him capital is totalising 'because two dimensions of social life... are conflated in capitalism inasmuch as both are mediated by labour' (Postone, p. 220) – the problem here is that, as we see in the main text, Postone's concept of labour is already conflated into capital. Postone's world has the colour of his glasses.

<sup>28</sup> This was also noted by Kay and Mott in 'Concept and method in Postone's *Time, labour and social domination*', *Historical Materialism*, op. cit., pp. 169-187.

<sup>24</sup> ('Labour objectifying itself as a social activity', Postone, p. 162)

value, becomes the ‘truth’ that capital is the ‘essential’ core of history.

To conclude, in Postone’s view, capital is a totality, of which labour, and the working class are an integral part. Labour, defined at the beginning as ‘a means of acquisition’, is immediately a social relation insofar as it constitutes capital as a social relation, i.e. as a ‘matrix of social domination’, the alien power that compels us to do more labour, becomes the system of command itself. We are then subjugated by capital, or, which is immediately the same, by our labour.

*Postone’s view of labour as an aspect of capital appears to be a good objection against the traditional-Marxist positive view of labour.* However, he falls into the other extreme, in an immediacy of labour and capital which implies an identity of the working class and capital, of the subject and object.

#### 2.4 Postone’s method: a Hegelian Marxist or a Marxist Hegelian?

Postone’s view of capitalism as an immediate identity of object and subject coincides with Hegel’s view of the Spirit as the identical subject-object of history. Indeed, Postone agrees<sup>29</sup> a lot with Hegel. Not only in the replacement of the real human being with conceptual thinking, but in a vision of a world driven by an abstract totalising Subject of history, which integrates within itself all subjective and objective aspects of reality. While for Hegel this is the Spirit, for Postone this is capital: ‘An identical subject-object (capital) exists as a totalising historical Subject and can be unfolded from a single category, according to Marx...’

We agree that it is interesting to look at the Hegelian roots in Marx – and the title of our magazine, *Aufheben*, could not express this agreement better. However, we can’t agree with Postone’s interpretation of how Marx draws from Hegel. For us, there is an important difference between Marx and Hegel. Hegel speaks about a totality as the harmonious integration of all contradictions. Concrete strife for Hegel is the limited experience of an undeveloped consciousness that has not already grasped reality in its fullness. The philosopher can understand the inherent reasons of all suffering, injustice, benefit cuts, police repression, wars, as well as the anger of the working class ... Once the individual reaches the heights of the Spirit (and his adhesion to the State) he can reconcile himself with any daily suffering and exploitation. For Hegel the contradictions of the totality are not delusions but real contradictions, crises are real crises, suffering is real suffering, class war is real class war, but they ultimately make sense in the complexity of the totality. Reciprocally, the totality can exist in its ultimate perfection and completeness only because its contradictions are real within it.

Hegelian Marxism does not simply appropriate Hegel by changing the meanings of his concepts, but articulates a totally different view of the dialectic. For the Hegelian Marxist the movement of the dialectic is a real challenge to concrete reality. The revolutionary dialectic ‘includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, *its inevitable destruction*’ (Marx preface to the second edition, *Capital*, p. 103). The real

contradictions of capitalism, including that of object and subject, cannot be resolved within capital – the solution of contradictions is only realised with the overcoming of the present system. The revolution is the ultimate completion of the contradictory development of history.

However, there is another way of appropriating Hegel in Marxian terms, which we may call a Marxist Hegelian way. In this view, the contradictions of capitalism (e.g. object and subject) are seen as necessary parts of the totality. The contradictions that manifest themselves in events of class struggle are in this view elements of capital’s dynamic: their presence drives capital’s dynamics along its pattern, which, in itself, is one with the logic of the totality. Looking at capital’s development retrospectively, the Marxist Hegelian can therefore proclaim that all contradictions have acted as a painful but necessary element in such development, confirming capital as it is today. For example, the struggles for the ten hour working day make sense as they explain the development from the extraction of absolute surplus value to relative surplus value. Thus the Marxist Hegelian can contemplate, in retrospective, the omnipotent wisdom of history. Inevitably, this retrospective construction becomes a faith in the future: the Hegelian Marxist is ready to bet that the next worker’s struggle and the next crisis will be another element of capital’s dynamic.

Let us find how Postone rewords what we have just said:

Class conflict and a system structured by commodity exchange... are not on opposed principles; such conflicts do not represent a disturbance in an otherwise harmonious system. On the contrary, it is inherent to a society constituted by the commodity as a totalising and a totalised form... class conflict becomes an important factor in the spatial and temporal development of capital... *class conflict becomes a driving element of the historical development of capitalist society.* (Postone, p. 317; 319)

But, as we said, class conflict is a driving element which can only follow an already drawn pattern, intrinsic to capital:

Although class conflict does play an important role in the extension and dynamic of capitalism, however, it neither creates the totality *nor gives rise to its trajectory.* We have seen that... it is only because of its specific, quasi-objective, and temporally dynamic form of social mediations that capitalist society exists as a totality and possesses an intrinsic dynamic... These characteristics cannot be grounded in the struggles of the producers... *per se*; rather these struggles only play the role they do because of this society’s specific forms of mediations. (Postone, p. 319).<sup>30</sup>

How can we imagine class struggle as playing an important role in moving capital, but by no means giving rise to its

<sup>29</sup> Postone says *Marx* agrees.

<sup>30</sup> Or: ‘Class conflict does not, in and for itself, generate the historical dynamic of capitalism; rather, it is a driving element for this development only because it is structured by social forms that are intrinsically dynamic’ (Postone, p. 355).

trajectory? Class struggle in capitalism is like a battery in an electric circuit. It drives the current, but can do that insofar as its role in the circuit is already decided. And it can't do anything other than what it is supposed to do. What does this mean for us? Even if we thought we were fighting capital, we have always played as elements of its dynamic, we have acted as automatons of History, driven and duped by the deep structures... This process has always, and will, reconstitute the contradictions between subject and object into the subject-object unity of the totality. In this view, then, the working class and class struggle are not in contradiction with capital but 'constitutive elements' of it (Postone, p. 357): precisely because of its struggle against capital, the working class acts as an unwitting puppet of capital! Precisely because of its contradictions with the object, the subject is an unwitting aspect of the object!

This Marxist Hegelian view leads Postone to an *impasse*: this dialectic cannot explain the necessity of the historical way out of capitalism. If all contradictions and their solutions are part of a dynamic of the totality, intrinsic to it, already structured by its 'forms of social mediations'; and if nothing is external to the totality, how can contradictions or their solution lead outside capital? The answer is: they can't, unless capital was... programmed since the beginning of its development to lead itself, after having dodged a number of crises, straight to the edge of the cliff. *That is, a revolutionary view based in Marxism Hegelianism must hold a faith in the concept of lemming capital.* But Postone refuses this solution, as he, son of the '70s, refuses to accept strict determinism.<sup>31</sup> In refusing this solution, Postone poses to himself the desperate riddle of where revolutionary consciousness is rooted, and digs himself deeper into the hole. In the next section, we'll consider this digging.

Before considering this, it is worthwhile to notice that even Postone's Hegelianism is flawed! Postone assumes that abstractions such as value and abstract labour are 'essential' and truthful to reality; and their appearances (the living social relations), are less truthful to reality and mystifying. But this view is criticised by... Hegel himself! Taking the piss out of Postone, McNally tells us:

'In Hegel's Doctrine of Essence, two sides of a relation are treated as independent entities external to one another, *one inessential and the other essential*. The concrete, phenomenal form of a thing is thus treated as inessential in relation to the Essence that lies outside itself' and quotes Hegel: 'Essence is held to be something unaffected by, and subsisting in independence of, its definite phenomenal embodiment'.<sup>32</sup>

This is precisely what Postone does, and what would make Hegel turn in his grave.

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<sup>31</sup> Too traditional Marxist??

<sup>32</sup> David McNally, 'The dual form of labour in capitalist society and the struggle over meaning: comments on Postone', *Historical Materialism*, op. cit., pp.189-207.

### 3 Fetishism and the riddle of revolutionary consciousness

*Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it can solve'... since closer examinations will always show that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the process of formation* (Marx, 'Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', p. 4)<sup>33</sup>

#### 3.1 The proof of the pudding: does this theory provide a revolutionary perspective?

As seen in Part 1, Postone adopts a method of abstraction which reduces the categories of capital to categories of simple exchange and hides away the fundamental conditions for capitalist production: property relations (or, *which is another dimension of the same relation*, class relations). In Part 2 we have showed that this abstraction eliminates from Postone's theory all the clues for understanding the interplay of subject and object. This theory then can only consider the subject as a mere part of capital as an identity of subject and object. We have also showed how this reduction leads Postone's theory into a 'Marxist Hegelianism' where dialectic oppositions reconcile within ongoing capital's dynamic.

In the reduction of capital as a unity of subject and object, capital (value) becomes, in this view, 'the social ground of itself'. Thus Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, the consideration of the actual, living social reality behind the objectification of value and capital, is subverted into a fetishism of capital as an overwhelming self-sustained reality. In Section 3.2 we'll explore the extent of this fetishism and one of its consequences: if value becomes the real social relation behind itself, in order to abolish value we can't tackle any concrete human relations, but value itself.

In Section 3.3 we'll see that this recipe is undermined by Postone's theory itself! By closing the overwhelming power of value into capital as a totality, an identity of subject and object, Postone fulfils the coherent realisation of his theory of doom. How to abolish value? If we cannot destroy capital by re-appropriating the means of production and experimenting in new ways of relating with each other – how can we then? If all what we can experience is misleading appearance, how can we, 'ordinary consciousnesses', develop a revolutionary consciousness and destroy capital? Eating lots of fish and becoming clever like Marx and Postone? And, to be fair to ourselves, how could Marx escape ordinary consciousness himself; and reveal to the world in slumber the truth about capitalism?

#### 3.2 The fetishism of value

Let us see first of all to what extent for Postone value is a reality more real than us. Postone's theory starts from an ideological imperative: to explain why the USSR and so called post-liberal capitalism are still capitalism. At the same time Postone uncritically accepts the Stalinist 'truth' that the USSR has actually abolished the bourgeois property

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<sup>33</sup> Foreign Language Press, Peking 1976

relations, class relations, and the market. And he accepts uncritically from the Frankfurt School that ‘post-liberal’ capitalism has essentially deformed the market in the West. According to these presuppositions, Postone’s theory is then bound to consider both the market and property relations as inessential for capital. This does not come out as the result of an investigation, but is already implied by Postone’s initial assumptions.



If the market is inessential, Postone has to look at labour and explain why labour in capitalism ‘grounds’ itself in itself. But in order for labour to ‘ground’ in itself, labour must be conflated with value and its laws. The logical conclusion is that for Postone value grounds itself in itself – while anything else is ‘inessential’. In such a totalised view, value can stand on its own legs, even without the very process that abstracts the various human activities and measures them in terms of value: without *exchange in an established market*. Postone’s concept of value then becomes something rather incomprehensible to... ordinary consciousnesses such as us: we cannot even imagine value if we cannot consider the actual way in which it is realised through our human intercourses.<sup>34</sup> Value becomes something magic, or better, a real fetish!

But, if Postone’s main starting and ‘essential’ point is based on the categories of simple exchange, how can he end with a concept of value that does not imply exchange? When Postone introduces his concept of labour (as a social mediation), he is obliged, by his very methodology, to define capitalist labour as a ‘commodity-producing’ labour simply because the only relations in simple exchange are precisely, er... exchange! But this does not worry the abstractive mind. Labour in capitalism is, yes, ‘commodity-determined’, but, at the end of the day, what is a commodity? Something produced by capitalist labour! In the same way as for Postone labour in capitalism ‘mediates itself’, Postone’s

<sup>34</sup> Market, private property, etc. only exist in capitalism that we know of, not those we don’t. As seen in Box 1, there are other capitalisms in parallel universes, so Postone’s theory has some usefulness.

concept of labour loops into itself and explains itself by itself. This makes not only the market, but bourgeois social relations as a whole, exchange and private property, conceptually redundant!

By closing up labour and the commodity as an identical tautology, this theory seems good enough to explain why the USSR, having abolished the market, remained capitalist: since the USSR maintained an industrial form of production that involved some direct or ‘proletarian’ labour, this direct labour keeps on creating value and capital, whether we like it or not. Clever. But Postone does not seem too eager to apply this theory to the USSR, disappointing the readers who reads his book to the end waiting for the proof of this pudding.<sup>35</sup> *In fact, a concrete analysis of the USSR would simply show that Postone’s theory is wrong!* As it is clear from more concrete studies<sup>36</sup>, the USSR tried to maintain a mode of production which was coherent with a market-based system, at the same time replacing the market with planning. The result was a disaster – production was undermined and eventually the system collapsed. The USSR was a non-mode of production, as Ticktin called it. Rather than proving that capitalist production can exist without the market, the USSR was *the living proof of the necessity of the market* for a capitalist form of production.

If value is independent from bourgeois relations of exchange and property relations, if it explains itself by itself (or by ‘capitalist direct labour’ defined as something that produces value), then there is no way of changing our concrete social relations if we don’t tackle value first. Because of this truth, Postone argues on page 334, if during the period of manufacture the workers had abolished private property, capitalist production and capital domination would have still survived. Why? Postone explains: ‘we have seen that value... is based on direct labour expenditure’; and since manufacture is inevitably based on direct labour, we will be inevitably obliged to reproduce the form of capitalist production, whether we like it or not.<sup>37</sup> In this spooky vision, labour acquires the mystically scary power to survive as a ghost and rule over us as a ‘matrix of social domination’, as long as there is some ‘direct labour’ to be done, and despite the social context of such direct labour!

So, then, how can we abolish value? This is possible only if value is abolished. Simply like this:

‘What characterises capitalism... is that – because of the peculiar nature of its structuring relations – it possesses a fundamental core that embodies its basic features.... This core... would have to be overcome

<sup>35</sup> Kay and Mott for example seem very disappointed indeed in op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> e.g. Hillel Ticktin –see *Aufheben* # 7 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Having detached value and labour from its actual, living social context, Postone now sees the mystery of value in ‘direct labour’ or ‘proletarian labour’, whatever the social context of such direct labour! But then what is ‘proletarian labour’? The only way of describing proletarian labour (without considering the arcane secret behind it: dispossession) is to look at its concrete form, industrial production, or simply ‘direct labour’. But, abstracted from the social context that makes it specific, this concept of ‘direct labour’ becomes (paradoxically) transhistorical. It is funny to catch Postone in such a conceptual mishap, since he is so keen to criticise everybody else for using ‘transhistorical’ categories.



for this society to be negated historically' (Postone, p. 263).

But, how to 'overcome' something that substantiates even the reality of its possible change? The only hope then is in the inherent development of capital (value): in its inherent movement, capital has reached a stage where, potentially, no direct labour needs to be done, so no value needs to be created. This is what Postone seems to imply when he comments on the scenario of the *Grundrisse*'s so-called 'fragment on machines': the development of an increasingly efficient production based on knowledge, technology and automation, which can potentially 'free' humanity from direct labour, thus from nasty value. Unlike manufacture, Postone claims, modern capitalism offers us this 'possibility': only now, since production is no longer fundamentally based on direct labour (but, on 'knowledge' and technology<sup>38</sup>) if we 'reappropriate the accumulated time' and take conscious control of production, value will no longer be a constraint on us! Then we will be free to reorganise production in order to abolish direct labour as known today and make work more fulfilling and interesting.

We have reasons to believe that Marx wouldn't have agreed with Postone. The 'fragment on machines' is unfinished notes, and has to be put in context with the rest of the *Grundrisse*. If we do so, we are entitled to assume that Marx tacitly assumed the abolition of private property as a *fundamental precondition* of his scenario – indeed only under this condition can he reasonably speak of what 'we' can do with 'our' technology and resources. The abolition of private property is the concrete truth behind any abstract dream of 'reappropriation of accumulated time'.<sup>39</sup> This is different from Postone's one-sided daydream of a 'possibility' opened up by value itself, amidst bourgeois relations unchallenged through class struggle. Dismissing those fundamental preconditions, Postone's dream risks to slip into a post-capitalist nightmare where direct labour can become unnecessary, but also where the ever unchallenged owners of the means of production can produce what they need without having to deal with the rabble. This is, truly, a 'possible' work-free world, but also one where the majority of people can be left starving outside huge walls and efficient (as well as, *automatic*) security systems: the Mega City 1 scenario.

### 3.3 The riddle of the totality and its way out through a 'possibility'

So how does value, in its quasi-objective dynamic, lead itself into its own abolition; or us into destroying it? Postone takes a distance from mechanical determinism. While for a traditional Marxist capitalism has inherent contradictions that lead the quasi-objective machine to quasi-mechanical jams

<sup>38</sup> Postone here shares the same problem as the apologists of immaterial labour. It is not the concrete aspect of labour but its social context that shapes the concrete aspect of labour. We can accept that the development of the forces of production may solve a material problem of scarcity, but this is different.

<sup>39</sup> When Postone talks about capitalist production as 'an enormous expansion of social productive powers and knowledge that are constituted within a framework determined by value and hence exist in alienated form as capital' (Postone, p. 355), what does it imply? How can this 'exist' if not in alienated form?

(i.e. the crises), for Postone all contradictions, crises and conflicts in capitalism find their dialectical solution in the dynamic of capitalism itself. The determinist Marxist was victim of a delusion: what he considered a jam, was in fact part of capital's dialectical development.

Coherently, Postone's favourite contradiction is one that has safely hovered above our heads since Marx's time as an inherent part of capital's dynamic. This is the contradiction between:

- capital's need to advance productivity and reduce the need of direct labour (the tendency of value to *shrink* or the tendency of the rate of profit to fall) and
- capital's need for direct human labour, which is the source of value (value's self-valorisation)

These two tendencies not only coexist in capital, but they constitute capital. We can visualise such a harmony in contradiction by thinking of a planet pulled apart by two tendencies: a continual fall towards its sun, and a continual centrifugal push outwards. This ongoing contradiction is resolved by the planet actually going round its sun for ever and ever. Here it is plain that the contradiction does not lead to a jam; instead they make the orbit, as their full realisation.

In Postone's Marxist Hegelian view, no inherent contradiction of capitalism, not even the 'fundamental' contradiction above, can by itself terminate the system. So his theory seems to have overcome mechanism and determinism, since this theory seems to require a conscious human intervention, based on subjective 'needs' and 'perceptions', developing from capital, yet calling capital 'into question' (Postone, p. 224). Postone calls this 'revolutionary consciousness'. The planet cannot escape its orbit unless someone desires to flick it off course and consciously does it.

But if capital is a totality, if any dialectical contradiction only confirms capital, where does this subjective intervention come from? Postone has to accept that revolutionary consciousness can't be rooted in totalised reality. So he has to look somewhere else - but where? Not outside the system, but still somewhere inside. Postone thus looks at one side of his favourite 'fundamental' contradiction: the tendency of capital to increase productivity and reduce direct labour. Postone argues that this is a 'possibility' that can ground our revolutionary consciousness: since this side of a contradiction goes against the tendency of value to valorise itself, it escapes capital's logic and 'points outside' of it. This seems to make sense.

Yet, it doesn't. We have sussed out that Postone is sceptical of practical action. While for a traditional Marxist the objective contradictions of capital lead to real crises of the quasi-objective machine, so they are real spurs for real, practical struggle under the blackmail of barbarism, Postone's favourite contradiction does not lead to crises, but to an imaginary 'possibility' which can be the object of safe intellectual thinking, of the 'immanent critique'.<sup>40</sup> This 'critique' will reveal the 'possibility' to the ordinary consciousnesses who don't see it and by doing so it will

<sup>40</sup> As you are what you eat, Postone's favourite contradiction is ideal for a couch-potato theory in which even the word 'revolution' is avoided, as it sounds uncomfortably too practical.

somehow contribute to the conscious transformation of society.

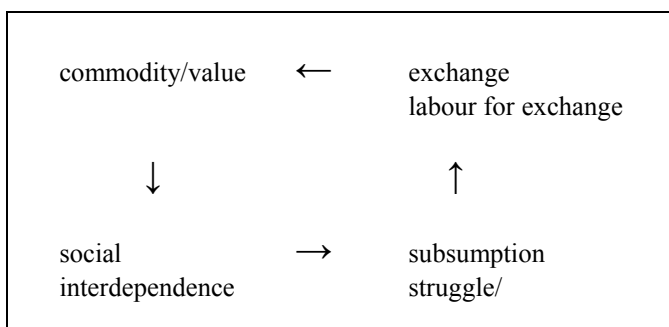
But Postone's solution of his riddle is a desperate solution. Postone has to ground his idea of revolutionary consciousness on an abstract view of the real, which escapes the logic of capitalism only because it is so one-sided that it *cannot fully reproduce the capitalist reality in our mind*. In reality Postone's 'possibility' is a non possibility for us as it implies its opposite: at every moment our concrete experience of the tendency of value to shrink is also our real experience of its power over us. But Postone has no choice. By reducing reality into capital as a totality, Postone has to look away from reality and take refuge in an imagination.

But it's not good enough to attack Postone if we are unable to suggest how things should go instead. This is what we will do in the next and last section. In this section we will explain how in capitalism subjectivity and objectivity never reach a solution – the supersession is only possible with the overcoming of the concrete system of production itself. We will also see how this contradiction gives rise to a revolutionary consciousness, which is not just abstract 'desires' but the concrete consciousness of our capacity to overcome capitalism, and which is founded on concrete practical experience, on concrete reality.

### 3.4 The phenomenology of class struggle

Postone's thought constitutes a challenge to Hegelian Marxism. Indeed, we share some of its arguments against the voluntarism of traditional Marxism, the concept that production is shaped by capital and one with it, the fact that the revolutionary consciousness must be rooted in the real material conditions of capitalism. We also share with Postone the idea that capital is a totality and revolutionary thought cannot count on, or appeal to, something 'external' such as marginal cultures or economies not yet totally subsumed by capitalism, and even less, to ideals which have no basis in the real. However, we have said, capital is a totality because, as an abstraction, it covers the whole; but it is important to remember that *it is an abstraction*. As such, it's like a cake: Postone has discarded the inner crumbs and toys with the crust.

In the course of this article we have highlighted the main reasons why Postone's theory fails. We have seen that it lacks a concrete understanding of production based on dispossession as precondition and result. Consequently he dismisses the question of labour power as a special commodity, and so the concrete pain and struggle inherent in the process of subsumption of labour by capital – this amounts to see labour as immediately capital. We have commented all this on the basis of the following diagram:



On the basis of this same diagram, let us see why Postone's reduction misses out the reality of capitalism as an irreconcilable contradiction of subject and object.

The crucial moment of subsumption of labour (figure, bottom right) implies a real opposition of subject and object, which is both necessary and can never be superseded. In order to exist as capital, as self-valourising value, capital needs to posit labour as external to itself and then subsume it. This means that the object has to pose a subject as external to it, then objectify it while becoming a subject itself. This also means that the worker is not a pure subject against a pure object, but that he is part of this contradiction. As long as the present social conditions continue, we have no choice – we have to sell our labour power, and so we rely, for our reproduction, to our identification with it – so we are objects. On the other hand this same objectification entails a real experience of alienation and dispossession.<sup>41</sup> This conflicting interplay is real and unavoidable.

McNally correctly criticises Postone for forgetting that the autonomy of capital is a partial truth as it continually necessitates the subsumption of 'sentient, embodied,

<sup>41</sup> See *Love of Labour?* Antagonism Press, p. 21 for a very interesting discussion on the contradictory role of the working class. This article was written against the Autonomist romantic idea of class struggle simply based on the refusal of work. This, of course, is not the only critique of one-dimensional theories where the working class is unquestionably revolutionary or unquestionably integrated, but it is convincing and written in an accessible style.

thinking, self-conscious labour', thus class struggle.<sup>42</sup> However, this is not enough. Class antagonism is not ontologically rooted in some a-historical or natural repulsion of the individual against work - or the subject against being objectified. In fact, antagonism is a result of a historically specific reality.

In capitalism there is a dialectical opposition between a sphere of production where the individual is necessarily subjected to despotism (command as a direct social relation); and the sphere of circulation where the individual is posited as independent and free as a definition of his being (the equality and democracy of exchange). These two spheres imply each other. There is no escape from wage work until we retain a social relation based on exchange so absolute freedom in circulation. But there is no escape also from command in production, which is felt by the worker as an abuse of our right to absolute freedom. The two are two aspects of the same contradictory coin, which cannot supersede each other. Our antagonism is then *historically specific* as it is inseparable from the historical specificity of capitalism.

Postone cannot see the fundamental contradiction between the sphere of production, with its despotic *class domination*, and the sphere of circulation with its *classless freedom and equality*, as historical grounds of the class struggle. In his (petty bourgeois) view, the main conflict of subject-object in capitalism is that between bourgeois freedom and 'objective necessities' dictated by the laws of value: both related to the same sphere of circulation, so he dismisses in two word the importance of the direct relations of despotism in production.

However, we<sup>43</sup> haven't answered to Postone yet. The contradiction among the spheres of production and circulation is still inherent to capitalism. The subjective aspect of antagonism can still be seen as the subjective aspect of a unity of object and subject, as the groans and creaks of this quasi-objective machine of capital.<sup>44</sup> And the consequent class struggle can be still explained as inner



<sup>42</sup> However, McNally accepts that the ground of the contradictions in capitalism is the duality of the commodity form. So he has to posit, as an external truth, that 'sentient labour' necessarily antagonises with capital; or that capital's aim of 'self-development' is necessarily antagonistic with the working class's aim of 'self-development'.

<sup>43</sup> As well as McNally.

<sup>44</sup> 'Structures of meaning as 'an intrinsic moment of the constituted and constituting structure of social relations' (p. 225).

forces of actions and reactions within the machine, which serve to move the machine forward. *If our criticism stops here, we would still be trapped in Postone's ideological hole:* we would have to admit that the working class is only a cog of capital.

Also, we haven't answered to Postone yet about the root of revolutionary consciousness. Although the two spheres and their subjective/objective contradictions are always in conflict with each other, crucially, each face is abstract on its own. It would be stupid to pick one of the sides (e.g. circulation) and claim that revolutionary consciousness lies on the 'possibility' of pure freedom and equality - precisely because our concrete experience of freedom and equality is concretely one with our concrete experience of unfreedom and inequality. *If we accepted a Marxist Hegelian view of dialectic, we would be trapped in Postone's ideological hole:* there would be no concrete experience where a revolutionary consciousness could root, except in partial abstraction!

But in fact what we have seen is not the end of the story - only its presuppositions. The above contradiction of subject and object is a real contradiction - crucially, this means it is a contradiction that cannot be resolved. It leads to class struggle, to praxis. Postone's theory, looking only at flimsy abstractions, cannot give a weight to this praxis, because praxis is a process, not an abstract result.<sup>45</sup> It is this praxis of struggle the clue to get out of Postone's trap of Marxist Hegelianism.

Praxis is in fact a process of (real) *aufhebung* - although it starts within capitalism, it is a qualitative step away. *When individual resistance become collective struggle, collective struggle presents itself as a concrete challenge to capital and its fetishism.* The collective struggle shakes the bourgeois mystification that presents the worker as owner of commodities; the 'objectivity' of the conditions for commodity exchange, including the 'objectivity' of the value of his labour power; the 'objective' necessity of given working conditions, etc. When we constitute ourselves practically and consciously as a class, we stop confronting capital as helpless individuals, and expose the 'objective conditions' as what they really are: a

<sup>45</sup> Marcel Stetzler does some archaeological work and digs out one reference by Postone to 'revolutionary practice', written as far back as 1974. Besides the fact that Postone seems there to relegate 'revolutionary practice' in a special revolutionary moment outside the present history as class struggle, he even stops speaking about revolutionary practice altogether in his recent book, as his admirer Stetzler seems obliged to acknowledge.

class relation of domination. There comes the realisation that the 'objective' power of capital is produced by our labour, thus capital is not omnipotent, and we can dismantle it. That value cannot exist as 'objective' without our compliance with the laws of exchange and wage work. That capital can be actually challenged by tackling what for Postone are 'non essential' appearances, for example by dispossessing the capitalist of the means of production. This, in a nutshell, is the realisation that *Postone is wrong*.

Although the collapse of capitalism necessitates revolution, we don't need to consider only revolutionary times to understand the apparent paradox of an objectivity that is reimposed and challenged through a continual process. All struggles, also the smallest, question the objectivity of capital and its laws. As McNally says, even the most mundane struggles aiming to

'... Limit the working day, establish standards of health and safety, create minimum wages, defend workers' autonomy on the job, guarantee job security, provide social benefits to the entire working class, overturn water privatisation, contain a non-capitalist logic... even if capitalists are often capable to adjusting to them'.<sup>46</sup>

Since both objectivity and subjectivity are defined by this process, class struggle is also the process that defines revolutionary consciousness. Although the ongoing experience of defetishisation during limited struggle is a limited, it is always the practical realisation of a *possibility*: of a society which is not based on alienated social relations, of a life which is not dictated by alien things. In the hottest moments of revolutionary times, when production and exchange are subverted and life is reorganised according to the needs of those in struggle, this practical experience is one the consciousness that a different society is not only imaginable, but also practically achievable. This is the revolutionary consciousness, the real possibility of a real revolution!

Revolutionary consciousness, then, is neither rooted ontologically on romantic clouds not on partial aspects of capitalist reality such as the possibility to abolish direct labour (sphere of production, Postone) or democratic freedom (sphere of circulation, Fortunati<sup>47</sup>). It is not only a 'possibility' in the thought or imagination, as it has involved the real experience of redefinition of reality in both its objective and subjective aspects.

This consciousness is the practical realisation of the class, when it constitutes itself as a class conscious of itself and its power. Thus, we come to the solution of the last riddle: *the demystification that Marx grasped in 1848 was not due to eating lots of fish*. Marx was 'special' only in a way, because he had the training and commitment to sit down and put this collective and historical realisation on paper in an articulated way. In this sense Marx's work is an

<sup>46</sup> McNally is 'not faulting Postone for failing to treat the complex problem of... struggle, experience, consciousness' since Postone claims that is not the object of his study. We disagree. That is not the object of his study because his theory closes such experience off from what is 'essential'. *Postone does not study that because he can't*.

<sup>47</sup> As we saw in *Aufheben* #13, 2005.

'immanent critique of capital', because he is part of history as the history of class struggle.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Postone's this view can see why we, the 'ordinary consciousnesses' are potentially extra-ordinary, and we are all part of this history.

But, Postone would object, are not we and what we think determined by material conditions? And are these material conditions not an objective constraint on class struggle? So, is not class struggle an intimate part of the reality of capitalism as it is, and its laws, and its relations to labour? So are not all the above struggles integrated within capital? In the light of what we have explored in this article, we have an answer now.

It is true that at every moment subjectivity and objectivity are two aspects of social reality determined by historically given material conditions. But what are these material conditions? The material conditions, Postone says, are capital and its laws, this is the quasi-objective reality. *This is wrong*. The 'material conditions' of existence are rooted in life itself, they are made by *the real individuals and their intercourses*, they are us relating to each other and the world as social individuals.

The material conditions are not abstract aspects of reality. They are not, Marx argued against the Young Hegelians, just ideas, as they are the abstract result of a social context.<sup>49</sup> They are not, as traditional Marxism tends to suggest, the economic structure, which is another abstraction.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, subjectivity cannot be considered as a primary agent of history, in separation from objectivity either.<sup>51</sup> But material conditions are not, either, the quasi-objective reified aspect of life, seen as already settled, which is what Postone is suggesting. Each of these aspects are the result, not the cause. What we object to Postone is the way he privileges the objectivity of capital, suggesting that it exists independently<sup>52</sup> of human relations, or as he says, *in lieu* of them. This objectivity becomes then the driver of subjectivity and history. We have seen, however, that at every moment the concrete reality of class struggle challenges and re-imposes the material basis of both subjectivity and objectivity, and that objectivity can exist as 'objective' only on the basis of this continual struggle, of its continual renegotiation and redefinition.

## Conclusions

*Aufheben's* structural survey of Moishe Postone's construction was perhaps biased by initial suspicions, which

<sup>48</sup> Hudis (*op. cit.*) notices that Marx could develop clearly his theory of commodity fetishism only after the collective defetishising experience of the Paris Commune.

<sup>49</sup> Referring to contemporary theoretical debates it is worthwhile adding that *material conditions are neither 'discourses' nor the physical 'body', as they are both partial aspects of reality*.

<sup>50</sup> It is true that in some statements Marx seems to imply that economic relations are material conditions, but economic relations are material conditions only in the context of a broad view that includes all aspects of life, including thought, which can become an effective cause of change.

<sup>51</sup> *Autonomia* suggest that subjectivity is the primary cause of what is objective, which is again a one-sided view.

<sup>52</sup> Or he would say 'quasi-' independently, but he means independently!

we spelled out in the Introduction, about Postone's abstract and classless theory. However, which surveyor would not allow himself to be influenced by the first sight of a building, its visible cracks and mouldy walls, before finding hidden structural damage and leaking pipes? In any case, closer analysis confirmed all our intuitive suspicions.

First of all, his construction is too abstract, and this abstractedness is one with its conservative nature. Though Postone seems to place himself in the fascinating tradition of Hegelian Marxism, he goes off on his own peculiar route. Pushing Hegelian Marxism too far he ends up in a thoroughly Hegelian vision of capital as a totality and an identity of subject and object. In this view, the subject becomes a mere aspect of capital as a 'quasi-objective' entity with a dynamic of its own. In the intent of challenging the traditional Marxist dualism of subject and object, Postone ends up in a view that is even more conservative, as it virtually subsumes us into capital, as cogs of a quasi-objective machine. Although the reader may be impressed by Postone's obsessive references to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, this totalising view of capital amounts to the best presented and articulated fetishisation of capital we've ever read in our life. Postone has fetishised capital as the alpha and omega of history and consciousness, and conflates consciousness as identical with capital.

In such a closed view, the origin of revolutionary consciousness becomes a tricky as well as unnecessary riddle, which Postone cannot even solve. In fact, in his closed view, concrete reality offers no basis for an historical emergence of any revolutionary consciousness at all. Postone is then obliged to trace an imaginary root of an imaginary revolutionary consciousness in abstract 'possibilities' that are never a practical experience.

Postone ends up in this closed Hegelian view of capital because of his method, which privileges abstractions to the concrete. In Postone's theory everything becomes 'essentially' what they are in their most abstract form, forgetting the concrete process of such abstraction, which involves class struggle. As Kay and Mott observe, in Postone 'abstractions... appear not as a process which must continually recharge itself but as a finished event'.<sup>53</sup>

Although we praised Postone for insisting that the organisation of production and concrete labour are aspects of capital, we cannot agree with him – he goes too far in his conflation of everything as (identically) capital. Postone considers capital as already objectified; labour as already subsumed; labour power as an already objectified commodity, etc. In his theory everything is already abstracted and already objectified, once and for all, and without struggle and questions. But, we have objected, by conflating labour as value and capital, Postone overlooks concrete experiences of real subsumption and dispossession, which is where subjectivity interplays with objectivity. It is in this way, we have seen, that Postone has conflated the subject as identical to the object and sanitised his theory from class struggle and built it with very, very abstract straw.

As a consequence, Postone's 'Marxist Hegelian' totalitarian view of capitalism is confirmed by his own abstractions. Postone can't see how capital is not a closed system, or that the working class is not merely a cog in capital's machine, precisely because he has abstracted class

struggle away. As Chris Arthur adds, Postone can't see how the working class is 'in and against capital' at all moments.<sup>54</sup> This, in fact, can be seen only at a more concrete level.

We also found problems in the foundations of Postone's house. We showed that Postone's assumptions already imply the construction of a classless theory from the beginning. Postone uncritically accepts the Frankfurt School's argument that in the present 'post-liberal' capitalism the working class plays a vanishing historical role; and that in 'post-liberal' capitalism the market has been severely controlled by the state. Also, Postone adopts from the Stalinist tradition a narrow definition of 'private property' as the private property of individual capitalists<sup>55</sup> – according to this definition, we don't have classes anymore if a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has abolished individual private property. Since Postone aims to show that the USSR and 'post-liberal' societies are capitalism, he then needs a theory where classes and property relations are 'inessential' for capitalism. Yet this is not the result of an investigation, but of already chosen foundations.

In Postone's classless theory, classes and waged labour are dismissed as mere 'sociological' issues and the concept of capital is narrowed down to a 'matrix' of abstract domination that confronts – quite democratically of course – all individuals irrespective of class. By virtue of a choice already done since the beginning, Postone's rejection of Marxism as a 'critique of capital from the standpoint of labour' reveals itself as what it is politically: the rejection of the standpoint of the exploited class. So what is the standpoint of Postone's critique? We noticed that Postone criticises those aspects of capitalism (such as the work ethic imposed by the commodity form) and avoids criticism of others (such as private property), according to a logic that reflects the love-hate relation of the independent producer in capitalism. Abandoning the traditional Marxist standpoint of 'labour', Postone seems then to embrace the standpoint of the petty bourgeoisie.

So, the reader's suspicions are basically true. Postone's theory is arguably classless, hopelessly abstract and more conservative than traditional Marxism itself. But, is it perhaps a true theory because it can explain the USSR or post-liberal capitalism and the present? No. We have shown that Postone's analysis of the USSR is wrong – that a deeper, more interesting analysis of the USSR would show that the market and relations of property were *essential* for the USSR as state capitalism, i.e. that Postone's theory is wrong. As for post-liberal capitalism, simply, Postone's theory is redundant. The development of capital in the recent times has shown that no 'post-liberal capitalism' has ever been a problem in the first instance. In no form of existing capitalism, no 'pure' market free from the interference of direct relations, state manipulations, or other concrete factors has actually ever existed! Let alone in Marx's times, where the market was heavily distorted by direct relations.

In conclusion, we have to admit that Postone is somehow useful. *Time, labour and social domination* is a stimulating reading on capital, Marx, revolutionary consciousness, maybe because it is so wrong: it obliges us to

<sup>54</sup> Arthur, 'subject and counter-subject', op. cit.

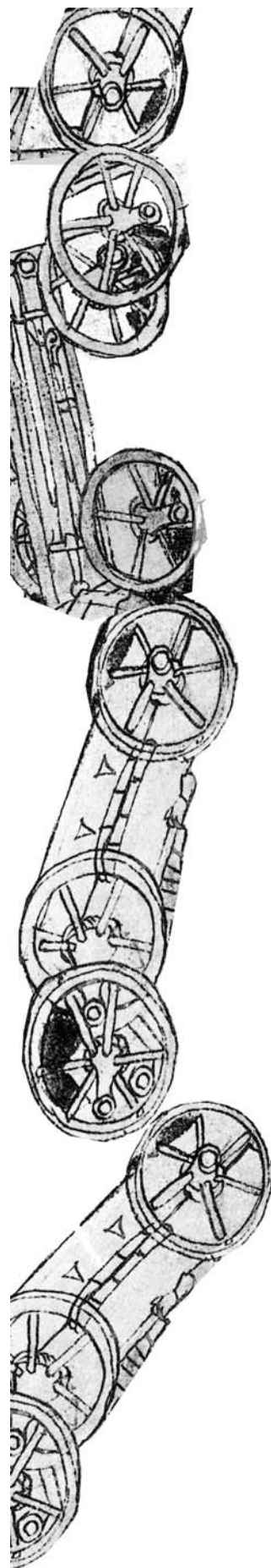
<sup>55</sup> All which was very convenient to the fat Stalinists bureaucrats, who, strategically, did not wear tall hats.

<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Kay and James Mott, op. cit.

wonder what capital is *instead*, what Marx said *instead*, and how revolutionary consciousness arises *instead*. Thanks to Postone we had to think a bit about our previous experience (see for example 'Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow 15 years on: A Reflection' in this issue), consider issues such as commodity fetishism, and the emergence of revolutionary consciousness. This contributed to an ongoing collective effort to understand capitalism and history as class struggle

However, our structural survey has shown that Postone's building can be a hazard for revolutionary theory. It is worrying that Postone can deny the importance of dispossession and of classes in times when the bourgeoisie are recovering their power, when the welfare state is disintegrated and sold to millionaire businesses and when the gap between the proprietors and the dispossessed is increasing globally... It is also annoying that Postone presents his conservative view in the name of Marx! As Arthur says: 'Postone is a revisionist Marxist; but a shamefaced one. What is 'new' here is that points normally made by dissenters *against* Marx are said to be Marx's own points'.<sup>56</sup> Sick and tired of a book that affirms the unaffirmable, denies the undeniable and aims at discouraging us to struggle as a class, we have therefore no objections against the common reader's instinct to dump their copy of *Time, labour and social domination* and get a life.

(For our opinion of Postone's conception of time in capitalism, see Fig. 2).



<sup>56</sup> Arthur, op. cit. *Capital and Class*.

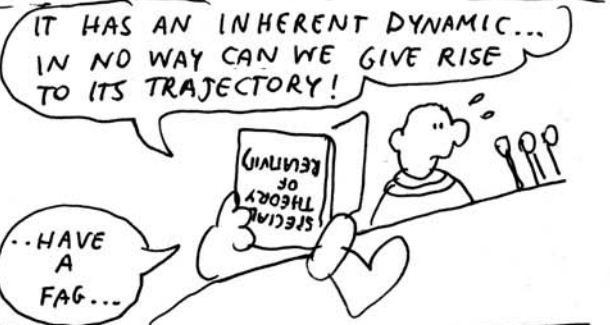
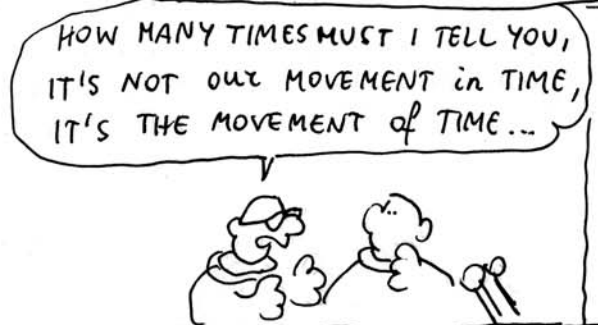
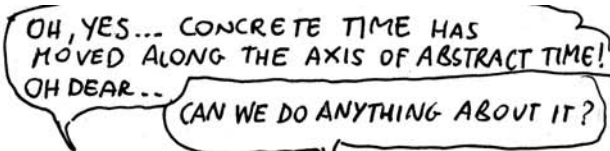


FIG. 2. MOISHE POSTONE'S THEORY OF TIME