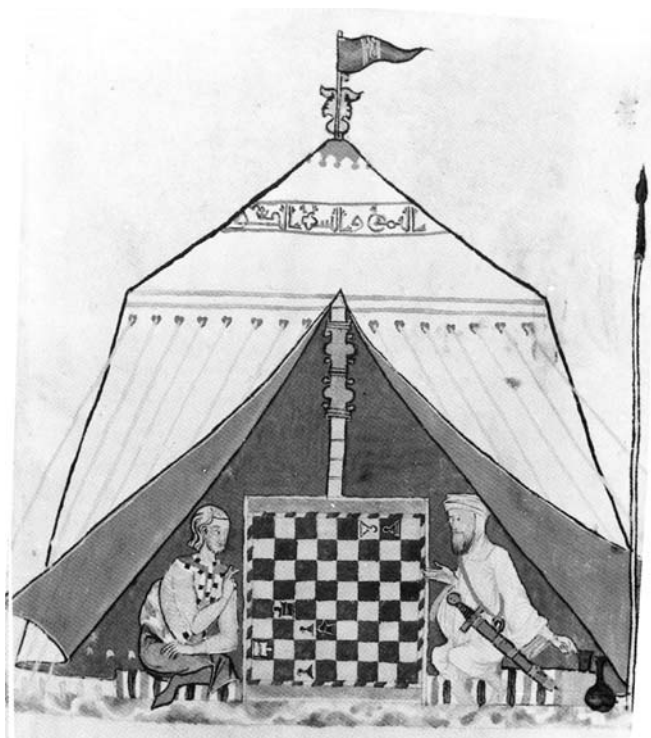


# Lebanon, Iran and the 'Long War' in the 'Wider Middle East'



## Introduction

Following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in July 2005, there was a decisive shift in Iranian foreign policy to a more strident and defiant attitude towards the USA. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric of 'wiping Israel off the map', Iran's increasing covert meddling in the fractious politics of Iraq and, most importantly, his decision to recommence Iran's uranium enrichment programme, all caused increasing alarm in Washington. The issue of Iran, which had become overshadowed by the problems arising from the prolonged occupation of Iraq, re-emerged on America's foreign policy agenda. There arose an increasing clamour, from both inside and outside the Bush regime, for a more robust and confrontational attitude towards Iran's defiance of the 'rules of the game' of the international bourgeois community, which by the beginning of 2006 had reached a crescendo.

Drawing together the increasingly bellicose statements coming from the more hawkish elements of the neoconservative circles in and around the Bush administration, with the shifts in both military doctrines and plans that have emanated in recent years from the Pentagon, many in the anti-war movement, on both sides of the Atlantic, jumped to the conclusion that Bush was already gearing up for a pre-emptive air strike against Iran's uranium enrichment programme, which, it was insisted, could well involve the use of bunker busting tactical nuclear weapons. Feeding the febrile atmosphere that such conclusions were creating within the anti-war movement, John Pilger went further. In an article in the *New Statesman*, Pilger revealed that the US had plans to invade the Iranian province of

Bushehr on the coast of the Persian Gulf and thereby seize the bulk of Iran's oil fields. By the Spring, many antiwar activists had convinced themselves that once the diplomatic formalities were disposed of, Bush was hellbent on launching some form of devastating attack on Iran. War, it was asserted, was merely a matter of months away.<sup>1</sup>

These fears seemed to be given further credence by Seymour Hersh's interviews with a wide range of leading figures in the Bush administration.<sup>2</sup> However, although these interviews showed that a more bellicose attitude towards Iran was gaining ground in Washington, it also showed that many in and around the Bush administration were not only alarmed by the advance of such attitudes, but, by agreeing to be interviewed by Hersh, wanted their alarm to be known. Therefore a more subtle reading of Hersh's report on these interviews indicated that there were important divisions within the Bush administration concerning the direction of foreign policy towards Iran.

Furthermore, on closer inspection, the military plans that were cited to support the contention that Bush was planning an imminent attack on Iran turned out to be either shifts in broad long-term military doctrines or else detailed contingency plans. The fact that the Pentagon had accepted that under certain circumstances the US army might use tactical nuclear weapons, or that plans existed for the invasion of Iran did not mean that Bush was intending to implement such plans. This was clearly the case with Pilger's revelation that the US had plans to invade the province of Bushehr. These versions of such plans dated back more than twenty years!

The Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), through the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), were quick to jump on the 'Don't Attack Iran' bandwagon in their typically opportunistic manner.<sup>3</sup> Following the success of the StWC in mobilising mass national anti-war demonstrations in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002, the SWP promptly ditched their erstwhile Trotskyist allies in the Socialist Alliance and attempted to build on the links they had established through the StWC with various political Islamic groups such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) to form a broad anti-war electoral front. Yet, despite being prepared to jettison, or at least play down, certain left-wing 'shibboleths' - such as gay rights, abortion and so forth - in order not to offend the

<sup>1</sup>On the influential Global Research website F.W. Engdahl, writing at the end of January 2006, predicted that war against Iran was likely to begin sometime after the Israeli elections scheduled for March 28<sup>th</sup> and the mid-term US congressional elections in November. 'Calculating the risk of war in Iran'. See also Michel Chossudovsky who argued in two articles - 'Nuclear War against Iran', dated January 3<sup>rd</sup> and 'Is the Bush Administration Planning a Nuclear Holocaust?' dated February 22<sup>nd</sup> - that any such attack was likely to use tactical nuclear weapons. All three articles are available at [www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca).

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Hersh, 'Would President Bush go to war to stop Tehran from getting the bomb?', *The New Yorker*, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The SWP effectively control the StWC with support of their junior partners the Communist Party of Britain (CPB).

conservative sensitivities of their prospective political allies, the SWP was rebuffed by MAB and the other main Muslim organisations. Although still attempting to appeal to anti-war Muslim opinion, the SWP was obliged to be content with a more restricted (un)Popular Front with the maverick ex-Labour MP George Galloway and various small Trotskyist groups, which was to result in the formation of Respect.

However, any hopes the leadership of the SWP may have had that Respect would provide the vehicle through which they could ride the wave of anti-war/anti-Blair sentiment in order to break into the big time of bourgeois electoral politics have been all but shattered. The electoral success of Respect has been mainly confined to Tower Hamlets in east London, where George Galloway was able to capture the Parliamentary seat, and where Respect is represented on the local council by a number of opportunistic local Asian politicians - whose loyalty is rather suspect to say the least. Outside Tower Hamlets, Respect's share of the vote, - in either the General Election of 2005, or in local elections - has for the most part been derisory.

Yet the reality facing the leadership of the SWP in the winter of 2006 was not merely that their Respect project had stalled, but that it was close to becoming a laughing stock following George Galloway's surprise, but ill-advised, attempt at self-promotion by participating in the 'Big Brother' reality TV show. At the same time, the StWC's uncritical support for the Iraqi resistance was becoming increasingly problematic as Iraq teetered on the verge of civil war. As the StWC welcomed prominent supporters of Sadr on its platforms, Sadrist death squads were pursuing a policy of sectarian murder in Baghdad, making the StWC an easy target for Blairites and pro-war liberals.

It is perhaps of little surprise then that the leadership of the SWP jumped at the chance of reviving the anti-war movement under the slogan 'Don't Attack Iran', which could then serve to kick start Respect. By stressing the imminence of the feared attack on Iran, the SWP leadership could hope, at least in the short-term, to throw the foot soldiers of Respect and the SWP into a frenzy of activity in which they could forget their recent electoral disappointments and humiliation at the hands of George Galloway.

As we pointed out at the time,<sup>4</sup> during the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002 the StWC had been merely one element in a broad and multifaceted anti-war movement. Its main function had been to organise national demonstrations and in doing so reflect the lowest common denominator of the anti-war movement - a function it must be conceded it did quite ably. The sheer size and enthusiasm of the anti-war movement meant that the ability of the StWC to corral it in any particular direction had been limited. However, in the past three years the movement has subsided and become dissipated. Now, as many local groups have shrunk to a hardcore of activists a large proportion of which being SWP/Respect members, the StWC is in a much stronger position to dictate the politics and activity of a much smaller anti-war movement. A position that the SWP has sought to exploit to the full.

In pushing the line that the US was gearing up to attack Iran in the next few months, the StWC coalition adopted the rather crass and disingenuous argument that

simply inverted the Manichean rhetoric of Bush. The response to anyone questioning why the US should take such a big gamble in attacking Iran in the present circumstances was to simply assert that the Bush administration was dominated by neoconservatives who were so mad and evil that they were hell-bent on war. Not only this, through Action for Iran - a group closely linked to the StWC - an argument began to be propagated that the viciously anti-working class and brutally repressive Iranian regime was somehow 'progressive' and had the 'right' to obtain nuclear weapons and as such ought to be defended by the anti-war movement. While the arguments of Action for Iran were aimed at the liberal elements in the anti-war movement, the SWP itself, attempting to retain some vestige of its Trotskyist past, began to stress the 'anti-imperialism' of the Iranian regime in order to defend its move towards critical support for Iran.

The SWP's opportunism has not only led them to peddle rather crass and disingenuous arguments, but has also led to certain inconsistencies between these arguments and their more serious writings. While through the StWC the SWP pushes the line that Bush is simply mad and evil, the SWP's theoreticians still see that US foreign policy in the Middle East is driven by its rational and material interest in securing oil and the profits from oil. However, following their theoretical mentor Hillel Ticktin, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) has put forward a more consistent and sophisticated, indeed 'Marxist', version of the argument that Bush's foreign policy is irrational.<sup>5</sup> Like Ticktin, the CPGB dismiss the argument that the fundamental cause of the Iraq war was oil (or more strictly speaking oil rents).<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Ticktin's theory of decadence, the CPGB argue that the 'real cause' arises from the fact that capitalism, or at least American capitalism, has entered into the terminal stage of its decline.<sup>7</sup> As a result US foreign policy is becoming increasingly irrational as it adopts evermore desperate short-term and short sighted policies to ward off the inevitability of its demise. On this basis the CPGB loudly

<sup>5</sup> See Mike Macnair, 'U.S.: Double or Quits', *Weekly Worker*, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006 and Hillel Ticktin, 'Iraq and the Myths of Oil Determinism', *Weekly Worker*, August 28<sup>th</sup> 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Ticktin dismisses the argument that the war on Iraq was a 'war for oil' on grounds that the major oil companies already control the world's oil industry. However, this notion that the major American oil corporations control most of the world's production and distribution of oil is more than twenty years out of date! It is true that in the 1970s what Anthony Sampson dubbed the Seven Sisters - that is the seven largest oil companies, five of which were American - controlled the production and distribution of 90% of all the oil extracted in the world. There was no real oil market. The price of oil was 'posted' rather arbitrarily by the Seven Sisters who sold oil mainly to their own subsidiaries. Following the 1970s oil shocks the world's oil industry has been transformed with the emergence of small and medium sized independent oil companies and the growth of national oil companies, which has led to a global oil market. Through mergers the Seven Sisters have become the five majors. The five majors market share has fallen to around 13% and is set to fall far faster as their main oil fields enter into decline. Now 90% of all proven oil reserves are owned by national oil corporations, mainly in Asia and the Persian Gulf.

<sup>7</sup> There is a difference here between Ticktin and the CPGB. For Ticktin it is capitalism as such that is now in terminal decline. The CPGB seem less sure as to whether it is capitalism as such, or merely the hegemony of US capitalism, that is in terminal decline.

<sup>4</sup> 'A phenomenal anti-war movement', *Aufheben* #12.

echoed the predictions made by the StWC last March that the Bush regime was preparing an imminent attack on Iran.

Yet, as American policy appears to have taken a more decisively diplomatic tack, the alarm over an imminent attack on Iran has abated. Indeed, as it turned out, the Summer saw not a US attack on Iran but an Israeli attack on Lebanon. Indeed, with Iran backing Hizballah and the US backing Israel, it must be asked if Bush had been planning an imminent attack on Iran why did he not take the opportunity of escalating the conflict in Lebanon?

In this article we shall seek to understand the current relations between the US and Iran in the context of long-term and rational plans put forward by the neoconservatives to re-order the oil rich regions of what has become known as the wider Middle East – and how these plans are conditioned by the class struggle in both the USA and Iran. We shall conclude that, although a major US attack on Iran cannot be ruled out in the medium- and long-term, it is unlikely any time soon.

### **Oil, neoconservatives and the geo-politics of the 'Wider Middle East'**

During Clinton's Presidency many of the more forward-looking foreign policy makers and analysts in the USA had become increasingly concerned at the prospect of a major shift in the global geo-politics of oil. As was observed, many of the major oil and natural gas fields outside of OPEC, which had been rapidly developed in response to the oil shocks of the 1970s and which had come on stream in the early 1980s, were nearing their peak of production and were expected to go into decline in the early years of the new century. As a result, it was expected that there would have to be a major restructuring and relocation of the world's oil industry. Yet it was by no means certain that the salient position of the US oil corporations could be maintained through such a restructuring without a major shift in foreign policy, particularly towards the Persian Gulf states where much of the remaining oil reserves of the world were concentrated.<sup>8</sup>

By designating Iran and Iraq as pariah states, which had to be excluded from the international bourgeois community, and insisting on the imposition of multilateral economic sanctions, existing American foreign policy had served to keep the second and third largest reserves of oil respectively off the world oil market. At a time when there was a large excess of capacity in the world oil industry, this greatly facilitated America's close ally Saudi Arabia in policing OPEC's oil quotas, which were necessary to prevent an oversupply of oil and the collapse in the oil price that would have had rendered American investments in high cost oil production elsewhere in world, such as the North Sea and Alaska, uneconomic.

Yet it was becoming clear that at some point in the first decade of the twentieth century a policy that restricted the investment of American capital in the development of both Iran's and Iraq's vast and cheap oil reserves would have to be reversed. How was this to be done? The first option, and one favoured by Japan and most of the great powers of

Europe, was to rehabilitate both Iran and Iraq and persuade them to do a deal. The problem with this option, particularly from America's point of view, was that as the old oil fields elsewhere declined, excess capacity of the world's oil industry would also decline. As a result, the bargaining position of the Gulf States would be decisively strengthened as overcapacity gave way to an oil shortage. Iran and Iraq could decide to develop their own oil production and lock out productive investment from American oil corporations. Even if they did allow foreign investment, which could bring with it much needed technology, they would be in a position to demand the lion's share of the oil rents that accrued.

The second option was to bring about regime change in both Iraq and Iran, either through some form of coup or popular revolt, or through military intervention. This would allow the US to install a pro-American regime, which would throw open the gates for American investment. Yet such an option was fraught with problems. An internal regime change required reliable and cohesive pro-American oppositions capable of overthrowing the regimes. As events were to show, neither in Iran or Iraq was there much prospect of such oppositions developing. However, regime change brought about by military intervention faced even more formidable obstacles which more or less ruled it out for the American foreign policy establishment at the time.

Firstly, the American ruling class, and even more so the US military high command, were still haunted by the ghost of Vietnam. It was feared that any invasion may become bogged down in a lengthy occupation that would become increasingly unpopular at home and lead to falling morale and rising insubordination in the armed forces. Secondly, any invasion would be prohibitively expensive at a time when the US government was committed to balancing its budget after the large deficits which had been run up under Reagan in the 1980s. Thirdly, any invasion would be constrained by America's commitment to the multilateralism of the New World Order – which required securing the unanimity of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and compliance with the strictures of international law.

A third option was for American oil capital to move into the largely untapped oil fields surrounding the Caspian Sea, which had been opened by the collapse of the USSR. This option also had its problems. Firstly, the extract of oil from this region required large and sustained investments. The region was landlocked and hence oil had to be pumped large distances, either through existing pipelines controlled by Moscow, or major new pipelines had to be built to go round Russia. Secondly, this region was outside America's traditional sphere of influence and, so long as this remained the case, the security of investments in oil extraction from it was vulnerable to the adverse policy of both Russia and China, as well as the action of various Islamic and ethnic separatist groups that now abounded in this rather unstable part of the world.

In the 1990s, the prospect of a major restructuring of the world's oil industry still lay in the future. Under Clinton, America's foreign policy with regard to the Persian Gulf was, for the most part, to defend the *status quo*. The US resolutely opposed attempts by the Europeans both to relax the punitive economic sanctions on Iraq, which had been imposed after the Second Gulf War of 1991, and to entice Iran back into the international bourgeois community. Instead, in 1996 Madeleine Albright announced that it was

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed examination of the how the prospect of the restructuring of the world's oil industry lead to the Iraq war see 'Oil Wars and World Orders New and Old', *Aufheben* #12.

American policy to bring about 'regime change in Iraq'. However, with large scale military intervention ruled out, the only options were either a *coup d'état* or a popular insurrection. However, subsequent attempts by the CIA to implement both a *coup d'état* and a popular insurrection in Iraq were half-hearted and ill-conceived - and in both cases ended up in a farce. As a consequence, 'regime change in Iraq' became a 'long-term policy goal', which could be taken up if necessary when the issue of unlocking Iraq's oil reserves became urgent.

However, the late 1990s did see increasing investment by the American oil companies in the oil and natural gas fields of the former USSR. This was supported by Clinton's continuation of his predecessor's policy towards Russia. Of course, Bush (snr) had welcomed the disintegration of the USSR. However, it was feared that if the dynamic of disintegration went too far it would lead to Russia breaking up into a multiplicity of nuclear armed mini-states, which would be too complex to handle. Bush (snr) had therefore adopted a policy of maintaining a unified Russia open to American business, but at the same time too weak to have much sway over the former republics of the USSR. Although neither Clinton nor Bush (snr) were able to prevent the Russian state's oil and gas companies being sold off on the cheap to what were to become known as the Russian oligarchs, Clinton was able to begin to extend US-influence into the oil rich Caucasus region allowing important oil deals to be struck between governments there and American oil companies.

### Planning for a New American Century

In the mid-1990s, the Project for the New American Century brought together a wide range of right-wing thinkers who were critical of the orthodoxy of the American foreign policy establishment that had emerged following the fall of the Eastern Bloc. The conclusions of the debates within the Project for the New American Century came to define the broad doctrines of what was to become known as neoconservatism.

This doctrine argued that existing orthodox foreign policy thinking was far too timid, cautious and pragmatic. This, it was argued, was due to the legacy of the Cold War, when American foreign policy had been hemmed in by the threat of all-out nuclear war with the USSR, and the trauma that had followed defeat in Vietnam, which had made the American ruling class reluctant to engage in prolonged military commitments. However, with the fall of the USSR, the US was now the world's sole superpower.

Furthermore, the neoconservatives were highly critical of the timidity of the military high command, which they saw as inhibiting the ability of the US to 'project' its power across the globe. Many of the US military high command had begun their careers during the time of the Vietnam War. As a consequence, many of them had direct experience of the fragging of officers, widespread insubordination and more general opposition to war that occurred during the Vietnam War. As a result they were reluctant to commit US forces to another prolonged imperialist adventure far from home, which might once again push the patriotism of US troops beyond breaking point.

However, as the neoconservative chicken-hawks recognised, the insubordination of the army in Vietnam had been part of a broader upsurge in class struggle and social

conflict that had occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Wildcat strikes and the revolt against work, together with social movements like the civil rights movement, had all been easily transmitted into the army by the largely working class, and disproportionately black, recruits. Now, after two decades of restructuring and class defeat, which had seen the re-imposition of work and authority, the neoconservatives could argue that US troops could be pushed far further before reaching their breaking point. The ghost haunting the US ruling class, and the military high command in particular, could now be exorcised.

Yet, if it was to preserve its status as the global hegemonic power into the twenty-first century, the US had to be prepared to forcibly assert its power across the globe, both to pre-empt the emergence of any economic or military rival and to secure its vital economic interests. This would mean that, where necessary, the US would have to be both willing and able to cut through the multilateral entanglements of the New World Order and act unilaterally in order to impose its will.

With the US economy dependent on an abundant supply of energy, of paramount importance to securing America's economic interests was control of the world's oil and natural gas fields. With much of the world's remaining oil and natural gas fields concentrated around the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, the neoconservatives could only conclude that the US would have to take action, preferably sooner rather than later, to politically re-order what they now began to term the oil producing regions of the *wider Middle East*.

Central to this bold strategic project was Iran. Iran is not only in possession of the world's third largest oil reserves, as well as vast reserves of natural gas, it also straddles the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. As such it is at the centre of the wider Middle East.

With the rather dubious election of Bush (jnr) in 2000, several of the more prominent figures amongst the neoconservatives were brought to high office. However, despite the appointment of Dick Cheney as Vice-President, Donald Rumsfeld as Defence Secretary and Condoleezza Rice as National Security Advisor, the neoconservatives were far from having a decisive say over American foreign policy. The continued influence of the circle of policy advisor surrounding Bush (snr) and the foreign policy establishment based in the State Department advocating a maintaining of a cautious multilateralism, a military high command wary of a repeat of Vietnam and a growing tendency towards isolationism within the Republican Party all served to hold the neoconservatives in check. Indeed, the fear of many European commentators at the time was that the new Bush administration would retreat into a new isolationism. All this changed with the attack on the Twin Towers.

Following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the neoconservatives were able to seize the political initiative and, under the rubric of the 'war on terror', press their plans for a radical re-ordering of the wider Middle East. With three swift strikes - the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the overthrow of the theocratic regime in Iran - the neoconservatives proposed to cut through the Gordian knot of diplomatic ties that had built up over decades around the Middle East and

resolve the prospective problems of global geo-politics of oil in favour of the USA.

At first the plan went surprisingly well. With the aid of the northern warlords, US forces swept the Taliban from power within weeks. Although several million Afghans had been obliged to flee their homes during the war, fears that the onset of winter would lead to a major humanitarian disaster were proved wrong. But perhaps more satisfying for the neoconservatives was that the warnings of those who pointed to the bitter lesson learnt by both the British and the Russians in attempting to subdue Afghanistan also seemed to have been proved wrong.

In invading Afghanistan the US not only secured the eastern border of Iran but also gained a vital foothold in Central Asia. The Central Asian republics had been threatened by political Islamic groups backed by the Taliban. As such, they not only welcomed the US invasion of Afghanistan but were also prepared to accept US military bases on their soil as part of the 'War on Terrorism'.

Flush with their success in Afghanistan the neoconservatives sought to maintain the political momentum by turning their attentions to Iraq. In not much more than a year, using far less troops than the US military command had originally deemed necessary, the demoralised Iraqi army had been swept aside, again in matter of weeks. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, in a speech delivered on the decks of an aircraft carrier, which has since come back to haunt him, Bush (jnr) declared that the mission in Iraq had been accomplished.

The neoconservatives seemed to be on a roll. Having seized Afghanistan to the east and Iraq to its west, Iran now appeared to be in the sights for an US invasion. The only questions that remained was whether the Bush regime would make a detour to take-out Israel's bane Syria first and how long would it be before the US was ready to invade. Yet, despite its initial success, the neoconservative's bold plan to bring about a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East by sheer force of arms was soon to run into the sands of the Iraqi resistance.

### **Failure in Iraq**

Perhaps due to the need to avoid dissension over the future of Iraq, and thereby maintain the pro-war consensus within the Bush administration, most of the pre-invasion planning seems to have concentrated on winning the war swiftly and with the minimum of casualties. Plans for the post-war reconstruction of Iraq seem to have been based on little more than the wishful thinking of neoconservative ideologues and the barely disguised greed of the likes of Haliburton.

Yet, given America's record, it would not have been difficult to predict that the imposition of *Pax Americana* in Iraq was not going to be easy. Having supported the Ba'athist regime in the 1980s, the Americans had bombed and invaded Iraq in 1991. Having then called for the people of Iraq to rise up and overthrow Saddam Hussein, the Americans had then stood by and allowed him to brutally repress the uprising. Then, after more than ten years of punitive sanctions, which led to the deaths of an estimated one and half million people, the Americans had bombed and invaded Iraq again. It is hardly surprising that the vast majority of Iraqis were not a little suspicious of the good intentions of the American occupying forces. Whatever goodwill the Americans may have enjoyed for ridding Iraqis of the hated regime of Saddam Hussein was soon squandered

by their ill thought out plans to engineer a velvet-style bourgeois Revolution in Iraq.

The neoconservative ideologues had expected that by destroying the Ba'athist state, a grateful Iraqi people would rise up and sweep a bunch of pro-American Iraqi exiles led by Chalabi to power. Chalabi's government would then establish a minimal state, which would then allow the miraculous powers of the free market and American capital to reconstruct a new and prosperous Iraq. Such ill-conceived expectations were to prove a disaster.

Firstly, following the suppression of the Communist Party of Iraq, and the popular organisations associated with it, in the early 1980s, the only political and social organisations that had been allowed to exist outside the Ba'athist Party had centred on the Mosques. As a consequence, out of the chaos of looting and rioting that erupted at the end of the war, it was not Chalabi and his followers who emerged as the Party of Order and Authority, as the Americans had hoped, but the Iranian-backed clerics and militias of political Islam, which began to fill the political vacuum.

Secondly, since the state had been the major employer in Iraq, and state employment often depended on membership of the Ba'athist Party, it was little surprise that the policy of the purging of the state apparatus of 'Ba'athists' led to mass unemployment. This was further compounded with the disbanding of the million-strong Iraqi army. This provided a pool of dissatisfied men and weapons that was to increasingly fuel the Iraqi resistance.

Thirdly, there was the abysmal failure of American Capital to bring about economic reconstruction. Months after the war, basic utilities such as water and electricity supply had not even been restored to the rather dilapidated state they had been in before the invasion. As the resistance grew, the prospects of economic reconstruction became worse as American companies became reluctant to invest in Iraq.

The Provisional Coalition Authority (CPA), safely secluded in the green zone, frittered away the early months of the occupation by insisting that once the small Ba'athist remnants had been mopped up things would start to get better. However, their complacency was shattered in April 2004 with the uprising in Fallujah and the capture of the holy city of Najaf by Sadr's militia. The Americans, now fearing they would not be able to forestall a general uprising for long, dumped Chalabi, and with the disbanding of the CPA, handed over formal power to the former Ba'athist strongman Allawi.

Yet Allawi soon proved ineffective in countering the growing resistance. The Americans were obliged to change track again. In entering a deal with the Iranian-born cleric Sistani to resolve the stand-off in Najaf, the Americans' adopted a new policy of divide and rule. Sistani and his allied Shi'ite politicians agreed to stand aside while the US troops crushed the insurrection in Fallujah. In return the Americans had to abandon any hopes of installing a secular pro-American government and agree to elections that would bring the Shi'ite parties to power.

As a result of the elections in 2005, Iraq now has a government dominated by Shi'ite parties, some of which are closely aligned with Iran. Secular opposition has been marginalized, if not crushed. Meanwhile Shi'ite militia have been allowed to take over Iraq's security forces and impose Islamic laws and social codes. Although by dividing Iraq



along ethnic and sectarian lines may have weakened the resistance to the American occupation, it has only done so by increasing the risk of all out civil war.

The US may have won the war but they have so far lost the peace in Iraq.

**Consequences of the US occupation of Iraq**

Even at the best of times a full-scale invasion and occupation of Iran would be a far more daunting prospect for the US than that it faced with Iraq. Firstly, unlike Iraq, Iran has a formidable military capability. It has a large well-equipped army and air force. Secondly, a full-scale invasion of Iran would have to deal with a far more difficult mountainous terrain than the desert and river valleys of Iraq. Thirdly, Iran has far more retaliatory capabilities. Its missiles are certainly able to hit America’s potential allies in the region - Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - and may even be able to strike as far as Central Europe. In addition its client groups, such as Hizballah, as was shown by the recent conflict in Lebanon, also have the ability to strike at Israel if not elsewhere in the Middle East. However, with a large part of the US army tied down by a low-intensity insurgency in Iraq, and a vociferous anti-war movement at home, even the most ardent hawks in and around the Bush administration had been obliged to concede that it might be better to postpone any further military adventures until after Iraq had been pacified.

Indeed, the failure to pacify Iraq had served to reveal the limitations of US military power. Despite all its awesome firepower and technological wizardry, US military operations were still severely strained by the political imperative to minimize casualties. The American ruling class had still failed to fully exorcise the ghost of Vietnam and still could not be sure that its economically conscripted army could be used as cannon fodder for its imperialist ventures.

By the beginning of 2005 it was becoming clear, even for its most committed apologists, that the post 9/11 plan to

bring about a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East by sheer force of arms had stalled, if not failed. Yet, nevertheless, the rise of China and the revival of Russia as a major power, only served to convince neoconservatives that the need to ‘project’ American power in the wider Middle East was all the more important. Indeed, it was now evident that China’s rapid economic growth was unlikely to stop any time soon. As she began to use her growing economic strength to pursue a more active and global foreign policy as well as to build up her military capabilities, it was becoming clear that China was emerging as a possible future military and economic rival, which one day may wrest the crown of global hegemony from the USA.

More immediately, China’s voracious appetite for energy necessary to fuel its economic growth meant that it had begun eyeing-up oil reserves across the globe, but most particularly

in Central Asia. At the same time, following the election of Vladimir Putin in 1999, Russia had begun to take a more assertive foreign policy stance. With the re-nationalisation of the oil companies that had been flogged-off on the cheap to Russia’s ‘oligarchs’ under Yeltsin, and buoyed by rising oil revenues, Putin had become far less reticent in exploiting Russia’s position as ‘gatekeeper’ to the vast oil and natural gas fields of the former USSR.<sup>9</sup> For neoconservatives, both China and Russia could only be emboldened by the perceived limitations of the military power of the USA.

As a consequence, the Bush administration has sought to pursue its objectives of reordering the wider Middle East by other means - that is through the use of diplomacy and by covert political action. This has entailed ‘going round Iran’; both to secure a foothold in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and to isolate and weaken Iran itself. This has involved a re-engagement with multilateralist diplomacy, through such vehicles as the UN, as the US has sought to persuade the international bourgeois community to isolate Iran. But, far more spectacular in its results, was the adoption of covert political actions that were to lead to the ‘colored (sic) revolutions’.

Following the success of the ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia in December 2003, the US sought to bring about simulated ‘Velvet’ liberal-democratic revolutions, modelled on those that had occurred with the break-up of the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s, across the states of the former USSR. With the impetus given by Bush’s re-election, the US sought to get the ball rolling with what became dubbed the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine. Using techniques developed in Serbia, US agencies banged the heads together of various

<sup>9</sup> Of course, the overall economic interests of both Russia and China require them to maintain good diplomatic relations with the USA, which after all remains the centre of the global accumulation of capital. Nevertheless, this has not prevented them from manoeuvring for their own advantage, particularly when has come to issues surrounding the geo-politics of oil.

opposition groups in order to form a united front. It then provided generous funding together with media and public relations expertise to launch a concerted anti-government campaign. As a result thousands were brought onto the streets leading to the annulment of the election of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich in favour of the more pro-American Viktor Yushenko and Yulia Tymoshenko.

The well publicised success of the 'Orange Revolution' encouraged the Bush regime to seize the opportunity to repeat the feat in Lebanon a few months later in what was to become known as the 'Cedar Revolution', or as the 'Gucci revolution', even by its supporters!<sup>10</sup> Through the 'Cedar Revolution' Bush sought to mobilise the Lebanon middle classes against the continued influence of Syria.

However, despite its initial success the policy of engineering 'colored (sic) revolutions' did not fare well for long. Within a year the pro-American alliance of Yushenko and Tymoshenko fell apart leading to the return to power of Yanukovich as Prime Minister in a coalition government in August 2006. Furthermore, attempts to spread the 'colored (sic) revolutions' across Central Asia simply met with repression. What is more, the governments of Central Asia, facing obvious US-inspired subversion, turned towards Russia and China. This led to a reinvigoration of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). The SCO had been set up in 2001 as an intergovernmental organisation to promote co-operation over economic and security matters between Russia, China and four of the five Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

At the annual meeting of SCO in July 2005, major economic deals were struck including an agreement to build an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China. In addition there was a joint statement calling on the USA to withdraw its military bases from Central Asia. Following up this statement a few weeks later, the Uzbekistan government announced the expulsion of the American troops based on its soil. It was only a frantic lightening tour of the region by Donald Rumsfeld which prevented the other Central Asian republics from following suit in the weeks that followed. The US is now at risk of losing its toehold in Central Asia, which it gained during its war on Afghanistan.

The consequences of the 'Cedar Revolution' for the narrow Middle East have not been that much more satisfactory for US interests than the 'Orange Revolution' has been for Central Asia and the Caucasus. The 'Cedar Revolution' certainly succeeded in curtailing Syria's direct influence within Lebanon. Yet in doing so it has increased the political and military strength of both Hizballah, and,

indirectly, of Iran. Following Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, the US had welcomed what they then saw as the stabilising influence of Syria in Lebanon's sectarian politics. Syrian influence was seen as a check on the advance of Hizballah buoyed from its success in driving out both the Americans and Israel. Curtailing Syrian influence only served to give Hizballah greater room for manoeuvre in Lebanese politics.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the 'Cedar Revolution' had mobilized the middle class Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims, in what was a barely disguised assertion of class power. In the entrenched religious and sectarian politics of Lebanon, the only organisation able to counter this assertion of class power by the rich and middle classes was Hizballah. Against the well-publicised demonstrations of the 'Cedar Revolution', Hizballah were able to mobilise much large counter-demonstrations. In doing so they were able to cement their position as the representatives of the poor Shi'ite masses throughout Lebanon.

The 'Cedar Revolution' also underlined America's hostile attitude to the Ba'athist regime in Syria. In doing so it served to strengthen Syria's unholy alliance with both Iran and Hizballah.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, rather ironically, the main winner of America's war on Iraq and Afghanistan has been Iran. By toppling the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan the Americans have weakened one of the Iranian regime's main rivals for leadership of political Islam. By toppling the secular Ba'athist regime in Iraq, the American's have achieved what Iran failed to do despite eight years of war in the 1980s. Not only this, but the US forces which might otherwise be threatening Iran, are now tied down in Iraq. Furthermore, with pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIR), now part of the ruling coalition there, Iran can hope to have a compliant Shi'ite sister-state in either southern Iraq or in Iraq as a whole when the US eventually withdraws.

Yet, while Iran's external geo-political position has been greatly enhanced, it faces formidable internal contradictions. Indeed, as we shall now see, Ahmadinejad's more defiant attitude towards the USA can be seen as a means of using this enhanced geo-political strength to shore up the Iranian regime's weak domestic position.

### **Class struggle rise of the 'neoconservatives' in Iran**

Until recently, bourgeois commentators tended to see Iranian politics as a two-sided contest between 'the conservatives', typified by the 'Supreme Leader' Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and 'the reformers', typified by former President Mohammad Khatami. The conservatives were characterised as the guardians of the 1979 'Islamic Revolution'<sup>12</sup> – staunchly anti-Western, and in particular anti-American, as well as authoritarian and socially conservative, insisting on strict

<sup>10</sup> "Some people here are jokingly calling the phenomenon 'the Gucci revolution' - not because they are dismissive of the demonstrations, but because so many of those waving the Lebanese flag on the street are really very unlikely protesters. There are girls in tight skirts and high heels, carrying expensive leather bags, as well as men in business suits or trendy tennis shoes. And in one unforgettable scene an elderly lady, her hair all done up, was demonstrating alongside her Sri Lankan domestic helper, telling her to wave the flag and teaching her the Arabic words of the slogans ... what has been fascinating to observe is how Lebanon's middle and upper classes have been woken from their usual lethargy by the assassination of Hariri." –

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/4318395.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4318395.stm)

<sup>11</sup> See Iason Athanasiadis, 'Iran Keeps Syria on side – for now', *Asia Times*, September 19, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> This phrasing is a bourgeois one, which erases from history the proletarian character of revolution of 1978/9. It is perhaps better to talk of the Islamic *Counter*-revolution – the widespread experiments in workers' control that followed the popular revolution being wiped out by the clerical reaction of Ayotollah Khomeini. See <http://libcom.org/history/1978-1979-the-iranian-revolution>

Islamic laws with regard to music, clothing, the role of women etc. The reformers on the other hand were presented as relatively pro-West, interested in a “*dialogue among civilizations*”,<sup>13</sup> and (relatively) socially progressive.

However, in the last couple of years two intertwined dynamics have disturbed this simplified view – an upsurge in class struggle and the rise of Iran’s own neoconservatives. The latter – particularly with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in June 2005 -- has generated much discussion in the bourgeois press, though unsurprisingly you’d be hard pushed to find a mention of the former! In order to chart these developments, it is worth briefly surveying the recent circumstances out of which they have arisen.

**Background: Corruption, structural adjustment, the IMF**  
Iran’s economy has had persistent problems with inflation, unemployment, and a chronic budget deficit stemming largely from multibillion dollar state subsidies, particularly on petrol and foodstuffs. However, this has not prevented sufficient economic growth to allow the creation of a cultural middle class, from which the reformers have historically drawn much of their support. The economy has traditionally been a mixture of central planning and state ownership for the oil and other large-scale industries, alongside village-based agriculture and a private sector consisting mostly of small-scale traders.

IMF-pleasing neoliberal structural adjustment programs, a.k.a. ‘market reforms’ have been pursued since the 8-year presidency of Rafsanjani began in 1989 and were continued under the presidency of Khatami, meaning widespread privatisations and layoffs. Notionally to attract loans to improve the economy, they have instead mainly consisted of the usual IMF affair; officials selling themselves state assets at knock-down prices, then slashing workers wages and imposing casualisation in order to improve profitability. Thus despite their public rhetoric condemning ‘Western decadence’, both reformers and conservatives have succeeded in enriching themselves despite the general economic stagnation, and have been anxious to do business with Western investors to continue that (corrupt) ‘success’.

In particular they have courted non-American Western oil giants such as Total, as well as pursuing a policy of ‘south-south integration’ to further economic ties with, and capital investment by, countries such as India, China and Venezuela as part of a strategy of diversifying the economy away from its oil-centric focus.

Politically, there has been a chronic crisis in the Iranian regime almost since its inception, with the ruling clerics constructing an intricate system of inter-related state functions in order to consolidate their power and mediate between the plethora of rival factions. From ‘the Supreme Leader’ whose power is effectively unlimited as commander-in-chief, but is nonetheless appointed and in theory dismissed by ‘the Assembly of Experts’, to the second highest position in the hierarchy, that of President, who is elected but whose candidates are vetted by ‘the Council of Guardians’, half of whom are appointed by the Supreme Leader. This is without mentioning the *Majiles*, or parliament, which is again elected

but whose candidates and laws are also subject to the approval of the Council of Guardians, or the raft of minor miscellaneous committees that have authority over each other in various intermeshed ways.

It has been said that “*the most important function of elections in the Islamic republic rests precisely here: namely the redistribution of power among the various ruling factions.*”<sup>14</sup> This complex arrangement has thus developed to accommodate factional struggles within a continuous regime, a well as to allow token popular participation to mitigate the distinct lack of popular interest in living in a theocratic state. Alongside this a vast military and secret police apparatus has been constructed to ensure respect for the ‘Islamic principles and values’ on which the cleric’s authority is based.

Nonetheless, support for the ultra-conservative clerics has never spread much beyond the military and the direct recipients of its Islamic charities – never exceeding 25% of the votes cast. The reformers, who drew on the growing middle class in the 1990s for support, also began to run out of steam when the re-election of the reformist Khatami in 2001 failed to produce any significant change. The reformers thus ceased to act as a pressure-release valve for discontent with the clerical elite.

### The rise of the Iranian neocons

This then is the situation out of which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in June 2005. The former Tehran mayor is an ex-military man, not a cleric – a rarity for an Iranian President - and the most prominent of those who have been labelled the “*radical new conservatives*” – or if you prefer, Iran’s very own neocons. The Iranian neocons are advocates of a strong, centralised state capable of preventing factional splits impeding their aims. They style themselves as opposed to the corruption of both the old conservatives and the reformers; opposing the soft-on-America reformers with a hard-line foreign policy including talk that Israel should be “*wiped off the map*”,<sup>15</sup> and opposing the conceited old guard with populist rhetoric about “*taking the oil money back to the people’s table*”.<sup>16</sup> However, while opposing what the old guard have become, there is also a simultaneous move to try and recapture the religious idealism and ‘Islamic principles and values’ of 1979, with the de-secularisation of the universities and so forth. But in doing this from a military rather than a clerical background, the neocons do represent the emergence of a new current in the Iranian ruling class.

For us however, it is the populist aspect of this neocon current that is most noteworthy, as it represents an attempt to rebuild the social base of the regime which has been eroded after years of stagnation and disillusionment among Iranian workers. It should be noted that while Ahmadinejad took 61% of the second-round votes to secure the presidency, the turnout was little over 58% according to official figures (i.e. including the accepted practices of ballot stuffing, count massaging etc, which are meant not to serve any one candidate but enhance the legitimacy of the process). This means that even including the most-likely inflated official figures, only around a third of eligible voters actually voted for Ahmadinejad, and thus his populist rhetoric has not

<sup>13</sup> Khatami’s phrase. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad\\_Khatami#Dialogue\\_Among\\_Civilizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Khatami#Dialogue_Among_Civilizations)

<sup>14</sup> Mehrdad & Kia 2005; [http://www.iran-bulletin.org/IB-MEF-3/presidentialelections\\_edited.htm](http://www.iran-bulletin.org/IB-MEF-3/presidentialelections_edited.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Quoted here for example: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/4387852.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4387852.stm)

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Mehrdad & Kia 2005, *op cit*.



translated into a mass movement, unlike say with Chavez in Venezuela.<sup>17</sup>

An explanation for this might lie in the fact that Ahmadinejad's policies have so far proved to be more of the same, only more far-reaching; to the point where Ayatollah Khamenei has had to recently 'reinterpret' the Islamic constitution, the '*Qanun-e Asasi*' or 'Fundamental Law' in order to allow mass privatisations in the hope of attracting foreign capital. In fact Ahmadinejad's welcoming of European, Chinese and Japanese capital, amongst others, has formed part of an effort, behind the fiery rhetoric, to show that Iran can be a part of the international (bourgeois) community without any need for regime change. Iran has even been pressing for the US to lift its embargo to allow US capital free access to its casualised workforce. So judging by the actions of successive Islamic governments the *Qanun-e Asasi* is not in fact a document, but simply the requirements of capital!<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, the neocon populism has failed to secure a significant social base (and of course a supply of willing cannon fodder for any conflict with the US), because its policies aggravate the very causes of popular disillusionment – the stagnant economy, social conservatism and declining living standards through wage cuts, casualisation and other capital-friendly neoliberal reforms. In fact a law announced in August 2006 that makes it easier for bosses to sack workers with no notice and replace them immediately with casualised contract staff has already provoked two major strikes. Therefore it is here that we turn to the other major dynamic in contemporary Iran: the upsurge in class struggle.

### **Class struggle in Iran today**

In mid 2003, a wave of strikes and worker-student demonstrations were brutally suppressed with over 4,000 arrests. In the autumn of 2004, copper miners in the city of Babak staged sit-ins against compulsory redundancies. The state responded by sending in special commando units that fired on miners and their families from helicopters. In response to this repression, workers in Babak and Khatonabad launched a general strike. Early in 2005, textile workers in Sanandaj, western Iran went on strike. Mobilising support from workers across the country, their 2-month strike won major concessions; including the reinstatement of sacked workers, strike pay, treatment for sick workers, the introduction of permanent contracts and safer machinery. In fact according to the Iranian government's own figures, in the period from April to July last year there were more than 2000 workers' actions, including strikes, occupations and road blockades.

Of course, unions and strikes are illegal in Iran, which makes these events even more significant; yet they were themselves overshadowed by the massive Tehran transit

strike in January this year involving 17,000 workers. Within hours of the start of the strike hundreds of workers' homes were raided by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the notorious secret police. Hundreds were arrested and imprisoned without charge.<sup>19</sup> Thousands were laid off, and there were violent clashes between demonstrators and the security services. The wives and children of striking workers were snatched from their beds and beaten, presumably to underline the populist character of the regime which talked of "*taking the oil money back to the people's table*".

Undeterred, demonstrations and strikes, including a no-fares action where drivers let people ride for free to attack profits directly, continued, both over the initial dispute over pay and the right to organise and for the release of workers imprisoned for months since the start of the strikes. The transit workers strikes continued into April and sparked a new wave of strikes over unpaid salaries and low wages which spread across the country – with walkouts in the northern provincial capital of Rasht, the western province of Elam, pharmaceutical workers in Tehran and coalminers in the northern town of Gilan.

In July 2006, Iran-Khodro car factory workers walked out demanding the introduction of a minimum wage. In August workers at the Par-ris mill struck over differential contracts which awarded 1-month, 3-month or 1-year contracts to workers on the basis of their previous passivity to the bosses' demands. After a week on strike, riot police attacked the picket with batons and tear gas, injuring several workers and arresting many, most of whom escaped en route to detention by jumping and running from the police buses, while two – a reporter and a worker from another factory who was on the picket in solidarity - were imprisoned overnight.

The company, in full co-operation with the police declared none of the workers' demands would be met and that one worker identified as an organiser was to be immediately sacked, meaning he would not be eligible for any social security because he was dismissed for organising activities. This prompted a solidarity statement co-signed by many (illegal) unions and workers groups across Iran, including the Tehran bus drivers, signifying the building of links between workers of different industries *as workers*.

As of September this year, around 3,000 workers are involved in strikes at the Khodro diesel factory over massive pay cuts. One worker reportedly tried to hang himself in protest, while bosses are threatening mass sackings unless the workers concede to their demands. It should be remembered that the Iranian revolution itself started after 50,000 slum-dwellers successfully resisted police evictions in 1977,<sup>20</sup> then after the police massacred 40 religious protesters a wave of strikes spread across the country. With martial law imposed thousands of demonstrators were gunned down on 'Black Friday' in September 1978. Workers' organisations spread and peasant farmers began to seize the land. Workers were setting up *shoras* (workers' councils) across the country to run industry and armed

<sup>17</sup> This relative failure has not prevented a 'strategic alliance' between Ahmadinejad and Chavez. On a recent state visit to Caracas, Ahmadinejad was warmly embraced by Chavez, and commented that "*we have a common thinking, common interests*" - how very true! See:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/5354812.stm>

<sup>18</sup> Here the situation echoes the teachings of an altogether different religious text: "the most fundamental right under the law of capital is the equal exploitation of labour-power by all capitalists" (*Capital* Vol.I p. 405), "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!" (*Capital* Vol. I p. 742).

<sup>19</sup> Of course we should not pretend that independent unions are legal in the UK, as any IWW member will tell you. Nor for that matter should we pretend that liberal democracies don't violently repress strikes or lock people up without charge!

<sup>20</sup> On this, see <http://libcom.org/history/1978-1979-the-iranian-revolution>

grassroots neighbourhood defence *komitehs* patrolled the streets.

However, the proletarian character of the revolution was swept away by the clerical counter-revolution, a.k.a. 'the Islamic revolution' in 1979. The following decades saw up to 100,000 socialists, Communists, feminists and others murdered by the state. But class struggle is on the rise again in Iran, and so far neither the populist attempts to incorporate the working class into the neoliberal state nor brute repression have succeeded in suppressing it.

### Iran and the divisions within the US neoconservatives

In contrast to Iranian neoconservatism, American neoconservatism has been born out of military, social and economic strength. The end of the Cold War has left the USA as the world's sole superpower. At the same time, as we have argued elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> the economic restructuring of the 1970s and '80s, has allowed the US to reassert itself as the centre of the world accumulation of capital.

On the basis of the underlying strength of the American economy, Bush was not only able to reflate the economy out of the recession that followed the Dot.Com crash of 2000 by tax cuts and low interest rates, but also engineer a pre-election boom, without creating an inflationary crisis. As a result, he was able to secure his re-election as President despite the problems besetting his foreign policy.

With the government reshuffle that followed 2004 election it appeared that the neoconservatives' grip on the Bush regime had tightened. Colin Powell was eased out of the all-important State Department and replaced by Condoleezza Rice. The arch-critic of the UN and multilateralism, and one of the leading proponents of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, John Bolton, was appointed as ambassador to the UN. While, at the same time, Porter J. Goss (a CIA operative in Latin America during the Cold War) was appointed head of the CIA with a remit of restructuring the intelligence agency, which had been critical of Bush's foreign policy. As a result, many in the anti-war movement concluded that if his foreign policy had not been fully dominated by the neoconservatives in the first term, it would certainly be in the second when Bush would have no need to worry about re-election.

In the autumn of 2004, Bush had been able to present the defeat of the insurgents by the wholesale destruction of Fallujah and the scheduling of elections for the Iraqi Constitutional Assembly as marking a vital turning point in Iraq. Bush could proclaim that the worst was over and Iraq was now on the road to 'democracy'. Yet it soon became apparent that this was yet another false dawn. It was not until March that the squabbling Iraqi politicians were able to form an interim government. The violence in Iraq, which had briefly abated around the elections, resumed. Then came the shocking revelations of the torture and mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison and the growing international concern at the continuing anomaly of Guantanamo Bay. All this, combined with what now seemed a never-ending stream of dead and wounded American troops coming back from Iraq, served to fuel the arguments of the anti-war movement

that the invasion of Iraq had been a major foreign policy blunder.

As support for the Iraq war fell in the polls, Bush's woes were compounded by events at home, which indicated cracks within the social peace. In the summer 2005, Bush's image as a patriotic, ordinary, middle American took a battering because of his callous and blatantly class-biased response towards New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina. The mobilisation and organisation of resources that had gone into the invasion of Iraq stood in stark contrast to Bush's abysmal attempts to save the poor of New Orleans.

As Bush's popularity plummeted, his critics in both the Democratic and Republican parties, which had for so long remained timid, now became increasingly vocal – particularly with regard to foreign policy. Many conservatives, including the circle surrounding Bush's own father, called for a return to the caution, pragmatism and multilateralism of old *realpolitik*, which had sought to maintain the *status quo* in international affairs, and the abandonment of radical plans to re-order the world. It was argued that not only had such plans dismally failed, but that they had led to the neglect of American interests elsewhere. Thus, for instance, while the neoconservatives had been seeking to reorder the wider Middle East, anti-American left-wing governments had swept to power in South America.

Along with these calls for a return to the old *realpolitik*, came a revival of calls for a more isolationist policy, which had been silenced by the fall of the Twin Towers. Why waste so much blood and treasure on futile foreign adventures it was argued, when there were more pressing problems at home?

So, within months of the triumphant re-election of Bush, when they had seemed to consolidate their hold on power, the neoconservatives found themselves on the political defensive. As it becomes evident that their attempt at a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East has failed, the neoconservatives found themselves in a particularly weak position. As a result, cracks have emerged within the neoconservative coalition. It is true that the diplomatic confrontation with Iran, which has followed the election of Ahmadinejad, has served to rally the retreating neoconservatives and given them something of a second wind, yet it has not resolved their underlying differences – indeed, if anything it has exacerbated them. To understand America's confrontation with Iran and the possibilities of its future development, it is necessary for us to examine these differences a little more closely.

### Differences within the neoconservatives

The Project for the New American Century brought together a wide range of right wing thinkers who were critical of the existing orthodoxy of the foreign policy establishment. The Project drew together academics, research fellows of leading right-wing think tanks, former government foreign policy advisors, journalists, propagandists, as well as lobbyists and representatives of the military-industrial complex, Israel and the American oil industry. As a result, it included at one extreme idealists, including as has often been observed, disillusioned former Trotskyists and liberals, through those schooled in the practical realities and compromises of actual foreign policy formation, to those who were little more than cynical prize fighters paid to secure a bigger slice of government spending for their paymasters.

<sup>21</sup> See 'China and world capitalism' in *Aufheben* #14 (1997).

Originally, the unity of this diverse coalition of neoconservative thinkers was perhaps secured by the rather general and long-term nature of the policy conclusions that were drawn from the deliberations of the Project for the New American Century. Following the attack on the Twin Towers this unity was forged through the opportunity of putting their doctrines into practice and initial success that was achieved. With the failure of the neoconservatives' attempts to bring about a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East after the attack on the Twin Towers now having run aground divisions in this coalition have inevitably emerged.

#### *The neoconservative hawks*

Many neoconservatives have become increasingly impatient at what they see as the timidity of the Bush administration's foreign policy, which they blame on the failure of the neoconservative project. Indeed, in the pages of the neoconservative journals, Condoleezza Rice, in particular, has been singled out and denounced for going native amongst the 'liberals' at the State Department and becoming a traitor to the neoconservative cause.

For these neoconservatives time is running out. The window of opportunity opened up by the attack on the Twin Towers is closing. Bush is in his last years as President and the neoconservatives may well find themselves out of office. At the same time, the notion that the USA is somehow really at war with 'terrorism' becomes more difficult to sustain. As memories of 9/11 fade, the siren voices of the liberal multilateralists and the conservative isolationists can only become more seductive to the 'American people'.

Most neoconservatives had been prepared to accept that regime change in Iran had to wait until Iraq had been pacified. However, as the pacification of Iraq has effectively become postponed indefinitely, and as calls for the US to cut its losses and withdraw have grown ever louder, this is no longer the case. Blaming the troubles of Iraq, not on the American occupation of course, but on the meddling of Iran, many of what we may term the neoconservative hawks have concluded that 'victory in Baghdad lies in victory over Tehran'. As such they have called for the Bush regime to be prepared to launch a military attack on Iran – an attack made all the more urgent with Ahmadinejad's decision to obtain nuclear weapons. However, in advocating a policy of 'double or quits' the neoconservative hawks have been obliged to confront the realities of the strengthened geo-political position of Iran that the policies they have previously supported have created.

Most of the neoconservative hawks accept that, with the US army already over-stretched occupying Iraq, a ground invasion of Iran is out of the question. What has been advocated is an air strike aimed at destroying Iran's uranium enrichment programme. However, even limited to air strikes such a military confrontation in the current circumstances faces formidable problems.

Iran's programme of uranium enrichment is being carried out with the use of hundreds of centrifuges hidden in deep bunkers across Iran. Hence, unlike the situation in 1981 when the Israeli air force was able to halt Iraq's nuclear programme by a single air strike on one nuclear plant, any attempt to halt Iran's nuclear programme would require both a large number of air strikes with special bunker-busting bombs and precise intelligence to know where the bunkers are hidden. Yet, to be sure that targets could be reached and

destroyed, any air strike would also have to overcome Iran's air defences. An air strike would have to be on a sufficient scale to destroy Iran's air force and surface-to-air missile systems in order to establish air supremacy over much of Iran.

But this is not all. It would also be necessary to pre-empt Iran's capabilities of seriously disrupting the world's oil supplies. The unanticipated growth in the demand for oil over the past five years, due largely to the rapid economic growth of China and East Asia, has led to a very tight oil market. With little spare productive capacity, even minor disruptions in the supply of oil can lead to sharp speculative rises in the price of oil on the world market. Forty per cent of the world's oil supply is presently produced in the Persian Gulf and must pass the narrow Straits of Hormuz, which separate Iran from the Arabian peninsula. Although the US 5<sup>th</sup> fleet presently stationed in the Gulf is probably more than sufficient to prevent Iran closing down the shipping lanes altogether, the amount of oil that could be shipped out of the Persian Gulf could be substantially reduced. However, perhaps more importantly is the vulnerability of the Arabian oil terminals and associated infrastructure, which lie on the opposite side of the Gulf from Iran, which are well within range of Iran's Shabab missiles. If Iran was allowed to retaliate by launching a full-scale missile attack on these oil facilities it could substantially reduce the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf for months if not years – that is until they could be rebuilt.

In 2001, the Bush ordered the replenishment of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which is an emergency reserve of oil, that had become seriously depleted since the 1970s. This Reserve currently consists of nearly 700 million barrels of oil. The US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, combined with an equal amount of oil stored in other Government controlled emergency oil reserves across the world, is sufficient to replace the entire output of oil from the Persian Gulf for around six weeks. This would probably be more than enough to offset any attempt by Iran to restrict shipments through the Hormuz Straits for a prolonged period. However, it may well not be enough if Iran was able to inflict substantial damage to the Arabian oil industry across the Gulf. Thus, any air strike on Iran would not only have to be able to destroy Iran's numerous well-protected centrifuges and its air defences but also pre-empt any possibility of a retaliatory counter-attack on the oil infrastructure in the Persian Gulf. The sheer scale necessary for such an air strike is indicated by Lt. General Thomas McInerney (retired) in an article published by the arch-neoconservative, *Weekly Standard*:

What would an effective military response look like? It would consist of a powerful air campaign led by 60 stealth aircraft (B-2s, F-117s, F-22s) and more than 400 nonstealth aircraft including B-52s, B-1s, F-15s, F-16s, Tornados, and F-18s. Roughly 150 refuelling tankers and other support aircraft would be deployed, along with 100 unmanned aerial vehicles for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and 500 cruise missiles. In other words, overwhelming force would be used.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Thomas McInerney, 'Target: Iran' *Weekly Standard*, April 13<sup>th</sup> 2006.

Yet, even if an overwhelming air strike succeeded in both halting Iran's nuclear programme and pre-empted Iran launching any retaliatory missile strikes, either in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere, American troops could find themselves under attack from Iranian backed militias in Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, with US forces hard pressed to keep the lid on the current situation, it is quite possible that in the face of a concerted Iranian-backed insurgency they could lose control of Iraq.

If it succeeded in its objectives such an attack on Iran would set back the Iranian nuclear project by five years. Yet it would carry grave economic and political risks. If nothing else an attack on Iran, particularly if it involved tactical nuclear weapons, could have major diplomatic and political costs. Furthermore, if things did not go according to plan, and Iran was able to retaliate, oil prices could soar and the world could be plunged into a recession. But even if the air strike succeeded in its objectives the American might risk losing Iraq. As such, in present circumstances, an American attack on Iran is a high risk gamble with little to gain and much to lose.



#### *Proponents of the 'Long War'*

As its name clearly implied, the Project for the New American Century was concerned with taking a long-term strategic view of US foreign policy. Indeed, it sought to oppose its long-term viewpoint to the short-term muddling through that was seen as characterising the old foreign policy orthodoxy.

In his efforts to orientate US defence strategy from Cold War doctrines to those of fighting 'rogue and failed states' and 'non-state forces' in accordance with the doctrines set out by the Project for the New American Century, Donald Rumsfeld has developed the notion of the 'Long War'. Although Rumsfeld has had an uphill task attempting to re-orientate America's military against its high command, the notion of the 'Long War' has gained ground amongst more 'centrist' elements amongst the neoconservatives in and around the Bush regime.

On the one hand, against conservative and liberal critics of the neoconservatives' direction of foreign policy since the attack on the Twin Towers, it may be conceded that the attempt to radically re-order the wider Middle East has so far fallen short of its original objectives. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the attempts to bring about 'Colored (sic) Revolutions' in the wider Middle East, were merely the early battles in a new long war. Just as the USA had to fight a long drawn out Cold War against the USSR – a war which lasted more than forty years - so it would now have to fight a long drawn out war against political Islam and rogue states if it is to preserve its global hegemony. As such, it is asserted, there can be no return to outdated over-cautious and pragmatic policies of the Cold War. The radical re-ordering of the wider Middle East must remain a key long-term policy objective.

On the other hand, proponents of the 'Long War' caution against the impatience of the neoconservative hawks. Although it may be admitted that if the Iranian regime was to develop nuclear weapons then this would make it far more difficult to bring about a regime change, which as we have seen is pivotal to the 'Long War' to re-order the wider Middle East, the warnings of some neoconservative hawks that Iran will be able to obtain nuclear weapons within as little as two years can easily be dismissed as alarmist. Against the hawks' clamour for an immediate military confrontation with the Iranian regime, the proponents of the 'Long War' prefer to continue the strategy of going round Iran.

The first, and most immediate, task of such a strategy is the pacification and consolidation of Iraq. Of course, it cannot be said that this will be an easy task. After so many false dawns, Iraq is teetering on the edge of all out civil war, while after three years the US forces have failed to defeat the insurgency. Nevertheless, if the increasing demands made by isolationists and the anti-war movement for the troops to be brought home can be held in check, the proponents of the Long War have reasons to hope that all is not lost in Iraq.

Firstly, although the Iranian regime has sought to use its influence to destabilize Iraq in order to tie down America's military might, a descent into a full-scale civil war is not in Iran's interest. A civil war in Iraq would almost certainly compel Iraq's other neighbours – i.e. Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia – to become involved to the detriment of Iran. Iran's best bet is to maintain the current levels of instability and to wait until the US becomes weary of attempting to hold on to Iraq and quit.

Secondly, there are the growing divisions amongst Iraq's main political parties. During the first elections held at the beginning of 2005 all the main parties and candidate lists had demanded at the very least a timetable for the early withdrawal of US troops. Now fearing civil war and the advance of the Shi'ite parties and militias the main politicians who claim to represent the Sunni population of Iraq are desperate for US troops to stay. This is a position that is also likely to be echoed by the secularist parties that have now coalesced around Allawi.

Furthermore, even the ruling Untied Iraq Alliance is deeply divided over the fundamental questions concerning the future unity of Iraq. Muqtada Sadr, whose main basis of support lies in Baghdad, is strongly opposed to any proposal that might lead to the break-up of Iraq along religious line or ethnic lines. The division of Iraq favoured by his fellow

<sup>23</sup> See Gareth Porter, 'US troops in Iraq are Tehran's 'hostages'', *Asia Times*, September 22nd 2006.

Shi'ite coalition partners, the SCIR, which would see an oil rich Kurdistan break away to the north and an oil rich Shi'ite state break away to the South, would leave Sadr supporters in a minority in an impoverished Sunni-dominated rump of Iraq.

Thirdly, there is the venality and narrow self-interest of Iraq's politicians and militia leaders. Iraq's politicians have shown that they are quite prepared to collude with the Americans and there is little doubt that in the right circumstances they could be easily be bought off. Indeed, for all their professed piety and anti-Americanism, leading politicians of SCIR have been more than willing as Ministers in Iraq's provisional government to sign contracts effectively selling off the country's oil to American oil companies on the cheap.

Hence, given enough time, and playing their cards deftly, the proponents of the 'Long War' can still hope to establish a pro-American moderate Islamic government in Iraq; which could provide political stability, allow the establishment of US forward military bases on Iraq soil and open the floodgates for US capital to exploit Iraq's resources.

Meanwhile, efforts can be made to tighten the noose around Iran and undermine its stability. Firstly, under the pretext of Iran's 'violation' of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the US can use its diplomatic muscle to press the great powers of the world to impose increasingly punitive economic sanctions on Iran. As with Iraq, it can be hoped that prolonged sanctions could seriously weaken Iran both economically and militarily.

Secondly, overt and covert political methods can be deployed to destabilise Iran. In March, Condoleezza Rice announced a large increase in the propaganda budget aimed at Iran. This will be used to fund pro-American Iranian opposition groups as well as to set up television and radio stations to beam propaganda into Iran. At the same time, the Pentagon has been promoting the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEZ) opposition group - which had formerly been designated as a 'terrorist organisation' by the CIA.

However, it must be said that in the current situation, when even the more pro-Western Iranian middle classes can quite clearly see what the US is doing next door in Iraq, neither of these tactics are likely to bear fruit soon, at least in terms of Iran as a whole. American propaganda broadcasts are likely to have as much impact as those of Lord Haw Haw in the Second World War, while, at present, the MEZ has very little support inside Iran.

Yet, such tactics may serve to supplement those proposed by the neoconservative think-tank, American Enterprise Institute, to undermine, if not break up Iran by stirring up ethnic divisions. With the Iranian government having already accused coalition forces in Iraq of supplying arms and support to ethnic separatist groups in Iran, and with the recent revelations that Israeli mercenaries are providing intensive military training to Kurdish peshmerga guerrilla forces, it would seem to suggest that this tactic of stirring up ethnic divisions in Iran is already being implemented.<sup>24</sup>

In the next couple of years many of the large investments on developing the oil and natural gas fields

around the Caspian Sea and elsewhere will begin to come fully on stream easing the current tightness in the world's oil markets, at least for a few years. By then, the proponents of the 'Long War' can have hoped that both Iraq has been pacified, and Iran has been seriously weakened militarily, economically and politically. Thus, against the neoconservative hawks' insistence on an immediate military confrontation with Iran, the proponents of the 'Long War' can argue that it is wiser to wait until a more auspicious time, and then be sure of bringing about regime change.

### *Third Option*

If nothing else the current situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates the limits of US power to radically reshape the world in its own interests. As such, however much they have sought to deny it, it also marks the weakness of the doctrines of the neoconservatives. The decision of Ahmadinejad to recommence Iran's uranium enrichment programme may have served to check the increasing influence of both isolationism and the American anti-war movement by allowing the neoconservatives to focus attention on the apparent threat of Iran. However, the consequent stand off with Iran has served to bring to the fore the divisions amongst the neoconservatives themselves and the very weakness of their underlying foreign policy.

As we have seen, the neoconservative hawks' advocacy of an air strike against Iran to take out its uranium enrichment programme offers high risks with little gain. In the current situation it would not seem to be a viable option. Yet, the option proposed by the proponents of the 'Long War', which seems to have the ascendancy in the Bush regime, is not a great deal better. As we have seen, although it may be plausible, it is a strategy based on reasonable hopes rather than realistic expectations.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, given its record over the past three years, it is far from certain that the US will be able to both pacify Iraq and seriously destabilize Iran as the proponents of the 'Long War' envisage.

However, at least with respect to Iran, there is a third option. Although arguably this is not completely incompatible with the longer term aim of the neoconservatives of re-ordering the wider Middle East, this option finds support mainly amongst the old school of foreign policy makers in the State Department and within the wider circles of the American ruling class and has yet to be publicly voiced from within the Bush regime itself. This third option may be termed the 'Grand Deal'.

This 'Grand Deal' would involve the US abandoning its policy of regime change in Iran and giving the Iranian regime cast-iron security guarantees. In return the Iranian regime would support America's efforts to pacify Iraq and open up Iran's economy to foreign capital. Through such a deal the Iranian regime would be rehabilitated and Iran's ruling class brought within the international bourgeois community.

As we have seen, despite all their anti-Western rhetoric, the Iranian regime has long been more than willing to impose neo-liberal policies and obey the dictates of the IMF. The Iranian ruling class would welcome an end to

<sup>24</sup> Also see James Brandon, 'Iran's Kurdish Threat' in *Global Terrorism Analysis*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 15, 2006, and Chris Zambelis, 'Violence and Rebellion in Iranian Balochistan', *Global Terrorism Analysis*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 29 2006.

<sup>25</sup> England may have a 'reasonable hope' of winning Euro 2008, after all Greece won it last time, but they do not have a 'realistic expectation' of winning it.

Iran's isolation and the inflow of foreign capital – particularly if it could be sure of taking its cut of the profits.

However, such a 'Grand Deal' would face two important obstacles. Firstly, as we have seen, the external threat posed by US imperialism has become of crucial importance in maintaining social peace at home. Defiance of the US has allowed Ahmadinejad to unite the middle classes behind the regime and contain the recent resurgence class struggle. In the current situation, supping with the Great Satan will not be easy for Ahmadinejad.

Secondly, if Iran was simply opened up for foreign capital then US capital would find itself at the back of the queue. As we have pointed out, US foreign policy towards Iran was put on a back burner once it became clear that sorting out Iraq was going to take longer than expected. The issue of Iran's breach of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which had originally been raised in 2002 as a possible pretext for a future confrontation with Iran, was handed over to the Europeans (the EU-3 comprising the UK, France and Germany). Meanwhile, the US maintained its unilateral economic sanctions effectively locking US capital out of Iran. As a consequence, America's rivals were able to position themselves for the future rehabilitation of Iran and the opening up of its vast oil reserves for exploitation. Through their negotiations over Iran's compliance with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty the EU-3 powers were able to strengthen their links with the Iranian regime. Russia offered a deal to help Iran develop its civil nuclear power programme. China and India went further. Risking the ire of the US they struck a joint oil deal with Iran in 2005.

Of course, for the neoconservatives such manoeuvres did not matter that much since their plans for regime change in Iran would sooner or later have rendered all such agreements and understandings null and void. However, to be satisfactory, any 'Grand Deal' that left existing regime intact would have to allow America's oil corporations to jump the queue.

#### *Keeping all options open*

Throughout the stand-off between America and Iran, which has followed Ahmadinejad's announcement that Iran was to recommence its uranium enrichment programme, President Bush (jnr) has consistently insisted that he was 'keeping all options open' – thereby implying he was not ruling out taking military action. Bush's repeated refusal to rule out taking military action has been taken by many as evidence that he is hell-bent on war. But it would seem far more likely that when he says that he is 'keeping all options open' that is precisely what he means!

By doing this Bush cannot only keep his cards close to his chest in what can be seen as a tough poker game, but also reconcile divergences of opinion both within his administration and wider ruling class circles. By not ruling out military action Bush can appease the neoconservative hawks. Confident that all other options will sooner rather than later prove futile the neoconservatives can be assured that their policy will soon be adopted.

For the proponents of the 'Long War', the sabre-rattling on the part of the neoconservative hawks can serve as a means to persuade the other great powers that the Americans might be mad enough to launch an attack on Iran. While such action would be a 'high-risk - low-gain' for the US, it would be a 'high-risk - no gain' for everyone else.

Facing the threat of war the other great powers may then be willing to accept the lesser evil of sanctions. Furthermore, the proponents of the 'Grand Deal' would not be adverse to maintaining a perceived threat of war, since this would strengthen America's hand in the bargaining process with Iran and the other interested powers.

### **The US – Iran stand-off and the war in Lebanon**

Much has been made of the revelations of Hersh that the recent attack on Lebanon had not only been planned well in advance by Israel but that such plans had been known and approved by both Bush (jnr) and his faithful servant Tony Blair.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, many, particularly within the anti-war movement, have concluded from such revelations that Israel's attack on Lebanon was at the behest of the Americans and foreshadowed an Israeli-led strike on Iran on behalf of the US. It was even suggested during the course of the month long conflict that Bush was planning to escalate the war in Lebanon into an attack on Syria if not also Iran.<sup>27</sup>

However, it would have been very surprising if Israel had not planned to launch such a pre-emptive strike against Hizballah in south Lebanon and had not sought approval of the Americans before implementing such a plan. There is little doubt that Israeli intelligence was aware of the build up of Hizballah's stockpile of Shahab rockets and the threat that this posed to the towns and cities of northern Israel. The Israeli military would have no doubt been required to draw up contingency plans to deal with this threat in the event of heightened tensions in the Middle East. The overriding constraint on the military planners in drawing up such contingency would have been that no Israeli government was likely to countenance yet another prolonged and costly military occupation of south Lebanon.

As has become evident, the plan the Israelis came up with was for a short and sharp military campaign, which would push Hizballah and their rockets away from Israel's northern border, and then, with the diplomatic support of the US in establishing a buffer zone in southern Lebanon. The first phase of the military campaign was to launch a massive and overwhelming air attack on southern Lebanon. This, it was hoped, would drive out the civilian population leaving Hizballah fighters exposed, and to destroy Hizballah's rockets and thereby their ability to strike back at Israel. The second phase would then be to move in with ground troops to dislodge the shell-shocked Hizballah from southern Lebanon. All the Americans had to do was to procrastinate long enough for the Israeli forces to achieve their objectives and then call for a ceasefire and arrange an international peace-keeping force to police southern Lebanon. With a buffer zone established in southern Lebanon preventing the return of

<sup>26</sup> Seymour Hersh 'Washington's Interest in Israel's War' in *The New Yorker*, August 21<sup>st</sup> 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, former foreign policy advisor to Clinton, on August 7<sup>th</sup> argued that hardliners in the Bush administration were attempting to widen the war by providing Israel with the intelligence it needed to implicate Syria in continuing to supply Hizballah weapons. With Iran committed to defend its ally if it was attacked, an attack by Israel on Syria could have led to war with Iran in which the US would have been obliged to join. However, as it turned out, Israel was very careful not to involve Syria in its war. 'The neocons' next wWar', available at [www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca).

Hizballah to its former positions the Israeli army could withdraw.

Obviously such a plan, and the timing of its implementation, required both the prior approval and co-operation of the Americans. Certainly it is likely that the Bush administration would have been well-disposed to such a plan. A decisive defeat of Hizballah would have strengthened America's hand against both Iran and Syria. Important lessons could also be learnt concerning the effectiveness of aerial bombardment on Iranian-style rocket systems, which could be useful in any future confrontation with Iran. And all this could be gained without putting US troops at risk.

But although it required the Bush administration's prior approval and co-operation, this does not mean that Israel's attack on Lebanon was at the behest of the US. On the contrary, it would certainly seem to be the case that Israel went to war for internal political reasons.<sup>28</sup>

As has often been observed, it was perhaps only due to his reputation as both a military commander and an arch-Zionist that allowed Sharon to pull off the major shift in policy towards the Palestinian question and the consequent dramatic realignment of Israeli politics. Although withdrawal from Gaza and his proposal to abandon the more outlying settlements on the West Bank was to be accompanied by a more intensive programme of settlements within the lands annexed by the new Wall, Sharon's new policy was widely seen as a betrayal of the long standing commitment of Likud to a Greater Israel. As we have argued elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> this notion of a Greater Israel, and the expansion of Israeli settlements that it has served to justify, has played an increasing role in binding the Israeli working class to the state with the decline of labour Zionism in face of the adoption of neo-liberal policies. Indeed, the new settlements within the Wall appear designed to be more conducive to the extraction of surplus value than as a means to provide a surrogate welfare system for the Israeli working class.

In order to bring about his radical policy shift, Sharon was obliged to split his own party Likud and the Labour Party opposition to form Kadima creating political enemies in the process. Yet in the midst of the huge political upheavals that he had created Sharon went in to a coma. This has left his successor Ehud Olmert in a vulnerable position having to sort out the consequences of Sharon's radical new policies without the advantages of Sharon's reputation and *gravitas*.

The right wing critics, who had warned that Sharon's decision to withdraw from Gaza would be seen as a sign of weakness that would encourage Palestinian militants, claimed to be vindicated when the Palestinian elections resulted in the victory of Hamas. In response, with the backing of the US and European governments, Olmert took a hard line with the new Palestinian authority, cutting off its funding and refusing to negotiate with the new Palestinian ministers until Hamas capitulated and recognised Israel's 'right of existence'. Hamas militants responded by attempting to force Olmert to negotiate by kidnapping Israeli soldiers and ending their ceasefire.

However, Olmert responded by refusing all negotiations. Instead the Israeli army was sent on punitive incursions into the Gaza strip. Yet his attempt to appease the Right met with little success. The incursions into Gaza did not lead to the return of the kidnapped soldiers and failed to stop the rocket attacks against Israel. At the same time, these incursions appeared to be leading to the re-occupation of Gaza, thereby reversing the most controversial actions of the new policy Olmert had inherited from Sharon and which had led to the formation of Kadima in the first place.

It was at this point that Hizballah kidnapped three Israeli soldiers. There is no reason not to accept Nasrallah's subsequent protestations that he had miscalculated Israel's response to such kidnappings. After all, as has been pointed out, there had been numerous incidents of a similar nature before between Hizballah and the Israeli army without triggering a major military confrontation. Indeed, there had existed a tacit agreement that such incidents should not lead to attacks on civilians on either side. However, Olmert seeking to demonstrate his hard line credentials triggered the contingency plans for a pre-emptive strike on Hizballah. Yet far from the short sharp military campaign planned, the conflict lasted over a month leading to the humiliating defeat of Israel.

## Conclusion

With the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and with Iraq teetering on the verge of an all-out civil war, it is now clear that the attempt by the Bush regime to bring about a swift re-ordering of the oil rich regions of the wider Middle East by sheer force of arms has failed. Far from securing its vital interests and 'projecting' its global power, the failure to impose a *pax Americana* on Afghanistan and Iraq has only served to demonstrate the limitations of American power. Furthermore, the US is perhaps now in a weaker geo-political position than it had been in 2001 – with both its state and non-state adversaries and potential rivals taking advantage of America's perceived weakness.

Nevertheless, the USA remains the world's sole superpower. Indeed, it is the only state power capable of carrying out large-scale military adventures across the globe. Furthermore, with sluggish capital accumulation in Europe, and with China unlikely to become a serious rival until well into the next decade, the US, at least for the time being, remains the world's dominant economic power.

Neoconservative doctrines did not arise as short-term expedients to arrest the terminal decline of US power. On the contrary, as we have pointed out, these doctrines were developed as long-term plans to exercise America's enhanced geo-political position following the demise of the only other superpower – the USSR – in order to preserve US hegemony well into the twenty-first century. The subsequent failure of neoconservative foreign policy has not been due to it being somehow 'irrational'. The neoconservative policies involved high-risk strategies that did not pay off. If anything their failure was due more to mistakes and miscalculations born out of an arrogant overconfidence – which itself can be seen as the result of the post-Cold War triumphalism of the American bourgeoisie – rather than desperation. This must be borne in mind when considering the possible outcome of the current stand-off between the USA and Iran, and the implications of their proxy war in Lebanon.

<sup>28</sup> With Iran given until the end of August to respond to the UN call for a suspension of their uranium enrichment programme, Israel's attack on Lebanon would seem to have been a bit premature as a pretext for starting a war with Iran.

<sup>29</sup> 'Behind the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Intifada', *Aufheben* #10 (2002).

As we have seen, Ahmadinejad's decision to recommence Iran's uranium enrichment programme served to expose the differences both within the Bush administration as a whole and within the neoconservatives. Yet, despite such differences of opinion, all could agree that America had to appear to take a tough stand and threaten the use of force unless Iran backed down.

However, although Bush (jnr) was able to secure Iran's referral to the UN Security Council for its alleged breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, not only Iran but the great powers, particularly China and Russia, seem to have called America's bluff. Not only have the threats of military action receded but it now seems unlikely that anything more than token sanctions will be applied against Iran. At the same time, the US has had to accept that it might have to enter into direct negotiations with Iran for the first time since 1979.

However, as the neoconservatives remain in the ascendancy in Washington, and consequently regime change in Iran remains a long-term objective of American foreign policy, an attack on Iran cannot be ruled out in the future. However, what at present seems more likely is covert political action to stir up ethnic tensions in Iran.

This could have its own deleterious effects on the emerging class struggle in Iran as sanctions or war. In such a case, we must maintain our opposition to American imperialist intervention as well as to the theocratic Iranian regime.

### Appendix: Who are Hizballah?

The recent Israeli assault on Lebanon has thrust the Lebanese group Hizballah back into the spotlight - denounced by the right as a 'terrorist organisation' and defended by many on the left as a 'legitimate national liberation group' (1). While both of these definitions contain partial truths, both eschew the complex nature of Hizballah in favour of arguing a 'good guys or bad guys' dichotomy. In order to try and understand the situation in Lebanon today, a more complete picture is required.

Hizballah, or 'the party of God', announced its existence in 1985 with "*An Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World*" (2), although the militia groups which comprised it had been active against the Israeli occupation since it began in 1982. The vaguely leftist/internationalist sentiment of the Open Letter is not incidental, as a brief look at the context of their origins shows. The Lebanese state is 'multi-confessional', which means that political power is distributed among religious groups on a quota basis, the quota being worked out according to the religious composition at the time of the 1932 census (the only one available). From the end of the French mandate in 1943, an informal pact divided power roughly equally between Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims were a minority, and so had little share of political power. This became a more pressing issue as the Shia population grew relative to the other sects, and politicians tended to divert resources to 'their own', the result was disproportionate poverty amongst Lebanese Shia by the 1960s (3), which was also the beginning of mass urbanisation/proletarianisation of the mostly Shia rural poor. However, the initial reaction to this rising poverty was, if not really on class lines, not on sectarian ones either (4). For example, the (pro-USSR) Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) was legalised in 1970 and enjoyed a resurgence in popularity, and although it failed to win any parliamentary seats and never became a mass organisation, its rank-and-file were mostly drawn from the various sects of

the urban poor. Although the LCP's membership was mostly Christian, it also attracted many impoverished Shia. The LCP organised a cross-sect militia - the 'Popular Guard' - which nonetheless participated in the Lebanese civil war on the side of the Lebanese Nationalist/Palestinian/Muslim factions against the Israeli-backed Christian sects. But by the early 80s the organisation - and the broadly non-sectarian grassroots sentiment it represented - was in decline. As the Communist star waned, the star of militant political Islam was rising.

Militant Islam's appeal amongst poor Lebanese grew for several reasons, which can all be traced to the period between 1978 and 1982. Firstly, the Israeli invasion of 1978 reinvigorated the Shia 'movement of the deprived', Amal, which had been founded in 1975 by the respected cleric Sayyid Musa al-Sadr (not related to the al-Sadr of Iraqi insurgency fame). Al-Sadr's unexplained disappearance earlier that year in Libya had already returned him to the spotlight and boosted his popularity (he was never found). When the Israelis invaded in pursuit of PLO fighters, Amal fought the PLO, and was thereby seen to be defending the southern Shia population from the conflict by attacking its immediate cause, namely the PLO's use of Lebanese territory to launch attacks on Israel. Amal's (moderate) Islamic ideology also offered an ideological basis for resistance that was independent of both the reigning superpowers, which tessellated well with the nationalist sentiments inspired by the invasion. The 1979 'Islamic Revolution' in Iran also had a catalysing effect on the ascent of militant Islam, as was made explicit in the founding statement of Hizballah six years later (5) - the impact is perhaps somewhat analogous to that of the 'success' of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution on the wider workers' movement, which boosted the statist parties at the expense of the libertarians, arguably right up to the collapse of the USSR and certainly until Stalin took power. Then came the second Israeli invasion of 1982, a watershed event which cemented the dual perceptions that the left had failed to protect the Shia poor from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the moderate Amal group was no longer representative of the Shia poor after its drift into patronage politics. A loose network of former Amal militants and others formed to resist the occupation under an Islamic banner, a network that was to coalesce and announce itself in 1985 as 'the Party of God', Hizb Allah.

Right from the time of its origins in these Shia resistance groups, Hizballah was keen to stress its desire to "satisfy the interests of the oppressed masses", stating "we reject both the USSR and the US, both Capitalism and Communism", and that "we don't want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force" - as well as significant quantities of anti-imperialist/national liberationist language (6). These sentiments have by-and-large been borne out by Hizballah's subsequent development into an umbrella organisation which incorporates an armed wing ('the Islamic Resistance'), a legal political party which forms part of the largest voting bloc in the Lebanese parliament today (i.e. September 2006), and an extensive network of social services including hospitals, schools and a civil reconstruction program. Although we obviously reject the idea that Hizballah is anticapitalist - it is quite clearly a faction of Lebanese national capital (7) - its opposition to the both US and domestic neoliberal policies alongside its social programmes have nonetheless won it some anticapitalist kudos with the Lebanese working class. During the most recent explosion of class struggle in Lebanon - the 2004 general strike against the neoliberal regime of Rafik Hariri (8) (whose 2005 assassination led to the 'Cedar Revolution') - Hizballah played a mediating role, maintaining their credibility as representatives of the mostly Shia urban poor while diffusing the raw class anger on the streets which threatened to escalate as the Lebanese army fired live



rounds at demonstrating workers, killing five and injuring many more. The fact Hizballah has largely maintained its support amongst the poor on account of its seeming commitment to its founding values was manifested by the huge counter-demonstrations they organised in opposition to the 'Cedar Revolution', which were at least as big as those of the middle/upper class 'revolutionaries' and drew on the working class in general and poor Shias in particular - which is even more impressive given the fact the assassinated Hariri was a hated figure amongst the working class for his neoliberal policies (even though he protected wanted Hizballah figures). In addition, Hizballah's nationalism, and its recent practical expressions as the armed defence of Lebanese territorial sovereignty has been attracting increasing numbers of middle class and upwardly mobile Lebanese too (9). Hizballah has always received military backing from Iran as well as financial backing from Iran and Syria, which together with donations from wealthy Lebanese and the proceeds of the annual *khum* (a rudimentary taxation system of 20% of surplus income paid by all Shia) finances their operations. Despite this, their policy has always been distinctly nationalist and fairly independent of their state sponsors. Thus, Hizballah today is much more than a simple armed group or an Iranian/Syrian proxy force. It is perhaps possible to think of it as a sort of state-within-a-state, complete with military and welfare wings, a tax system, the task of maintaining law and order (in the south at least), and the role of mediating between the requirements of capital and the demands of the working class, a role which requires it maintains a certain working class base.

(1) For example the slogan 'he are all Hezballah' featured prominently and fairly uncontroversially at the national Stop the War Lebanon demo, while George Galloway celebrated Hezballah giving Israel 'a bloody good hiding' in an interview on Sky News. Evidently terms like 'the right' and 'the left' are problematic, but adequate approximations in this context.

(2) The Open Letter: see [http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/Hiz\\_letter.htm](http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/Hiz_letter.htm)

(3) Of course Shia politicians, like the others, were generally of ruling class background (mostly feudal landowners), and so tended to represent their sectarian class interest over that of their serfs. - it obviously it goes without saying that politicians are ruling class once they become politicians, by definition!

(4) See Lara Deeb;

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=2897>

(5) "We are the sons of the *umma* (Muslim community) - the party of God (Hizb Allah) the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran. There the vanguard succeeded to lay down the bases of a Muslim state which plays a central role in the world. We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and *faqih* (jurist) who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!"; the Open Letter.

(6) Open Letter.

(7) By which we mean as a political party, a part of the government and a pseudo-state in its own right, Hizballah is a part of the Lebanese ruling class apparatus, albeit an apparatus that requires a significant working class base to function.

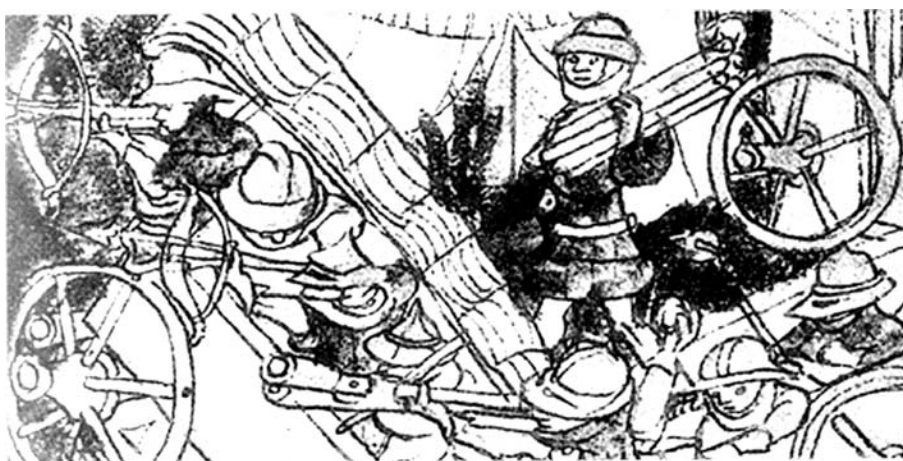
(8) See the Beirut Indymedia film 'Leaded/Unleaded' available for free download here: <http://users.resist.ca/~leaded/>

(9) The middle classes have always been a part of Hizballah's cross-class nationalist project, but their size has grown of late.

#### **Aufheben Commentaries**

This article is a much expanded and updated version of our first 'Commentaries' pamphlet, 'War in Iran? *Why we must oppose sanctions*', which was produced in early 2006 to coincide with the national anti-war demo on March the 18<sup>th</sup>. At this time, there was an expectation that the US would launch air strikes or, perhaps more likely, sanctions, against Iran. The pamphlet was written as an intervention to encourage resistance to any such sanctions – particularly in the light of the failure of the official anti-war movement previously to oppose sanctions at the time of the first Gulf War. (The ill-judged call of the official anti-war movement for 'sanctions not war' was exposed when the devastating effects on the sanctions on the health of millions of Iraqis – and on the ability of the Iraqi working class to mobilize – soon became evident.)

Our 'Commentaries' pamphlets will be produced on an occasional basis to supplement the annual magazine by providing a topical analysis when needed. The pamphlets will be given away free at relevant events and at some outlets and eventually uploaded onto our website. (See inside back page of this issue for details.)



# Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow fifteen years on: A reflection

Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow are...inseparable activities, not in any abstract sense but as a concrete and real alteration of the concrete and real world of bourgeois society. (Karl Korsch; as cited in *Aufheben* inaugural editorial, Autumn, 1992)

The small group of people who first produced *Aufheben* back in 1992 had already been involved in a number of different struggles for some time before we even thought of publishing a magazine. In particular, the struggle against the poll tax (1989-1991) brought us together as a group of comrades, though some in the group had been active together from as long back as the miners' strike of 1984-5. The poll tax riot of March 31<sup>st</sup> 1990 was the biggest riot seen in London for a century, and it prompted the formation of a small group of like-minded people around the particular issue of support for poll tax prisoners. Meeting regularly, thrashing out our strategy in relation to the leftist-dominated official national anti-poll tax movement, jointly producing newsletters and leaflets, and participating together on pickets, demos and riots, we found an increased convergence in our ideas, as well as an interest in developing these ideas further, beyond the limits of anarchism and Marxism as we knew them.

After the poll tax campaign, we continued to work as a group in subsequent struggles, in particular the struggle against the Gulf War, while at the same time connecting and interacting with a wider circle of groups and individuals in resistance. The concern of all of those in the group in trying to understand what we were doing in these struggles, to reflect on and theorize our practice, and to develop constructive critique – to grasp the meaning of capital and its overthrow and our possible role in this – led us to set up a weekly reading group, eventually working through all three volumes of Marx's *Capital* and most of the *Grundrisse*.

We approached this reading through the lens of a shared interest in what we saw as the most valuable contributions of the historical ultra-left, in particular the Situationists and *autonomia*, as well as earlier important contributions such as those of Rubin, Korsch, Lukács, Pannokeok, and Bordiga, as well as the philosopher Chris Arthur, and at all times using our understanding of Hegel, the most advanced bourgeois philosopher, to enhance our grasp of Marx's ideas.

Our subsequent experience has led us to develop criticisms of some of these early (and to an important extent continued) influences on our understanding<sup>1</sup> as we have tried to interrogate and develop theory in tandem with our continuing practice as people involved in various struggles (e.g. anti-roads, 'anti-capitalist', welfare benefits reform, and anti-war again). The point was that, however valuable previous theoretical contributions are, theory which stands still is no longer living theory but ideology. Living theory is by its nature bound up with practice. Our first editorial back in 1992 stressed the importance of the unity of theoretical-

practical intervention, that is, the development of political theory in connection to practice, at a time when the two seemed to be split:

[In] the present situation... [t]he connection between the movement and ideas has been undermined. Theory and practice are split. Those who think do not act, and those who act do not think. In the universities where student struggles forced the opening of space for radical thought that space is under attack. The few decent academic Marxists are besieged in their ivory tower by the poststructuralist shock troops of neo-liberalism. Although decent work has been done in areas such as the state derivation debate there has been no real attempt [to] apply any insights in the real world. Meanwhile out in the woods of practical politics, though we have had some notable victories recently, ideas are lacking. Many comrades, especially in Britain, are afflicted with a virulent anti-intellectualism that creates the ludicrous impression that the Trots are the ones with a grasp of theory. Others pass off conspiracy theories as a substitute for serious analysis.

We publish this journal as a contribution to the reuniting of theory and practice. *Aufheben* is a space for critical investigation which has the practical purpose of overthrowing capitalist society.

In times of retreat in the class struggle this unity of theory and practice is not obvious. In such times, revolutionary theory appears increasingly less relevant, more abstract, and revolutionary ideas of the past seems to offer a noticeable tension with the present reality. Categories such as 'working class', 'class struggle', and 'proletariat' sometimes seems quaint and are routinely challenged by the chattering classes and would-be intellectuals.

There are two parts to the problem of the relation of theory and practice that arise in times of the retreat of the class. One is: how important are intervention and practice for the development of theory? How can theory develop when there is little in the way of struggle to nourish it? Do we simply 'preserve' it to be wheeled out again when struggle returns? Should we instead understand theory as much more than a series of 'hard won truths' and in what way?

The other part is: how important theory is for a practice of struggle that is effectively a process towards communism?

The past examples of struggles inspiring a thirst for theory and more theoretical work could seem to mean that theory essentially follows practice. Of course in an important way this is true. Marx's written ideas were the articulation of tendencies in the form of the developing working class and class struggle in the nineteenth century. Communism is the

<sup>1</sup> See our critiques of the Situationists (*Aufheben* #6, 1997) and some of the theory that has come out of *autonomia* (*Aufheben* #11, 2003; #13, 2005; and #14, 2006).

movement with the potential to destroy capitalism, not a set of ideas or a theory which inspires that movement. Ideas and understandings are the product of this movement. Hence Marx, by writing down some of these ideas and understandings, expressed its most radical theoretical achievement.

However we would suggest that this conception is only part of it. Theory and practice are two sides of the same dialectical coin. Although as we will see they make sense of each other only as two parts of a whole, they (can) present themselves as opposites, in competition. This apparent separation and opposition is exacerbated, we said, in those times of retreat in the class struggle, when revolutionaries without their revolution in view are tempted either to retreat into abstract more-or-less radical ideas or into ritualistic practice. In this separation, either ideas or actions become crystallized through deprivation of any potential for development. This is because such development would involve precisely the dialectical back-and-forth movement of theory and practice (struggles). We call this crystallization a fetishism<sup>2</sup> of either theory or practice because either one is considered (by the fetishists) to contain the solution in and of themselves – i.e. in their own nature - and not in their context. As we wrote in the editorial, ‘those who think do not act, and those who act do not think.’

This fetishism of pure action or pure theory gives rise to an experience of alienation and disempowerment, which is very common, and often frustrating. In the following, we will first identify various dead-end situations that arise in periods of retreat of the class. Two caveats are in order, however. First, although we seem to be describing ‘types’ of people or extreme cases, we do not see these as ideal types that reality approximates to; rather they are examples that we have actually observed. Second, although we seem to be speaking of people other than ourselves, all of us have had some past experience of such forms of alienating relations with theory and practice in concrete contexts, which to some extent are reflected in these examples. As we will explain in detail, it is only an involvement in struggle and a willingness to relate thought and experience that has created a critical awareness of these problems. Thus, in the next part of this article, we will look back at examples of practical experience and reflection, in particular two moments of struggle in Brighton: the campaign against welfare benefits reform (the Job Seeker’s Allowance) and the recent movement against the war in Iraq.

## **1 Fetishism and disempowerment: from the ‘activist’ to the ‘theoreticist’**

### **1.1 Practice over ideas: ‘the ideological activist’ (or the ‘fetishism of practice’)**

By ‘ideological activists’ we mean those fetishizing of particular forms of practice, and measuring of existing

struggles against these fetishized ideas about practice. The (fetishized) practice arose from particular given conditions, where it was found to be necessary, appropriate or successful. But then the ideological activist clings onto that successful practice, understanding it as a general strategy, valid in and of itself. Thus, instead of continually testing the practice in a process that involves critical evaluation, there is only (mechanical) action.

In this perspective theory is seen as a hindrance since the process of critical evaluation of ‘what we do’ appears as an unnecessary interference with a practice that has been established as good and effective as it is and once and for all.

The upside of this ideological activism, that is its moment of truth, is a not unreasonable reaction against abstruse sectarian waffle and time-wasting theoretical debates, which are so common in non-revolutionary times, and which can effectively stop protesters getting on with action.

The downside is that, by failing to think and debate further about practice, practice gets fossilised within an uncritical loop. The fetishism of the ideological activist reveals its recuperative potential when practice becomes an endless repetition of (supposedly) ‘revolutionary’ acts. An example of this activist dead-end is the more predictable form of militancy exhibited by the black bloc, for whom the image of militant opposition can be more important than the development of a movement. The black bloc’s clashes with the police during demonstrations become rituals, which are expected by the police and get accommodated as an ongoing part of the status quo.

Ideological action has no potential to develop beyond an elite of activists. It therefore creates a gap between the activist ‘ghetto’ and ‘ordinary people’ who don’t seem to be interested or brave enough. Thus it becomes an endless repetition of radical actions that only serve to define the activists as ‘revolutionary’ and justify their difference from the rest of the ‘ordinary’ world.

### **1.2 Ideas over practice**

The other side of the coin is the privileging of ideas over practice, of which there are a number of different types of examples.

#### *‘The activist ideologue’*

The ‘activist ideologue’ is the counterpart of the ‘ideological activist’: its other extreme. While the ideological activist fetishizes the ‘right’ practice, the activist ideologue fetishizes and proclaims the ‘right’ ideas – which are then treated as finished and fixed by virtue of their assumed absolute ‘correctness’.

Such ideologues may get involved side by side with activists, but for opposite aims, and are alien to each other since their interests don’t overlap. Indeed, the activist ideologue is not interested in actions, but in the purity of ideas diffused during actions, the correctness of words uttered at meetings or written in leaflets.

As in the case of the ideological activists, activist ideologues in effect separate themselves from what is perceived as ‘the ordinary world’. The activist ideologue inevitably faces a cold or even hostile reception to their

<sup>2</sup> ‘Fetishizing’ here mean mistakenly (ideologically) holding up something as the (magical) key to something, treating it as a fetish – a thing with powers – when it is in fact only an aspect (or even simply an effect) of the phenomenon in question. See Part 4 of Chapter 1 of *Capital*. (Fetishism in Freud’s discussion of sexuality meant the endowing of an (otherwise non-sexual) body part or object with sexual significance – only this object has the power to provoke a sexual response.)

leaflets and preaching.<sup>3</sup> But, having separated ideas from the living context in which ideas are true for - and make sense to - us, the ideologue can't explain why such 'right' ideas are not immediately acknowledged, why there is this lack of interest from 'ordinary people' or other activists. The cause that seems obvious to them is: *other ideological sources*, which brainwash individuals with recuperative ideas. Activist ideologues see themselves at the front of an ideological war. For them, class war is principally a war not against the bourgeoisie, the state or the police but what they understand to be their subtle means of recuperation - minor Trotskyist parties; the school; the mass media; etc.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, this ideological war is sterile. Critical ideas can't just be taught or preached: as activity can have meaning through theory, ideas can make sense only in a concrete context. The truths about capitalism can be realised only through our involvement in class struggle. The gap between the activist ideologue and the unenlightened can be bridged only through the common experience of struggle.

But this creates a vicious circle, since the activist ideologue separates himself with disdain from those who potentially can, or just start being, involved, and who still have half-baked, liberal, common-sense, confused ideas about justice, capitalism, freedom, rights, etc. Those people are, for them, hateful liberals, union militants, etc. i.e. class enemies. The result of this separation is an endless and sterile production or utterance of smug 'critiques' that have no other end but the definition of oneself as 'revolutionary' and provide a justification for the separation from a hopelessly alien world of 'ordinary people'.

#### *The academic*

The separation experienced by the ideologue between reality and his world of ideas is disheartening. This separation can in some sense be resolved, avoiding so much pain, by concentrating on making theory. The radical *academic* has solved this problem. She has turned the activity of making revolutionary theory into her job - the concrete basis of her own material reproduction.

The radical academic can enjoy practical activity outside her university library, which may include membership of a Trotskyist party, for example, or even involvement in some local campaign meetings. This activity however, is separated from any interest at work; the critical ideas developed at work do not connect with the political

practice outside of work - the academic ideas may be more radical than the political practice.

On the one hand, the academic may produce theory that is interesting and useful to those of us involved in struggle. Her practice is to do theory, and her (over-emphasis) on the moment of reflection gives her the opportunity to develop ideas. On the other hand, by having turned making theory into a job, she is obliged to adopt the mindset of production for production's sake, often in collaboration with colleagues or students who are not totally like-minded. The academic's theory thus enters into a compromise with academia that, in return, guarantees her reproduction. Academia is not a neutral realm. Its nature as the realm developed under capitalism as one of ideas outside the conflicting interests of classes or particular capitals itself produces distortions and constraints: constraints in the form of the time and energy given over to ideas which then take away from practice, and distortions in the form of elevating these ideas over practice. The academic then prefers to slog away on her papers instead of undergoing a real, active, critique of her status, which would initiate a conflict with her establishment that may ultimately cost her job and undermine her reproduction.

As a consequence of the radical academic's priority, that of remaining within and continuing to reproduce the academic world, her critiques are ultimately timid. Battles of ideas among academics are often empty of any political content and constrained by due respect for their academic peers and the usual polite bourgeois conventions of this world of ideas and arguments. The academic can do a good job, sometimes, but this is often partial or even defused of any real power (and, even when it is interesting, is normally very boring)!

#### *The 'theoretician' (or 'anti-activist')*

The theoretician takes the radical academic's 'solution' to the problem of the separation of theory and practice one stage further: he fetishizes theory as the most revolutionary form of practice.

Unlike the academic who makes theory his job then separates his '9-5' job (theory) from the rest of his practice (whether 'political' or not), for the theoretician making theory is itself the very definition of being a revolutionary. He therefore achieves the unity, or, more precisely, thoroughgoingness, absent in the case of the academic. His theoretical practice is thoroughgoing in that he applies (or at least attempts to apply) it to every aspect of his life - there is no compromise with his principles and thus no contradiction between work and life outside work as there is for the radical academic. In fact, however, the theoretician can have an academic job, or she can be a factory worker or a drop-out; what matters is his attitude to theory.

Theoreticism is the complete alienation from the concrete world. There is nothing outside a desk full of books. All life, all definition of oneself, is locked into making or understanding and following the most radical, the most pure, the most revolutionary theory, and being thoroughly faithful to it in every moment and aspect of one's life.

Theoreticism is consequently total immobilisation by theoretical purity. Any real struggle, movement, political activity, become anathema as in any struggle, movement, group there are always people who don't fit the theory, and

<sup>3</sup> This is the problem noted by Guy Debord in anarchism. Anarchism, Debord says, 'leaves *the historical terrain* by assuming that the adequate forms for this passage to practice have already been found and will never change' (*Society of the Spectacle*, §92). This is behind the ideologues' 'certainty that ideas must become practice' immediately. As a consequence, Debord adds, the anarchists' 'intellectual activity consists of the repetition of certain definitive truths' (§93). What Debord calls 'the terrain of history' we here call the process of realization of ideas through praxis.

<sup>4</sup> The apotheosis of such ideology is perhaps the notion put forward by Althusser of 'Ideological State Apparatuses', those institutions (such as education and the media) which, he argues, are the key to explaining the absence of revolution. In this conception, ideology is not a consciousness arising as a bi-product of alienated practice but the deliberate manufacture of false ideas by capitalist functionaries. Althusser's supposed anti-idealism (anti-Hegelianism) is thus a profoundly dualistic and idealistic ontology.



any contact implies the sacrifice of revolutionary principles. No campaigns or movements are therefore worth his while.

In this resistance to activism, there is an element of truth, which is the real risk of being recuperated in liberal struggles that reflect and enhance the power of the ruling class. But there is also a crucial drawback: the theoretician waits motionless for the purely and perfectly revolutionary moment, looking with disdain at any struggle that is actually happening around them - and, tragically, there is an irresolvable gap between the non-revolutionary present, and a revolutionary moment where it's okay to get into action.

Many theoreticians have found the perfect doctrine to contemplate, which justifies their condition.<sup>5</sup> Some, for example, fetishize theories that explain that capital is bound to bring about the pure revolution one day through its own inherent development; and/or explain that the present struggles are not 'revolutionary' in nature. Some, instead, may fetishize theories that condemn practical intervention as an undue interference with the autonomous struggle of the proletariat. Others may be fond of theories<sup>6</sup> which see culture, thought and actions as overwhelmingly shaped by capitalism, so that nothing can be done, except redeem oneself by reading lots of theory at home. Others may nurture themselves in the idea that we are irremediably victims of super-powerful lizards<sup>7</sup>; etc.

<sup>5</sup> The theoretician can draw upon theories produced by non-theoreticians, such as old council communist theories, etc.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Adorno, Baudrillard.

<sup>7</sup> One day when we were leafleting for the campaign against identity cards a supermarket security guard came out and informed us of a world-wide conspiracy, which had already completed and inescapable surveillance system covering the globe. The conclusion of this was that it was too late to struggle as everything was already bound to happen. Of course, the mouthpiece of this theory, the security guard, felt self-satisfied about this esoteric knowledge he possessed, thus also self-satisfied in his haplessness and powerlessness. In general, conspiracy theories are subtly (or not so subtly) conservative.

There is, in some of these versions of theoreticism, the implication that active political intervention in struggles is somehow artificial (perhaps because such struggles should operate without the interference of those 'people like us' who have esoteric knowledge of the true nature of class struggle). Yet it is the notion we should not get involved in the world that we theorize that is artificial, since it implies that we are not a part of this world. This separated world is, in the previous example, either capital as a quasi-objective structure which moves independently from us; 'the proletariat' which we should not interfere with; 'culture' or 'discourse' as something created in separation from us; or a network of conspirators beyond our reach.

For all these different theoreticians, there is, at least implicitly, a *choice* of inactivity. But there is also a great intellectual reward from this choice, as a kind of peace of mind or calm self-satisfaction is the consequence of being the exclusive recipient of exclusive knowledge. Like the ideological activist and the activist ideologue, the theoretician defines himself as revolutionary insofar as he is separate from, and somehow superior to, the 'common' world. His exclusive access to sophisticated theory that ordinary people can't understand is the glorification of his separation.

Politically and practically, 'theoreticism' is ultimately conservative; it is the ultimate enactment of a separation with the world and immobility. By ruling out involvement in struggles in non-revolutionary times as useless or worse than useless, it contributes nothing to change.

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In each of these different examples above, there is a kind of dualism and separation. For the ideological activist, there is the refusal to allow current practice to feed back into a (changed) understanding of proper practice - the two are held apart. For those who privilege ideas over practice in different ways, the separation can be analysed as a matter of degree. Thus the activist ideologue has certain ideas but gets involved with practices and people which are alien to themselves, and experiences this separation or alienation and tries to overcome it (unsuccessfully) by mere assertion and repetition. For the academic, the separation is greater: ideas are his job, and he separates out his working practice (ideas, which may be radical and revolutionary) from his daily life, or even political practice, which may be reformist, counter-revolutionary or not 'political' at all. For the theoretician, extreme closure within pure theory is realized: being revolutionary means to limit one's practice to the realm of ideas, hence not be involved at all.

We now move on to two accounts of recent struggles in which we had some involvement. We use these to illustrate (1) the way the above separations<sup>8</sup> operated potentially or actually to limit the potential of the struggles, and (2) how these ideological positions were challenged and the important consequences for theory as well as practice of this challenge.

## 2 The struggle against the Job Seeker's Allowance (1995-7)

<sup>8</sup> By definition the academics and the theoreticians/anti-activists do not get involved, so these examples concern only the ideological activists and activist ideologues.

## 2.1 The background

In the UK, the mid-1990s saw a number of important reforms of the system for claiming benefits. Central to these was the introduction in 1996 of the Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), which replaced Unemployment Benefit, and included such features as increased sanctions for not 'actively seeking work'. The nature of the JSA and the struggles against it and other reforms and schemes introduced in this period, including 'Project Work' and the New Deal, have been detailed elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> What we are concerned with here is the nature of the struggles against the JSA in Brighton – how and why those involved in this struggle, who included some of us, had to challenge crystallised ideas, which made sense in abstract as 'revolutionary' but were a hindrance for an effective revolt against the reforms. Also, we will show what this experience meant for us in terms of theoretical understanding.

The pre-existence of 'revolutionary' ideology at the beginning of the anti-JSA movement needs to be placed historically. In the UK, the early 1980s were a time when there was a rough consensus amongst the 'actual existing ultra-left' – i.e., all those groups and individuals inspired by left communism, the Situationists and *autonomia*. Democratic representation – the unions and leftism more generally – had been powerful, and there was no dispute that they were the 'left wing of capital',<sup>10</sup> and that they should be denounced at every turn. With the defeat of the miners, however, the unions' power and their usual role was seriously undermined. As such, the critique of the unions as the recuperators of struggles became an ideology that was true in abstract but made increasingly less sense in practice. The working class were not being held back by the unions; indeed class struggle went into retreat and there was little for the unions to recuperate.

The anti-poll tax movement of 1989-90 and the riots of 1990, however, brought a sudden and unexpected, and extremely vibrant, resurgence of class struggle. The working class reared up against an arrogant and miscalculating Conservative government and incompetent police force, and the existing ultra-left was re-invigorated, with renewed interest in the old currents of the late 1960s and their modern counterparts – as expressed in the ICC, Class War etc. Within this re-invigorated ultra-left, the truth of the limits of the unions and the historical counter-revolutionary role of leftism seemed to be confirmed. First, the left was up to its old tricks – Militant<sup>11</sup> tried to control the movement and rein

<sup>9</sup> See *Dole autonomy versus the re-imposition of work: analysis of the current tendency to workfare in the UK* (1998); 'Social democracy: No future?' (*Aufheben* #7, 1998); *Dole autonomy and work re-imposition: An epilogue* (1999); and 'Unemployed recalcitrance and welfare restructuring in the UK today' in *Stop the Clock!* (2000). Details of all articles are on the inside back page of this issue.

<sup>10</sup> The well-known phrase 'left wing of capital' isn't meant to be taken literally, but is a shorthand for all those tendencies implementing or pressing for a reformed, progressive, less market-led (and hence, they expect, more legitimate and 'fair' form of capitalism – e.g. state capitalism, socialism etc.)

<sup>11</sup> Militant Tendency, now the Socialist Party, was, at one stage, a party within a party in relation to the Labour Party and the biggest of the Trotskyist factions.

in the most radical, and when it could not do this itself it openly sided with the police. Second, the struggle had operated and been won not through the moribund structures of the labour movement or even through strikes but through riots and action on the streets.

Indeed, the historic and successful struggle against the poll tax revived and demonstrated the continued relevance of the whole of the ultra-left analysis – not only the critique of the left and of the unions, not only the role of street collective action such as riots rather than institutionalized forms of dispute but also the central notion of proletarian spontaneity or autonomy more generally – the idea that the working class will naturally resist without conventional parties or formal, centralised organizational structures – and finally the crucial idea of the refusal of or revolt against work as a revolutionary act, which distinguished the ultra-left so sharply from the workerist leftists. As we will see, the revival of all these ideas informed debate about strategies of resistance in the anti-JSA movement in 1995-7.

But at the same time as the assumptions of the existing ultra-left seemed re-confirmed, so did the importance of some form of activism in relation to others not adequately captured in the positions of the actual existing ultra-left. The partial stranglehold by Militant of the anti-poll tax movement was challengeable, and many from the existing ultra-left got stuck in more than previously – attending meetings, pickets and demonstrations.

## 2.2 The campaign

With the threat of the JSA, different groups affected at first began organizing separately. Those of us who were living on benefits saw the JSA, which could deprive us of all the weekly money we needed to live, as a threat not only to our own immediate living conditions, but to the conditions of the wider working class, and hence ourselves again, as it provided a mechanism for compelling people to take the low paid jobs that no one wanted and thus push wages down at the bottom end of the labour market.

Across the country independent anti-JSA claimants' action groups appeared, eventually coalescing in a network of groups of claimants against the JSA, 'Groundswell'.

Many of those involved in this anti-JSA campaign were radical claimants, mostly anarchists, rather than having no political background or having a background linked to the labour movement or trade unions (whose officially sponsored unemployed centres were behind a smaller parallel network of campaign groups, in-turn linked to a leftist European network). Most of them came out of the experience of the poll tax. As we discussed earlier, they were influenced by the ideological context created during the 1980s and early 1990s, according to which they saw themselves to some extent as representatives of the 'real proletarians', ideally radical like them, ideally against work. So they saw the struggle against the JSA as a struggle between the claimants as this 'real proletariat' on the one side, against not only the government but also the dole workers, as the representatives of capital, on the other.

Yet the radical claimants faced the undeniable general inertia, atomization and powerlessness of the 'ordinary' claimant. They had to accept that the way 'common' claimants would react to the JSA (if they would react at all!) would be at the very best a strategy of scams or 'duck-and-

dive', i.e. attempts to go round the rules as an individual, feigning job-search, sickness, bluffs and other use of one's own wits. So at the beginning the radical claimants supported such 'ducking and diving' as a general 'radical' strategy against the JSA.

The strategy of 'duck and dive' in effect substituted the anarchists' and activists' perspective for the working class. Although 'ducking and diving' may be common among claimants who inevitably develop individual survival techniques, the radical claimants overlooked a tragic separation between themselves and the 'ordinary' world. Whether they liked it or not, most 'ordinary' claimants were not in principle against waged work. Most claimants wanted a job - although they wanted a well-paid job and preferred to 'duck and dive' only to avoid being pushed into poorly paid waged jobs or losing their benefits. The radical claimants could not address this separation, assuming, as activist ideologues, that their 'true' ideas, their 'true' critique of waged labour was obvious to all by virtue of its fundamental correctness.

Of course there is an element of truth in the radical claimants' analysis and hence their strategy. In times of less promise, 'duck and dive' may be a viable survival approach. But on this occasion we saw the potential for much more. We were able to start and carry out an effective strategy of collective attack. Eventually, however, recognising the need to up the ante, the radical claimants too proposed collective action - however, with a strategy of attack that had to be coherent with their ideology! So, in May 1996, they proclaimed the so-called 'Three Strikes' strategy:

The 'Three Strikes' strategy had previously been used to some effect in Edinburgh where a claimants group had been active for a number of years. They used the strategy in response to a government snooping campaign. In the Groundswell version of the 'Three Strikes' strategy, any Employment Service worker persistently reported as harassing claimants is sent two written warnings by the claimants' group. If these are not heeded, the claimants' group distributes a poster depicting the offender and prints it out on a poster describing what the person has done; the poster is then distributed in the local area.

*(Dole autonomy versus the re-imposition of work: Analysis of the current tendency to Workfare in the UK, Aufheben 1998, pp. 27-8)*

...the expectation being that the enraged local proletariat would then attack or at least harass the offending JobCentre worker.

The three strikes strategy was coherent with the activist ideologues' view of the anti-JSA struggle as open confrontation between idealized activist claimants, representing a wider antagonistic and anti-work proletariat, and stereotyped dole workers.

The Three Strikes strategy was based on the belief that, by proposing the 'right' radical idea, this would be followed immediately by the masses. Disappointment followed when the 'common' claimant didn't seem very excited about the strategy:

due either to lack of support for it among Groundswell-affiliated groups or lack of numbers in

these groups, the method has been implemented on only a handful of occasions, and only by the groups in Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol and Nottingham  
(*Dole autonomy, op. cit.*, p. 28)

The JSA was much more than an attack on 'dole autonomy' - i.e. the most radical (anti-work) expressions of unemployment. It was an attack by capital against the wider working class; it was the thin edge of privatisation of the welfare state administration, and a strategy to bring wages down. This was both a threat to the workers on benefit as well as to the dole (JobCentre) workers, as it immediately aimed to undermine their working conditions, wages, and job security.

The JSA seriously affected all JobCentre workers dealing with the claimants face to face. By changing the balance of any potential policing role (which they had previously the discretion to simply pay lip service to) and made it central. The JSA did not pretend, as in previous schemes, to offer 'make-work' opportunities, but was designed to be confrontational to deal with the ongoing problem of unemployed recalcitrance.

The dole workers' identification with their targets and orders was increasingly undermined by increasing proletarianization. These workers had increasingly lost the privileges that once made even the lowest civil servants a middle class worker separated from the working class. Their working conditions had declined, their pay was already low (many had to claim housing benefit). Hence there was mounting hostility to their own management, and this hostility was exacerbated by the JSA, which offered only a future of antagonistic relations with the claimants.

In the face of the JSA, the most combative dole workers, who also were those unionised, felt encouraged to take action, since it was officially the policy of their union (then the CPSA later the PCA) to oppose the JSA. Yet they faced the problem of their real fragmentation, powerlessness against their managers, and the resistance and hostility of conservative workers in their same workplace. Their struggle could not develop if limited only to their workplace, in the same way as our struggle as claimants could not develop further if limited only to fragmented and hapless claimants.

### 2.3 Rationale for BABC strategy

In Brighton the militancy of the local dole workers offered a chance for an alliance that had a real opportunity to develop a viable strategy against the new regime. Brighton Claimants' Action Group was one of the most active in the country but it was still tiny compared with the huge numbers of unemployed in the town. The militant JobCentre workers were keen to work alongside us and so Brighton Against Benefit Cuts (BABC) was born, an alliance of unemployed activists and militant dole workers who aimed to resist the JSA.

Our involvement in BABC was not simply a hope but based on an understanding of the potential of this particular situation. The militant dole workers were increasingly conscious of the contradiction of their position, not seeing themselves as opposed to the claimants, but opposed, instead, to their managers. This consciousness would potentially spread throughout their office if the conditions for this developed, if effective anti-JSA struggles effectively

undermined the power of their management, encouraged the workers, and marginalized the conservative elements.

An important catalyst for this alliance was the pre-existence of direct relations among us. Some of the most active dole workers shared our same social environment. This made us overcome any separation created by the relations we were supposed to maintain among us – we were not ‘claimants’ and ‘dole workers’, but friends who could trust each other without any feeling of separation created by their roles.

On the day the JSA came into force, all the Groundswell groups had decided to take action, but the biggest demo in the country was in Brighton; over 300 laid siege to the JobCentres, and dole-workers used it as an excuse to down tools, bringing the new system into chaos. This and subsequent Brighton demonstrations involving occupations of the JobCentres were based on a conscious co-ordination between claimants and JobCentre workers, with whom tactics were pre-arranged. JobCentre workers used the pretext of ‘health and safety’ regulations to close down the JobCentres for the whole day, something which we wanted to do but couldn’t have achieved on our own, since our crowds were usually relatively small and most claimants in even our biggest crowds were not as confrontational as they appeared. These tactics, and the regular sharing of information between JobCentre workers and claimants, were the basis of our continued effectiveness as a campaign.

The introduction a year later of a punitive quasi-workfare pilot scheme, named ‘Project Work’, in many areas of the country saw a re-invigoration of some Groundswell groups, which had otherwise fallen into a decline once the JSA was in place. The Brighton group held a small demo the day the ‘intensive job search’ component of the scheme began, in April 1997, again managing to close down the JobCentres, despite the meagre size of the crowd. When the job placements began, in August of that year, the group occupied the offices of the placement providers (the ‘training’ agencies who are paid for each placement they can find). The main tactic of the group, however, was to target the placement organizations themselves. The Brighton version of ‘Project Work’ involved the ‘voluntary’ sector, and therefore in many cases charity shops. Pickets of charity shops encouraging consumer boycotts forced some to pull out. The scheme in Brighton, poorly funded and vulnerable, was almost on the verge of collapse, prompting the Employment Service to draft in management reinforcements from London to shore it up. The police stepped up their harassment of claimants too, in a response that seemed disproportionate to the actual size of the campaign.

However, the viability of the small Brighton campaign appeared to be unrepresentative of what happened across the country as a whole, where Project Work continued despite the activities of the local claimants’ groups. Thus, even the introduction of a blatantly punitive workfare scheme which didn’t even pretend to provide jobs or give people training did not lead to the development of a movement of any significance.

Our intervention in the dole campaign was an objective-subjective experience, with both subjective and objective effects. First, we felt the excitement of the threat we posed to the bosses, as we closed JobCentres, forced them to involve the police, saw hundreds of claimants come together physically for the first time in decades and start

questioning their previously experienced haplessness. Generally we were seen as and felt ourselves to be subjects of a moving history.

Second, through their participation, the dole workers concretely challenged their already deteriorating view of themselves as ‘middle class’, and their identification with their management. This subjective development undermined the ‘truth’ of the ideologues, that is an assumed fixed separation of all dole workers on the one side, siding with their managers and the state, and all claimants on the other side. This ‘truth’, instead, began to be exposed as an aspect of the divide-and-rule mechanism on which capital had so far consolidated its power.

Thus subjective and objective are inseparable. Further, in Brighton subjective experience – such as excitement, understanding, and decisions – became objective *affordances* for the anti-JSA struggle. However, as we will see, the (subjective) ideology and choice of the radical activists elsewhere became an objective *hindrance* to the struggle against the JSA.

The Brighton radical claimants, who at the beginning shared at least in part the radical ideas of the radical claimants from other towns, started realizing a practical critique of those ideas, above all the separation of ourselves as ‘real’ proletarians’, from those at work, and the potential for struggle of this realization.

Despite the fact that our approach seemed to represent a viable strategy – we organized visible actions and were seen as a threat by JobCentre management – across the country, many of the other radical claimant groups in Groundswell seemed stuck in their activist ideology, and preferred to carry on their dual-track policy, paradoxically comprising of either covert ‘ducking-and-diving’ or extremely open threats of ‘Three-strikes’, which never appeared to us to be a viable strategy let alone one that could develop into something that could involve the wider claimant population.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the central problem of seeing us as separated from the dole workers, there was the continued hostility towards leftism, which, we have seen, had consolidated with the poll tax. The refusal on behalf of some radical claimants to get involved with the JobCentre workers as leftists and union activists was grounded in the ultra-left critique, but a critique which had crystallized into an ideology, to be repeated rather than engaged with.

In fact the most militant, the most reliable and the most willing to get stuck into the anti-JSA struggle in Brighton were leftists – members of Militant and other Trot sects. These organizations had been anathema to us, as they were for other radical groups; however, the way BABC was born had put this issue under question. Those workers who

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that all the Brighton campaign tactics were viable while all those of the local groups that opposed our alliance with JobCentre workers were not. For example the Edinburgh group was one of the more vibrant and active for a number of years, with good links with the wider claimant population, while maintaining its dole autonomy. And some of the Brighton group’s tactics either flopped – such as our phone tree to gather people to lay siege to JobCentre management (not front line staff) whenever there was a sanction – or were not fully or happily endorsed by the whole group – such as our support for the Benefits Agency staff strike against the removal of screens from their counters. See *Dole Autonomy*, op. cit.



actively planned and plotted with us against their managers were rank-and-file union members, and were not interested in ‘recuperating’ anything. The context was new, and this context served to create a more and more radical class consciousness in these workers. It increasingly separated them from their union leaders as the struggle escalated.

The leftism of the dole workers was in fact less of a problem for these critics of the Brighton strategy than the fact that they were dole workers. In fact, however, a critique of opportunism – the fact that we were working with leftists - might have been a more worthy thing to argue over.<sup>13</sup>

#### 2.4 Critique of the activist ideologue – material conditions and intervention

By failing to connect the radical claimants with the wider claimant population, ‘Three strikes’ served only to reproduce the gap between the activist ideologues and the ‘ordinary’ claimants and reinforce the isolation of the campaigners. At the same time, completing the vicious circle, the ‘Three strikes’ strategy served to confirm to the campaigners their being ‘revolutionary’, thus it glorified their separation from the ‘common’ world as being one with their practical haplessness.

To some extent, perhaps, ‘Three strikes’ also limited any alliance between dole workers and the unemployed in other areas of the country on the model of the one in Brighton. In those places where the (empty) threat of ‘Three strikes’ came to the attention of the JobCentres, it may have scared off those dole workers who might otherwise have linked up with claimants’ groups against their own management. At its worst, therefore, ‘Three strikes’ may have only reinforced the power and influence of management and union leaders, who were keen to demonstrate the most patronizing protective attitude to their workers in order to gain loyalty and in order to encourage their emotive separation from the claimants – functional to the implementation of the JSA.

The ultimate defeat of the claimants’ campaign, in the form of the successful implementation of the JSA, appeared confirmed in 1997 with the introduction of New Labour’s New Deal, which presented itself not as a punitive regime but as a series of claimant-friendly ‘options’ designed to get the ‘willing but unable’ unemployed ‘job-ready’ (and win over the TUC etc.) – though it created no new jobs (and certainly didn’t lead to the creation of any well-paid ones – in fact it boosted only low paid jobs) and itself was premised upon the iron fist of the JSA.

Yet the government success in implementing the New Deal was possible only because the anti-JSA movement had not been able to deliver a decisive and humiliating blow to the JSA and to the previous Tory ‘Project Work’ pilot scheme. One presupposition for the introduction of the New Deal therefore was the choices made in struggle by the various campaign groups across the country.

In defiance of the choice taken by those Groundswell groups who endorsed strategies of ‘duck and dive’ and ‘Three strikes’, rather than co-ordination with JobCentre workers, perhaps the material conditions in Brighton were

different than in other parts of the country. There was, it is true, an already existing militant mood among Brighton dole workers prior to the formation of BABC. We in fact do not know if an alliance between dole workers and claimants in other areas was so difficult because we don’t know how many of them seriously tried to do so – in fact we know that some didn’t seriously try. As such, this reconfirmed what was perceived as true beforehand. In a vicious circle, the fact that the dole workers could not count on any external solidarity contributed to their weakness and their apparent ‘need’ to stick to their managements. As mentioned, ‘Three strikes’ was in some sense a self-fulfilling prophesy in the way it assumed an opposition between claimants and JobCentre workers.

What one can understand as the ‘material conditions’ are neither purely objective or purely subjective conditions, but life in its entirety. This also includes, as we said earlier, choices and conscious thought – including the active interventions of elements of campaigners. A choice based on conditions assumed as inevitable is self-defeating, locks the subject up into a fetishism of already objectified relations, elevated as unchallengeable ‘material conditions’. Activist ideology then becomes a passive contemplation of the present relations.

As we mentioned earlier, our experience with BABC implied for us a rethinking of the ‘truths’ that we inherited from the past. This rethinking was a new moment, the moment of making theory – yet not a rumination of old truths but a reflection on the concrete reality that we had lived. This generated our pamphlet *Dole autonomy*.<sup>14</sup>

With *Dole autonomy*, a concept taken up by a number in the actually existing ultra-left, we were trying to describe (among other things) some of the more militant and radical effects of mass unemployment. The implicit (and perhaps unconscious) position of the majority of militant claimant activists who opposed our alliance with JobCentre workers and who wanted a separate unemployed campaign was that dole autonomy was the condition of the whole of the unemployed. They projected their own dole autonomy onto the recalcitrant unemployed, who were often individualized and subjectively powerless. This was reflected in the early suggestions on tactics – in particular ‘duck and dive’.

In writing *Dole autonomy* we developed a critique of the radical strategy of ‘duck and dive’ and of ‘Three strikes’, and the ideology underlying them. This critique of ideology, and our new understanding, was not based on simply applying a ‘more sophisticated’ theory, either Marx, Bordiga, Debord... or anyone else. It was not made of paper, but life - the experience of creating solidarity, building collective real power, the excitement of seeing the fragility of the state’s schemes in relation to our actions. But this critique was also based on the anger of losing this possibility, trying in vain to expand our viable strategy of resistance and coming up against brick wall made of perfectly ‘true and revolutionary’ ideas as we argued that the strategy should be more widely adopted if we had any chance of damaging the JSA!

Our critique of the activist ideologues in the campaign against the JSA was about their incapacity to see reality in terms of dynamic relations, not fixed in absolute.

<sup>13</sup> It is true that getting involved in absolutely anything can be opportunism. We refused to get excited by the lorry drivers’ fuel; blockades; while these actions did cause some chaos, we did not see it as a struggle with radical potential.

<sup>14</sup> The pamphlet is now out of print but is available on our website. See inside back page for details.

What the ideologues missed was, first, the acknowledgment that 'ordinary claimants' needed to be involved into a process in order to radicalize, and, second, the possibility of a radicalization of the dole workers.

In both cases what had to be challenged was the weakness of the class in itself, not yet constituted as a class for itself. It is the weakness of the dole worker that makes sense of their trade union consciousness and leftism. It is their weakness that makes sense of their antagonistic role face-to-face with the clamant. On the other side, it is the weakness of the claimant that makes sense of their inertia and feeling that nothing can be done. But the constitution of the class for itself is based on real experience of power, only realized by struggle, only by starting from the present conditions.

Our approach was in effect to start a process that would develop the dole workers' own contradictions, nurture their questioning of their policing role and consider direct action as part of a viable strategy – all this through practical involvement. Our approach also showed to the claimants that something could be collectively achieved.

Class struggle is the only solution to our 'objective' reliance on bourgeois representative structures (unions and parties), structure of power (the welfare state and eventually capital itself (the necessity of a waged job). All these 'objective' necessities can only be dissolved by building alternative direct relations of solidarity and by seizing material control of our reproduction. But this struggle can only start from the present conditions, involving those who feel, and are, limited by those 'objective' conditions.

### 3 Anti-war campaign actions 2002-3

#### 3.1 The background and the campaign

The mass campaign against the Iraq war began in Brighton with the Halloween events of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2002. This unruly, unruléd and unpredictable event set the tone for the rest of the campaign. We described the event briefly in *Aufheben* #12 (2004)<sup>15</sup>. We now add some background and an analysis of why events happened as they did in Brighton but perhaps not in the same way in other places.

The uplifting Halloween actions were followed by a children's mass action, which involved along the way a (partial) critique of school itself, a further evening action in the town centre on the day the war broke out, in which the town hall was partially invaded, and then a weekly street march which was never agreed with the police yet which they had to accept, redirecting traffic as though it was a legitimate march. In some ways these street marches became in the end somewhat ritualized as the campaign ran out of steam and ideas, but for a while they were exciting and unpredictable, carrying their participants along to new ways of thinking and acting. Was this a typical 'direct action' involving a (small) group of specialists? No. Was it a traditional boring lefty march? No. Yet the actions seemed to contain some of the best elements of both of these things: large numbers of people coming together and feeling more confidence in doing so; a lack of control from hacks; the threat of doing something (occupying certain sites rather than just marching from A to B) – and perhaps above all a general sense of power and politicization, irrespective of the

issue, in that we were able to assert ourselves against the police – marching in the road instead of on the pavement without permission. This set of actions defined the tone for police-protester relations in future events, thus encouraging further actions (e.g. the campaign against the arms manufacturers EDO).

However, the background to Halloween and its aftermath was equally interesting. As we said in our earlier article, the way various elements organized and came together was very different than that in the case of the war against Afghanistan:

In Brighton, in response to the war on Afghanistan, a number of different (relatively small) protest groups were formed, reflecting different political tendencies. The most radical anti-war group (comprising anarchists, communists etc.) became a constipated direct-action group, in large part because of internal political differences. By contrast, in response to the threat of war on Iraq, a larger more inclusive group, ['Sussex Action for Peace' (SAfP)], emerged despite such differences... The national Coalition called for actions on Halloween (October 31st 2002), but local groups decided what form these might take. The Brighton group proposed a 'Stop the City, Stop the War' action, which was originally intended as a small group direct action. However, it subsequently became a mass tactic, endorsed by the Brighton group as a whole. In effect, the Halloween action served to resolve all the factional differences, and pleased everyone. It defined the identity of the group as a whole. ('A phenomenal anti-war movement?', p. 31)

The failure previously of the different factions to organize together was understandable, however - in particular, the refusal of the direct activists to link up with those liberal-leftists who sought to involve the wider popular. For a number of years, the broader 'direct action' movement has been able to claim with some justification that direct action, particularly that characterized by the participation of only small ('affinity') groups, often clandestine, has been successful. The anti-roads, RTS and anti-GM<sup>16</sup> actions relied on such tactics, by contrast with which the traditional leftist march from A to B appeared boring and alienating, and was even more risky in terms of arrests. This then led to less emphasis on mass action and involving large numbers. But the truth and effectiveness of these small scale actions is in large part a function of the retreat of the working class, where, indeed, masses of people were less confident and willing.

However the retreat of the working class is not a constant. As we said in our original article:

The demonstration on February 15th 2002 against the threatened war on Iraq was the biggest protest march in British history. Almost unique in recent history, it was promoted beforehand by sections of the UK national media. The following day, the newspaper

<sup>15</sup> See 'A phenomenal anti-war movement?' (*Aufheben* #12, 2004)

<sup>16</sup> RTS = Reclaim the Streets; GM = genetically modified (crops). See 'The politics of anti-road struggle and the struggles of anti-road politics: The case of the No M11 Link Road Campaign' (*Aufheben*, 1994/1998)

front pages were dominated by pictures of all the thousands in the streets, such images being treated as far more eloquent than the accompanying hacks' commentary... The recent protests not only had a political impact, they also appeared to affect the subjectivity of many of those who took part in them. Many for the first time became interested in 'politics', and demanded to know more and to understand the wider world. This politicization seems to have been developing before the demonstrations themselves and was reflected in a general thirst for information. ('A phenomenal anti-war movement?', pp. 28-9)

The situation with the war against Iraq needed to be recognized as something different, and required reconsidering the nature of 'activism' and hence the kind of tactics we use - a process of 'thinking about' and reshaping aims and modes of action.



### 3.2 The grounds for a development of something new in Brighton – the background to Halloween

The anti-war movement of 2002-3 put into question again the separation of theory and practice for its participants. Our practical involvement in collaboration with a number of like-minded participants in SAfP worked toward a collective development of action based on practical theory, trying to challenge ideological limitations. Such a development culminated in a 3,000-strong mass action in Brighton, which broadened expectations and the consciousness of collective power in SAfP, and shattered the crystallized perspectives of both direct activists and leftists.

Yet, this development was missed by theoreticians and unrecognized by activist ideologues. Many theoreticians refused to 'mix' themselves up with non-revolutionary participants and missed the build up to the street protests, and the street protests themselves. Many activist ideologues participated in SAfP and at demonstrations as critical observers, standing in the sidelines, except for criticizing the words of some leaflets or, in some cases, producing some sterile critique.

As mentioned, a large group of activists with a background in direct action, were involved in SAfP. Initially, many of them were locked into the ideological understanding of involvement limited only to traditional clandestine, elitist actions, which had been for them, objectively, the only viable tactic until then, and which separated from 'ordinary

people'. At first they attended SAfP meetings only as delegates rather than full participants.

A number of leftists and liberals were involved in SAfP too, wrapped in their own ideology of practice, which saw the traditional march as the only possible kind of action to undertake.

Some of us from *Aufheben* also got involved, as we said, together with a group of like-minded participants. We shared a theoretical-practical background based on both the poll tax and the experience of BABC (see above), which had made us aware of the problems and potentials of working with those still limited by liberal and leftist perspectives. But our background also included our involvement with the new recent types of struggles based on direct action (in particular the anti-road movement), which had made us critically aware of both the importance and limitations of direct action. Importantly, those like us who had past involvement with the above struggles had also consolidated relations of trust with elements from both the leftist and the direct action sides of SAfP, which would be crucial later.

We accepted that direct action was an excellent answer to the leftist traditional kind of protest and could be of use in the anti-war campaign. However we could not accept the trap of separation between the ideological activist and the 'ordinary' world. Unlike the most ideological activists in SAfP, we tried to bridge the gap between ourselves and the 'ordinary world'. We got involved with the liberal-leftist side of the campaign, doing publicity and stalls with them, a kind of activity that ideological direct activists regarded as boring and useless. But it was not useless. By doing stalls and talking with 'ordinary people' in Brighton we realized a potential – a general readiness to get involved in something more radical than a traditional march. We then understood that the time was ripe to escalate the double limitation of the traditional leftists march and the small direct action into a mass direct action and actively worked towards this.

Some form of direct action was going ahead already – the direct activists in SAfP were already planning one for Halloween 2002. The liberal-leftist component of SAfP was also there, ready to do lots of publicity work and use their networks to build up a mass event. Those who had relations of trust with each of the two camps of SAfP and could see value in aspects of each of their approaches tried to act as catalysts. They convinced some of the activists that it was a good idea to give up clandestinity and open their direct action to the wider public, and they suggested to the liberal-leftists to do the work of publicizing this mass direct action as they would have done for a traditional march. These arguments worked because the conditions were there: both camps were potentially ready to overcome their initial scepticism, the success of Seattle (and, for the direct activists, J18) immediately coming to mind for all of them, an event at which different political elements (in this case black bloc and liberals) came together and complemented one another in one of the more successful and celebrated anti-capitalist actions.<sup>17</sup> This way, the mass action of 'Halloween' 2002 became a reality.

### 3.3 Critique of and effects on the ideological activists

<sup>17</sup> See 'Anti-capitalism as ideology... and as movement' (*Aufheben* #10, 2002).

Overcoming their own scepticism was not an easy step for the ideological activists. Many direct activists who had spent years learning painfully of the uselessness of marches and the necessity and effectiveness of small and/or clandestine actions only reluctantly accepted the general decision of the group. Even when the action had been publicized to the wider public, some still said they were going to turn up with their D-locks anyway. They did not expect large numbers to turn up, let alone to make a stand against the police in the way they did; they expected to have to do the militant action themselves. But in the face of so many people swarming the streets, stopping the traffic, resisting the cops, the direct activists' small scale approach was rendered irrelevant.

Importantly, however, the experience had affects on their own subjectivity. The real and exciting experience of outnumbering the police<sup>18</sup> made them look again at the nature of 'the right kind of activity', and the fact of being a part of a large event with people as confrontational as them, yet not from the 'direct action' background. They thought again about the division in their mind between people like themselves and the broader working class.

For the liberal-leftists in the campaign group, who had argued against any form of direct action, and had insisted in the past on liaising with the police when traditional marches were organized (in line with the law), there was also a change in consciousness. The involvement of large numbers of 'the public' in a mass action which was successful and popular (both in its own right and in building the movement) served to question their ideological adherence to the sanctity of the traditional boring march. After so many years when demos before had been forced on the pavement by the police (without any appreciable resistance), the simple fact of being able to walk in the road delighted them. There was a real excitement in discovering that limits that one had accepted as 'inevitable' could actually dissolve. Also, barriers between them and others changed – this time that between them as 'law-abiding' and the 'violent anarchists', who were found to work well together.

### 3.4 The role of conscious intervention and material conditions

For all those involved in SAfP, the experience of mass direct actions the emerged with Halloween was not only a practical experience: it implied a dialectic of praxis and understanding, which was experienced consciously. A stage of conscious realization, in the form of a tense debate, was bound to emerge as the new conditions started shattering consolidated ideas and beliefs of the various camps in SAfP.

This moment came in the aftermath of the mass protest of the 20 March 2003, when some protesters were able to force their way past police into the town hall. Immediately after this occupation, SAfP was presented with

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<sup>18</sup> The police were outnumbered at this time due to a problem they were then having with their budget. This budget problem undoubtedly contrinuted in allowing us to feel empowered. Not only were the police outnumbered, they were also disorganised, and panicking. In particular, the mass street action that occurred on the day the war began was exciting because we walked along the streets with no police in view at all. There were only two or three police at the town hall when we arrived. Those involved commented on this day and on the regular street marches that followed on the generally permissive and hand-off approach of the police.

a complaint from the civil servants' union UNISON about 'violence' in the demonstration. Expressing the most unbelievable fetishism of the commodity imaginable, UNISON whined about 'violence' with regard to the fact that some computers (i.e. things with *value*) got sprayed with paint inside the town hall; but at the same time they made no mention of the fact that, the same morning, motorists deliberately used their cars as weapons to assault and injure protesters, including a teenager, on the anti-war demo.<sup>19</sup>

SAfP could have split up the – the liberal-leftists renouncing their alliance with the direct activists as indisciplined trouble-makers with no concern for 'public opinion', the direct activists seeing their initial scepticism about working with liberals-leftist apologists for 'official channels' vindicated. But it didn't. The collective experience in SAfP was a real, concrete event that involved understanding real violence against people (us) as a *collectivity* – this was enough to encourage solidarity among us, in opposition to UNISON's uncritical position on the City Council's valuable possessions. During the discussion about that day's 'violence', four or five members of both the direct action and liberal-leftist camps gave accounts of violence from the police against them, and one of us reminded the meeting about the motorists' assaults. Unanimously SAfP rejected the complaints of 'violence' from UNISON. The meeting later formally sanctioned a decision not to split up with a letter written by a member of the direct action camp and read at a meeting by one of the leftists.

In this unanimous decision the different factions that had come together to make up the group dissolved in taking ownership of what had been experienced collectively. Even the (neo-)Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) members in SAfP rejected their Party's criticism of SAfP which the SWP had expressed by setting up a rival group, Hove Action for Peace. They neglected calls to recuperate the group, pack the meetings, etc. from an SWP hack in Hove Action for Peace. They preferred the positive experience they had had of real power in collective action, in contrast to the sterile, artificial and alienating discipline and mechanical strategy of the party line. This was a real victory against the power of leftism and the SWP that no ideologue could have achieved by keeping himself away and 'pure' from all leftists – in fact this was achieved by working with them!

Crucially, it wasn't just the events themselves but the sitting down and discussing and arguing that led ultimately to a reflection on both forms of ideological activism – one which privileged direct action and one which privileged 'respectable' boring marches.

Union criticisms of the Town Hall 'riot' in another circumstance or in the past might have easily served to

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<sup>19</sup> In and around this period, despite the inability of police to hinder the mass street actionse, their repressive threats to 'law-abiding liberal pacifists' played a significant role in the latter's politicization. One woman involved in SAfP was harassed by the police after the Halloween events, by them for example threatening to cancel her children's carnival event. The significant point, however, is that this occurred because these 'law abiding liberals' had been successfully encouraged to get involved in what was in effect a mass direct action – thus they were defined by the police as a legitimate target of harassment in the same way as any other direct activist. They were positioned as, and became, radicals.

undermine any attempted alliance between liberal-leftists and direct activists, highlighting their ideological differences and divisions over the meaning of ‘activism’. As we have suggested, the ‘material conditions’ – the public mood for mass criticism and confrontation – were conducive to allow the ideological activists to transcend their own limitations. However in this context these ‘material conditions’ did not *determine* the events in and of themselves. The events would have not happened without the decision of elements of ‘the actually existing ultra-left’, to get involved, to go to the meetings and get involved in the arguments. In other places, in particular London, where radical groups such as ‘No War but the Class War’ opted not to get involved in the wider campaign but remained separate, the movement was bound to be controlled by the leftist SWP and their ilk by default.

### 3.5 Postscript and reflection on the anti-war movement

At the national level the struggle against the war remained a liberal-leftist one, dominated by a preference for tokenistic traditional marches, and the opportunity to capitalise on the upsurge in the ‘public’ anger and willingness to act was missed. In this context, the actions of the Brighton group, while exciting and promising initially, could not escalate into anything else, and eventually degenerated into an endless repetition of ‘mass actions’ that became ritualized and eventually shrunk.

However, although the movement did not evolve much further, Halloween meant a lot for Brighton and for our future struggles, as mentioned above. In terms of the leftist ideological activists, the SWP and their ilk (the national Stop the War Coalition) were able to recuperate the anti-war movement as a law-abiding and police-liaising thing only in new conditions – when mass participation had fizzled out. In terms of the direct action ideological activists, the direct action strategy lost its isolation. In the following year, the campaign against the arms manufacturer EDO developed into a struggle about protest itself. As well as radicalization and confidence developing amongst its participants who were also involved in Halloween and its aftermath, the anti-EDO campaign developed connections with other struggles around this issue of ‘the right to protest’ and the role and function of the police.<sup>20</sup> The anti-EDO campaign was in part fought (and won) in the legal arena, when the police and EDO tried to serve injunctions on just about anyone protesting about anything to do with the war, but the campaign could only win thanks to this vast political support. The anti-EDO campaign will no doubt influence the way other protests and campaign develop in the UK.

## 4 Towards a conclusion

All human activity is conscious. One of the defining features of being human is the reflexive ability to think about what we do, to debate possibilities, to make plans, to devise rationales, and to do things differently for different reasons. We can think about what we do beforehand, monitor it as we do it, and step back and reflect upon it afterwards. What Marx said of human labour applies to human activity in general – that it is more than ‘instinctual’, and involves the

concrete reproduction of ideas, as we reflect upon what we are doing and consider alternatives:

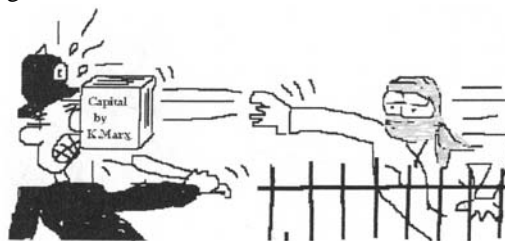
A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement.

(*Capital*, Volume One, Chapter 7, p. 284, Penguin edition)

While practice is always conscious, at the same time it can be more or less *ideological*. Theory - consciousness in living feedback with the acted-upon-world - becomes ideology when ideas become crystallized and ultimately mystificatory and self-defeating.

If these points have any truth, they must also apply to ‘political’ practice and ‘activism’ – i.e. the practice of people involved in struggles, campaigns, movements, ‘political’ activities. In fact, perhaps they apply even more so. ‘Political’ practice is intervention which entails not only such everyday practical organization activities as networking, meeting, building trust in relationships, confronting our enemies together, but also ideas and arguments – about how to approach our enemy, what kind of ‘campaign’ or group we are, and how we talk about ourselves to others outside the campaign to get them involved.

We therefore understand theory as part of struggle. It is indeed our rationale for our ends and means. Hence particular theories are bound up with particular political practices. But it goes deeper. How we understand theory itself interrelates with our practice. How far is it part of necessary intervention, a passive reflection of or just a crystallized understanding of intervention? At its most adequate it should go beyond a one-sided emphasis on holding on to theory as ‘correct understanding’ – i.e. it should be practical – but also beyond a one-sided emphasis where particular forms of practice are fetishized – i.e. it should be dynamic. Theory as theory is living not crystallized; it is a reflective moment of practical engagement with an intervention in the world.

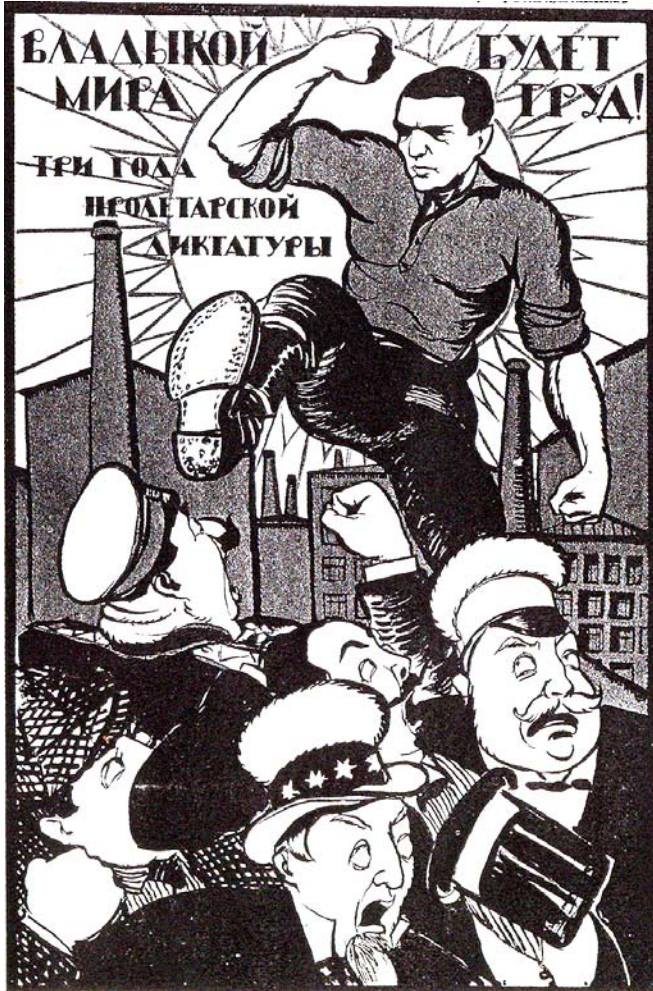


<sup>20</sup> When the conditions for a mass action fizzle out, small direct action returns as a tactic that makes sense. However, after Halloween, this tactic was not considered as exclusive anymore.

# 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:

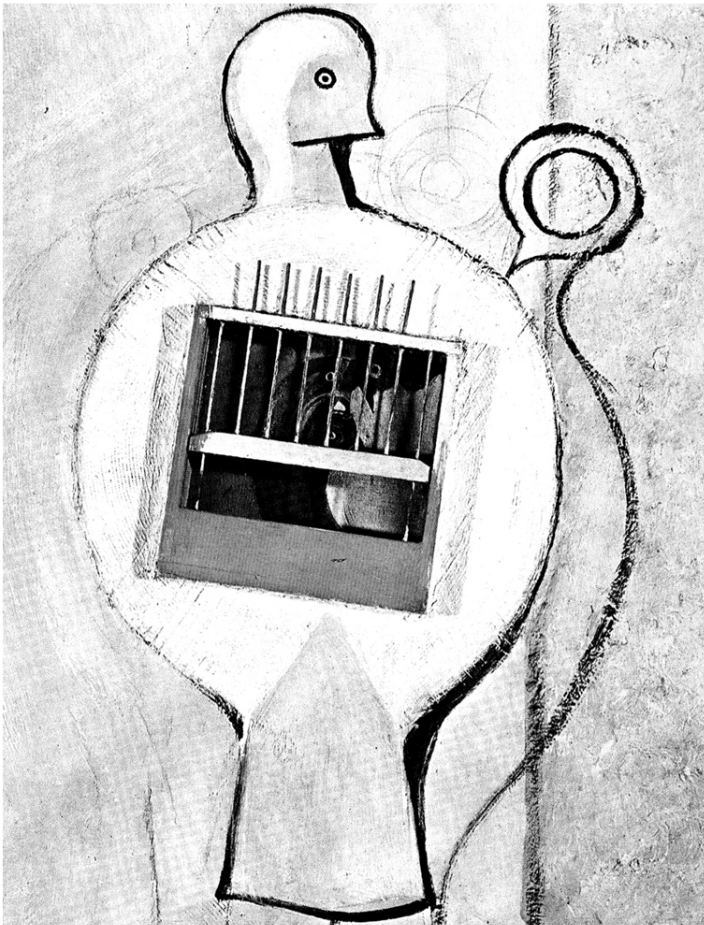
'The initial determination of such abstract social compulsion is that *individuals* are compelled to *produce and exchange* commodities in order to survive. This compulsion is not... direct... rather, a function of "abstract" and "alienated" social structures and represents a form of abstract impersonal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

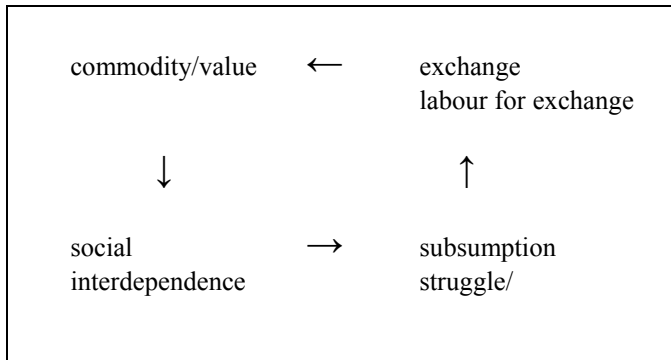
### 2.3 Object and subject as part of a subjective-objective mechanical machine<sup>23</sup>

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:

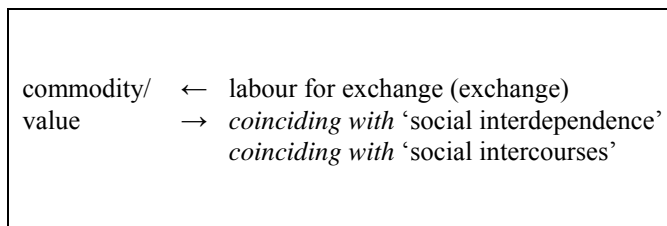
<sup>22</sup> In the same way, Postone fetishises time as something that is able to ‘organise much of social life’ (Postone, p. 216). In fact time can be conceived as it is today *because* our social relations are organised as they are. This is commodity fetishism in another version. As we will see in 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.

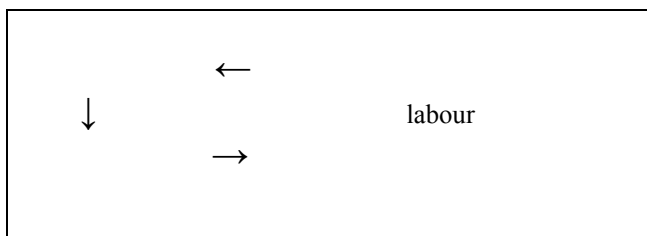


into something like this:



'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-valorising

<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 read 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.

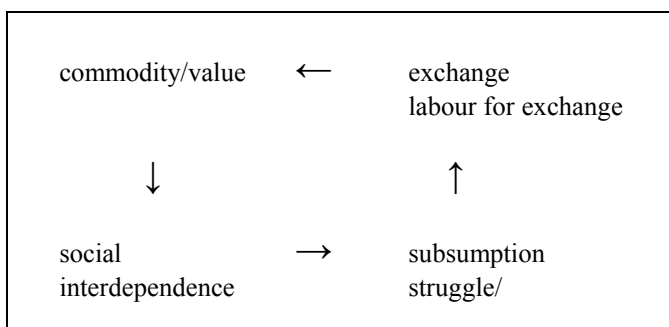
But Postone's solution of his riddle is a desperate solution. Postone has to ground his idea of revolutionary consciousness on an abstract view of the real, which escapes the logic of capitalism only because it is so one-sided that it *cannot fully reproduce the capitalist reality in our mind*. In reality 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

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>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).

<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 nor 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.

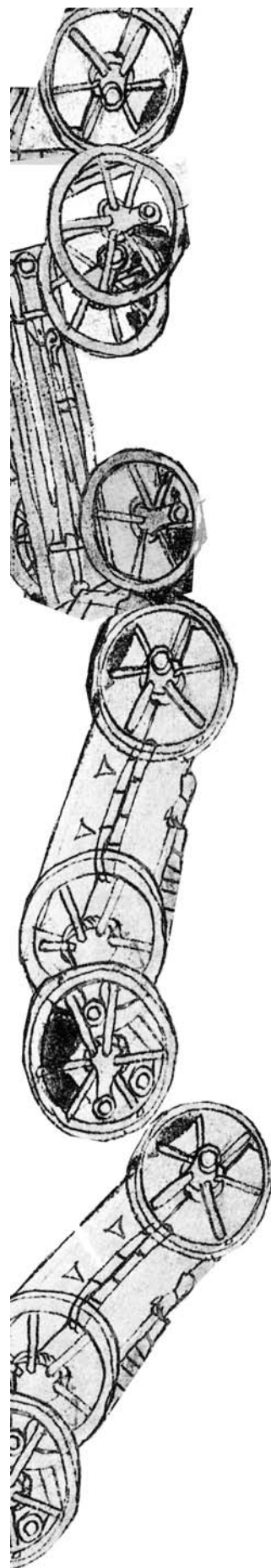
<sup>55</sup> All which was very convenient to the fat Stalinists bureaucrats, who, strategically, did not wear tall hats.

<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