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Subject and Counter-Subject

Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is a rich text containing much of interest that I cannot discuss here (for example, the notion of 'abstract time'). I wish to respond to just two of its central ideas. First, he argues that capital is the self-constituted 'Subject' of our epoch, glossing 'Subject', and its movement, in the Hegelian sense. Here, I agree one hundred per cent. Second, he denies that the critique we require is to be rooted in the social standpoint of the proletariat. Here, I disagree fifty per cent.

The Hegelian Subject

To begin with, then, let us review Postone's position on the 'subject' of our epoch and the relevance of Hegel in this. The debate on the relation of Hegel and Marx has too often been posed as a rigid dichotomy: if Marx was not a Hegelian, then he must have rejected all Hegel's insights, with any residue of Hegel's turns of phrase being merely stylistic and insubstantial; conversely, if Marx's debt to Hegel was real, then Hegel's method must be taken on board wholesale and Marx's disagreement with Hegel obtains only at the substantive level of social analysis.

Postone takes a middle position through the strategic relocation of Hegelian dialectic from a universal logic to a specifically capitalist one. What Hegel presented in affirmative terms as the historical process of the self-realisation of Spirit, Postone presents critically as the specifically capitalist development of the domination of totalising abstraction. 'Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism . . . that the social relations that characterize capitalism . . . possess the attributes that Hegel accorded the *Geist*'.¹ In other words, Hegel grasped the contradictory social forms of capitalism but 'not in their historical specificity'.² Thus:

The structure of the dialectical unfolding of Marx's argument in *Capital* should be understood as a metacommentary on Hegel. Marx did not 'apply' Hegel to classical political economy but contextualized Hegel's concepts in terms of the social forms of capitalist society.³

Whereas a simple inversion of Hegel produces a materialist philosophy of history founded in some a priori dialectical schema, the real achievement of Marx's critique of political economy is to socially specify the forms which Hegel's concepts absolutise and idealise. In these forms a historical 'logic' can indeed be seen; but it is one restricted to the parameters of capitalist development, because its social forms are uniquely constituted through material abstraction in a way that grounds a dialectic. The method corresponds to the object. Postone also correctly argues that the object is developed capitalist society; only there do we see 'a totalizing category', namely value.⁴ As Postone says,

other social formations are not so totalized: their fundamental social relations are not qualitatively homogeneous. They cannot be . . . unfolded from a single structuring principle, and they do not display an immanent, necessary historical logic.⁵

Postone rightly twits those 'post-Marxists' and 'postmodernists' who deny the validity of the category of totality, as if Hegel and Marx were at fault; whereas Hegel, uncritically, and Marx, critically, reflect the totalising logic of the value-form which imposes itself in such a manner that all relationships

¹ Postone 1993, p. 75.

² Postone 1993, p. 81.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Postone 1993, p. 271.

⁵ Postone 1993, p. 79.

become inscribed within it. Value 'is not merely a regulator of circulation, nor a category of class exploitation alone; rather, as self-valorizing value, it shapes the form of the production process and grounds the intrinsic dynamic of capitalist society'.⁶

It follows that Marx has identified a most peculiar 'Subject' in capital, which has strong affinities with the Hegelian 'Spirit'. 'Marx's Subject, like Hegel's, is abstract and cannot be identified with any social actors. Moreover, both unfold in time in a way that is independent of individual will'.⁷ This dialectic of development therefore 'presents itself as a logic'.⁸ In this way, far from inverting Hegel's idealist dialectic, Marx gives it a 'materialist' justification. 'Marx implicitly attempts to show that the "rational core" of Hegel's dialectic is precisely its idealist character: it is an expression of a mode of social domination constituted by structures of social relations which . . . acquire a quasi-independent existence'.⁹

However, there are differences with Hegel also to be noted.

Whereas Hegel's Subject is transhistorical and knowing, in Marx's analysis it is historically determinate and blind. . . . It has no ego. . . . It does not possess self-consciousness. Subjectivity and the socio-historical Subject must be distinguished.¹⁰

Postone is to be congratulated on searching for the disanalogies here. Too often, commentators content themselves with referring to capital as a 'quasi-subject'; but this is not good enough; the force of each term needs explicating in more precise terms, as we have just seen with Postone. However, in this passage, the qualifications to the basic thesis seem so strong it is unclear what remains of such a 'Subject' if there is no ego, no self-consciousness, no knowing, and no subjectivity. Agency without self-consciousness or subjectivity we might wish to attribute to animals whose activity secures their subsistence, just as capital bent on self-valorisation preserves and increases its 'substance' through reflexively incorporating its increment. But is this tendency to self-preservation enough to constitute a subject?

From a Hegelian point of view, the most abstract capacity of a subject, that which makes possible its freedom, is the capacity to range things under their

⁶ Postone 1993, p. 278.

⁷ Postone 1993, p. 76.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Postone 1993, p. 81.

¹⁰ Postone 1993, p. 77.

universal concept, and treat them accordingly. It is the way heterogeneous commodities are posited by capital as bearers of value and surplus-value, the universal substance of capital, and the way the production process is shaped so as to maximise valorisation, that means we are faced with a 'Subject' here, albeit of a 'logical' kind rather than a flesh and blood one. Moreover, the complementary moments of consciousness, knowing, etc., are secured insofar as this structure of valorisation imposes its logic on the personifications of capital, namely owners and managers.

Postone's account of the relation between Hegel and Marx I find convincing; not surprisingly, because it accords with the view I have myself developed.¹¹ However, it is also my view that the claim that Marx's work can be read as a transposition of Hegel's needs a good deal of detailed development. Only then does it get to grips with the subject matter concerned and succeed, or not, in illuminating it. The project of expounding the dialectic of capital in detail is fraught with difficulty, and it leaves much room for divergence and controversy.

A good illustration of the difficulties involved in appropriating Hegel's metaphysics is provided by Postone's treatment of Marx's references to 'substance'. There are three passages cited. First Postone reminds us that, in 1845, Marx made fun of Hegel's speculative construction of 'substance as subject'.¹² He then points out that Marx had evidently changed his mind by 1867, and he cites two passages containing the term 'substance'.¹³ But Postone has not understood that these are *different* from each other and *different again* from the context of 1845.

The first is the well-known passage in Chapter One of *Capital* referring to value as having a 'substance', which Marx identifies with abstract human labour. The second is from Chapter Four, in which Marx refers to 'value' as 'an automatic subject' and 'as a self-moving substance'. Postone comments:

Marx . . . characterizes capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject.

In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism.¹⁴

Notice the slippage here from 'value' in the quotation to 'capital' in the comment; however, this is of no moment because, in this section, Marx is

¹¹ See Arthur 1993, Arthur 2000a, Arthur 2002, and Arthur 2003.

¹² Marx 1975 [1845], pp. 57–61; compare Hegel 1949 [1807], pp. 80–4; Marx is also very critical of Hegelianism in Marx 1976 [1847], pp. 162–5.

¹³ Postone 1993, p. 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

discussing precisely how 'value becomes capital'.¹⁵ More seriously, Postone has failed to observe that there is a slippage of reference in the two *Capital* chapters from 'abstract labour' to 'value'. Moreover, in my opinion, this is not, in fact, a slippage because it is better understood as two different senses of the term 'substance'. This is a notoriously slippery term. There are three senses to be discriminated here.

First there is the Aristotelian sense in which substance is associated with what is self-subsistent, exists on its own account, and supports 'accidents'. In this sense, every human being is a different substance, whereas their 'colour' would be an accident. This is the sense which Spinoza absolutised. For him, there is only one universal substance which appears in different ways. This, moreover, is the sense that appears in Hegel's *Logic* as the culminating category of the Doctrine of Essence, distinguished therefore from 'Being' on the one hand, and 'Concept' on the other. It is also surely the sense in which *value is itself a substance* in the second *Capital* passage. Another sense of substance, that in which it contrasts with form, is a more everyday one, referring to what things are 'made of', the clay as opposed to the pot shaped from it. I suggest Marx's contrast in Chapter One between substance and form of value means this is the sense he is using when he speaks of abstract labour as the substance of *value*. Thirdly, there is the sense found in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, in which 'substance' is contrasted with 'subject', and which is mocked by Marx in 1845. Here, substance is what appears phenomenally over against the knowing subject. The trick, says Hegel, is to overcome this dichotomy by 'grasping substance as subject'. In my view, while, with M-C-M, a subject has emerged, the Hegelian sense in which it is united with its 'substance' is best applied to capital's real subsumption of the production process by the purposes of valorisation.

On a single page, then, Postone deploys all three senses, but as if they were all the same. However, they must be carefully distinguished, and deployed in their appropriate contexts.

Here, I just state briefly that my own insight about the relevance of Hegel is that the purity of the ontological forms idealistically developed in his logic up to the all-encompassing 'Idea' (which then is shown in Hegel's *Realphilosophie* to embody itself in the external world) is exactly paralleled by the dialectic of the value-form (constituted through the abstractive power of exchange)

¹⁵ Marx 1976, pp. 255–6.

up to the general formula for capital (which then appropriates material production and forms it as a valorisation process).

Abstract labour

On my view, capital is self-mediating, albeit on the basis of the exploitation of labour. The totalising category is value; this appears in commodity-form, money-form, and the capital-form; then it gives itself a 'substance' in labour. But I think the exact relation between 'value' and 'labour' is hard to pin down.¹⁶

Unhappily, I do not find a perspicuous account in Postone's book. As I read, I find continual ambiguity as to which category is fundamental to the social totality and its mediations. In earlier quotations, I have chosen those from Postone in which value is assigned this place. But, more commonly, he assigns it to labour. This is not because he relies on some historical-materialist thesis about the centrality of productive activity to the constitution of all social formations, but because he holds that in capitalism, specifically, 'labour' is socially constitutive.

Anyway I cannot see how to make compatible the following two assertions: 'Labor grounds its own social character in capitalism by virtue of its historically specific functions as a socially mediating activity. In that sense, labor in capitalism becomes its own social ground';¹⁷ and 'Value is . . . an objectified, self-mediating form of social relations'.¹⁸

If, as Postone sees, capital is the subject, and only its totalising activity posits value as an actuality and abstract labour as a practical truth, then it seems plausible to argue that labour is not the *self*-mediating social ground, but rather a moment in the self-mediation of capital, with value as both origin and product of this subject.

If one says labour creates value, and then falls victim to its creation, one could then have labour as self-mediating, with the inflection that its mediations are alienating so it becomes through its own activity alienated and alienating. This was Marx's position in 1844, when he had not comprehended the self-constitutive power of capital as a subject. *But*, if one says capital creates value, with labour as its negatively posited sublated ground, then labour is victim

¹⁶ For germane discussion, see Arthur 2001.

¹⁷ Postone 1993, p. 151.

¹⁸ Postone 1993, p. 154.

of capital's self-positing through absolute negativity, constituted *by capital* as an abstract totality, its shadow side.

However, if one tracks Postone's original introduction of the topic, it seems that he prioritises abstract labour over capital and that is why it is its own social ground. He introduces the notion of abstract labour in a different way from Marx, who brings it in as the substance of value. Rather, Postone argues that, in generalised commodity exchange, labour is abstract in the sense that, while its own activity is concrete and produces a specific product, it appears socially as a means of acquisition of any and every product through the exchange mechanism; hence its concrete specificity is displaced, and it takes on a form of abstract generality. It is only because all labours taken thus are integrated in a social totality that their products take the form of value.¹⁹

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

My view is that capital posits itself as its own product, but in so doing covertly presupposes both labour and nature as its conditions of existence. These repressed others will take their revenge in the short (revolution) or long (ecological collapse) run.

The standpoint of critique

In his *Capital*, Marx explained that his critique represented the standpoint of 'the class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of

¹⁹ Postone 1993, pp. 148–52. An issue on which Postone is very brief is that of Stalinist social formations. He simply asserts without argument that value is not a category of 'liberal capitalism' alone (Postone 1993, p. 278), and that the job done by markets in the historical genesis of commodity production need not be essential and could be replaced by an administrative machine (Postone 1993, p. 291). I find this implausible. Possibly, he has in mind here the argument that, if the 'logic' of capital becomes 'materialized' (Postone 1993, p. 280) in industry, and hence 'industrial production is the materialization of capital' (Postone 1993, p. 352), then all industrial production must be capitalist. But this is an obvious fallacy. It is similar to the position advanced in Mészáros 1995, which I have rebutted in Arthur 2000b.

production and the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat'.²⁰ He does not amplify there the reason for this, but I think it can be safely assumed he still held the view he expressed more than a quarter of a century earlier. 'The proletariat is compelled . . . to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property. . . . It is the *negative* side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property'.²¹ The main reason for revolt is not so much that labour does not get its proper return, it is rather the revolt *against* labour:

In all revolutions up till now the mode of activity remained unchanged and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons, whilst the communist revolution is directed against the hitherto existing *mode* of activity, does away with *labour* . . .²²

However, it is important to realise that, at this date, by 'labour' Marx did not mean free productive activity but its alienation in systems of private property and the social division of labour.²³ This usage of 'labour' is – unfortunately, in my view – dropped in the later Marx, where it is no longer free productive activity, but in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 'labour' that is 'life's prime want'. Thus, 'alienated labour' in the early writings is something of a pleonasm, but not in the later writings.

Now, Postone disagrees entirely with Marx's standpoint of critique, although, strangely, he does not acknowledge this. Rather, he claims 'The logic of Marx's presentation does not support the notion that the proletariat is the revolutionary Subject'.²⁴ He does so because he thinks it follows from the fact that 'labour' is a determinant of the value system that, therefore, the proletariat cannot be the social standpoint of critique. His fatal mistake is to go from 'capital cannot be grasped *fully* in terms of class *alone*' – from this 'fully' and this 'alone' – to complete rejection of the relevance of class struggle for socialism. The

²⁰ Marx 1976, p. 98.

²¹ Marx 1975 [1845], p. 36.

²² Marx and Engels 1976 [1846], p. 52.

²³ Incidentally, Postone wrongly asserts that Marx treated 'labor transhistorically' in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 (Postone 1993, p. 74). To the contrary: 'labour' there is Marx's term for the specifically capitalist form of productive activity. Moreover Postone misreads also Marx's reference to Hegel's labour of the concept affirmatively, whereas Marx was referring to Spirit's journey through alienation, what Hegel called in the *Phenomenology* 'the labour of the negative'. (These points are exhaustively documented in my book Arthur 1986.)

²⁴ Postone 1993, p. 325.

central claim of his book is that, whereas ‘traditional’ Marxism criticises capitalism from the standpoint of labour, with Marx, labour in capitalism is ‘the object’ of critique.²⁵

The conclusion he draws is that the working class is ‘integral to’ capitalism and its development, rather than ‘the embodiment of its negation’.²⁶ Capital rests on proletarian labour, hence, Postone argues in a wonderful non sequitur, ‘overcoming capital cannot be based on the self assertion of the working class’.²⁷ Of course it can! Workers are *in and against* capital; bearers of its forms to be sure, but always incipiently in revolt against such ‘interpellation’.

Postone’s contrast between a standpoint of labour, and a critique of labour, is a false antithesis. Insofar as labour grasps itself as the ground of its own oppression it undertakes a *self-critique*. Thereby, the social standpoint of labour gives rise to a self-transcending movement. Thus Marx’s position I characterise as ‘the critically adopted standpoint of labour’.²⁸ Even if labour was entirely subsumed (which it never is in practice) by capital, although it is an activity the proletariat is forced to undertake, it is distinct from the class undertaking it. The critique is from the standpoint of labour considered as the negative: both negative to capital, in that capital must produce it as *alienated labour*, and negative to the workers who are disposed to be recalcitrant to capital’s imposition on them of alien labour.

Thus, while all Postone’s points about the integrality of ‘labour’ as a category to the existing social totality are well taken, there is nothing about this that disqualifies the proletariat from forming itself as a counter-subject to capital, and rebelling against wage-slavery. Indeed, no one is more aware of this than capital itself, which certainly does not rely only on ‘dull economic compulsion’ to secure labour services, but actively seeks to atomise and demobilise its potential ‘gravediggers’. In Michael Lebowitz’s superb phrase, it must continually ‘negate its negation’.²⁹

The secret of critique lies in uncovering the repressed ‘others’ of capital that it pretends to have reduced to sublated moments, namely land and labour, and in basing the breakout from capitalism on the self-assertion of the proletarian counter-subject.

²⁵ Postone 1993, p. 388.

²⁶ Postone 1993, p. 389.

²⁷ Postone 1993, p. 371.

²⁸ Arthur 1986, p. 145.

²⁹ Lebowitz 1992, p. 85.

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