

# **An interview with Moishe Postone: That Capital has limits does not mean that it will collapse**

**Agon Hamza &  
Frank Ruda**

**Q:** Your work establishes a crucial distinction between the critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour and the critique of labor in capitalism. The former implies a transhistorical account of work, while the latter situates labor as a consistent category - capable of "social synthesis" - within the capitalist mode of production.

Does this distinction require us to abandon any form of ontological account of labour?

**M.P.** It depends what you mean by an ontological account of labour. It does force us to abandon the idea that transhistorically there is an on-going development of humanity which is effected by labour, that human interaction with nature as mediated by labour is a continuous process which is led to continuous change. And that labour is in that sense a central historical category. That position is closer actually to Adam Smith than it is to Marx. I think that the centrality of labour to something called historical development can be posited only for capitalism and not for any other form of human social life. On the other hand, I think one can retain the idea that humanity's interaction with nature is a process of self-constitution.

**Q:** In what sense you would say that there is a possible account of labour in terms of constitution? It is something that one can find in early Marx that points out in that direction.

**M.P.** Yes, and it seems to me

that once Marx historicizes the centrality of labour to an on-going process of development, that in itself doesn't obviate the idea that labour is the process of self-constitution. It just wouldn't be tied to a notion of historical development and constant improvement in labour.

**Q:** One of the most important contributions of *Time, Labor and Social Domination* is a novel theory of impersonal domination in capitalist society. In light of this irreducibly abstract form of domination, could we not invert - or perhaps add a new torsion - to Marx's famous definition of fetishism as "relations between people appearing as relations between things"? Is the capitalist form of domination not better defined as the appearance of truly abstract relations as if they were concrete, personal relations? Furthermore, does this inversion, or at least the recognition of the crucial role of abstraction in capitalism, render a definition of class struggle untenable, or are we rather in need of a concept of class that takes this distance from the concrete into consideration?

**M.P.** I am not sure that I would fully agree with the attempted reformulation. First of all, with regard to the quote "relations between people appearing as relations between things" what is left out of this version of what Marx said is that he adds that relations among people appear *as they are*, as social relations between things and

thingly relations between people. Marx only explicitly elaborated the notion of fetishism with the fetishism of commodity. All three volumes of *Capital*, are [our change] in many respects, however, a study on fetishism even when he doesn't use that word. And fetishism means that because of the peculiar, double character of the structuring social forms of capitalism, social relations disappears from view. What we get are thingly relations: we also get abstractions. However, one dimension of the fetish is, as you put it, that abstract relations appear concrete. They appear in the form of the concrete. So, for example, the process of creating surplus value appears to be a material process, the labour process. It appears to be material-technical, rather than moulded by social forms. And yet there are also abstract dimensions and regularities that don't appear in the form of the concrete. I am emphasising this is because certain reactionary forms of thought only view capitalism in terms of those abstract regularities and refuse to see that the concrete itself is moulded by, and is really drenched with, the abstract. I think a lot of forms of populism and anti-Semitism can be characterised that way. Now I am not sure that this appropriation of the categories of Marx's critique of political economy renders a definition of class struggle untenable, but it does indicate that class struggle occurs within and is moulded by the structuring social forms. This position rejects the ontological centrality or the primacy of class

struggle, as that which is truly social and real behind the veil of capitalist forms. Class struggle rather is moulded by the capitalist relations expressed by the categories of value, commodity, surplus value, and capital.

**Q:** One of your famous and often discussed thesis or claims is that impersonal domination in capitalism, as Marx also famously stated, is exerted by time and hence the critique of political economy ultimately becomes the critique of the political economy of time itself. For a standard philosopher educated in pre-Hegelian, that is Kantian German Idealism this cannot but come as surprise: what Kant considered to be an *a priori* given form of intuition must be radically historicized and might precisely have -as one could argue with Sohn-Rethel – only have its *a priori* status because it was historically posited as an *a priori*. Could one therefore say from your perspective that not all history is the history of class struggle, but all class struggle is the class struggle about history and more precisely about time? About which transcendental temporal framework one is living in? And thus the first step to break out of the capitalist transcendentalization of time (making it into an *apriori* grounding what you call “historical time”) is to demonstrate (critique by means of *Darstellung* as Marx had it) that what we consider to be natural (time) is itself a historical product, that is to say: that there is no TIME AS SUCH (time is

essentially relative and should never be naturalized)? This insight then could be the very condition for emancipation from what appears to be an unchangeable because natural regime of time.

**M.P.** Yes but I would add that the nature of class struggle about time shifts historically. That is to say, one could argue, and in many respects someone like E.P. Thompson did argue, that a great deal of early working class struggles were struggles against a new regime of time that was being introduced. It was a struggle against the regime of abstract time as disciplinary, as it were. However, within several generations, (and of course I am being completely schematic) working class struggles become struggle within the framework of abstract time itself, they become struggles for the length of the working day. In a sense such struggles already presuppose the existence of the working day, in abstract time units and so became quantitative struggle within that given framework. In terms of what I have argued about the possible abolition of that temporal regime, which I related to the possible abolition of proletarian labour, the historical possibility of the self abolition of proletariat emerges in ways that would begin to point beyond the existing framework of time. Whereas industrial class struggle, occurred within this framework of time.

**Q:** Could one reformulate that such that the proletariat is not struggling

with another class (like with the bourgeoisie) but rather with the bourgeois world and its conception of time whereby the very self-abolition of the proletariat would change that very world and thereby would change the constitutive conception of time of this world. Would that be in your sense?

**M.P.:** Definitely, absolutely. That becomes more difficult for people to see in periods like today, where there are enormous inequalities. So that they think the struggle is against the 1%. But I agree completely.

**Q:** How does your account of time as “independent variable” or abstract time and as “dependent variable” or concrete time, relate to standard and rather trivial dimensions of time, namely past, present and future. You indicated that with the development of technology an hour of work can become intensified, denser, condensed and such that there is specific relation between to historically determined forms of time, so there seems to be a quantitative intensification that may ultimately even lead to a qualitative leap into the converse direction, such that at one point this is precisely where there might even arise a possibility for overcoming and liberating the worker from work, when technology reaches a point where the worker is no longer needed? Would you agree with this trivializing reconstruction? If so or even if not so, how does your analysis of time in and under

capitalism relate to analyses of contemporary capitalism that seek to demonstrate how capitalism subtracts one or maybe even more than one dimension of time, such that there is a peculiar absence not only of future (as the no-future attitude asserts), but rather of a proper present (and therefore even of a proper past)?

**M.P.:** The time(s) of capital are of a complex dynamic, that entails at one and the same time ongoing and accelerating transformations, which are not only technological but of all spheres of life on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the reconstitution of the fundamental basis of capital itself. That process of reconstitution of the basis of capitalism within the framework of Marx's critique is the reconstitution of labour, not only as the source of the value form of wealth but, relatedly, of labour as the necessary socially mediating activity which gives rise to an entire structure of abstract domination. I suggested that people tend to view only one dimension of this complex dialectic: either they notice that the more things change the more they remain the same, everything is just this constant featureless desert of the present, or they become very excited about everything solid melting into air, about how everything is acceleration. The actual trajectory of capital's development within the framework of the theory, as I understand it – and this is particularly powerful – should not be understood with reference to

the one nor the other but as both at the same time. This means that it is not a linear development. There are growing shearing pressures, as one would say in physics, that are internal to the system. Both the form of production and the sense of historically constituted possibilities have to be understood with reference to what I call the shearing pressures of capitalist developments. Does this make sense?

**Q:** It does. So, could one say that certain contemporary theoretical positions that appear under the name “accelerationism”, a position that assumes that one needs to embrace the contradictory tendencies of capital and accelerate their production on all levels is just like a fantasy of overcoming capitalism from within the very functioning of capitalism and thus cannot but stick to its very dynamic?

**M.P.:** Well, even there, I would have to disarticulate several moments in your description that were fused together. This dialectical dynamic that I outlined is a contradictory one, that is, it generates an increasing contradiction between the potential of the system and its actuality. The fact that there is a limit to capital does not mean that capital collapses. Rather the limit is an asymptotic curve, you get closer and closer to an absolute limit but you never reach it. If transformation is going to occur, it has to occur because people caught in the contradiction between what

is and what could be, look to the what could be, to the future, rather than remaining fixated on what they think was the past. In a sense, much of the left, in this regard and from this standpoint, is becoming conservative. What I mean by this is that their standpoint is the past. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, many anticapitalist movements looked to the past. They had a glorified picture of a society of peasants, the organization of which was just. Such a society never existed, of course. And it was the work of intellectuals associated with the working class movement who saw very clearly that there was no going back. However, many of those associated with working class movements, based in part on reading the *Communist Manifesto* assumed that the working class was just going to expand indefinitely and encompass most people. Finally, society would be composed of 1% bourgeoisie and the workers would take over. This, however, is not the case and is not going to be the case. And what we are faced with today is a crisis of the traditional working class and of work. Yet we have varieties of left wing thought that still glorify proletarian labour, still implicitly have a notion of a society based on full employment-- by which they mean full proletarian employment. Or, more social-democratically, they look back to the successful Fordist-Keynesian synthesis of the post-war decades, where many more people were employed, were wages were higher, were income inequality was not nearly as great

as it is today and they would like to see a return to that sort of social-democratic utopia. But, there is no return. And a clear-eyed analysis of capital would indicate that there is no return and that all who still insist on talking about full industrial employment etc are in a very specific sense reactionary. They are looking back to a past that no longer can be re-established. On the other hand, the answer is not to simply embrace capital. Capital is not going to realize the potential that it generates and cannot do so. Capital is enormously destructive as well as generative of possibilities that point beyond it. There has to be a re-orientation of thought towards a different conception of the future. We have to go beyond 150 years of left wing thought and begin to take up what had existed only as a minor strand, and begin to think what post-proletarian labour would look like. People like André Gorz were concerned with such issues but of course except among university intellectuals he was very marginalized.

**Q:** In *History and Helplessness* you approach the critical category of indetermination as an objective of political and social struggle, rather than as a category of social analysis. Rather than assume that there is a class or social group that is inherently free from certain social determinations, you evoke the production of indetermination as an important result of political action. Could you elaborate a bit on this point - and supplement it with an analysis of its obverse:

the place of indetermination in capitalist social structure, and the struggle over different forms of determination as a dimension of political action?

**M.P.:** I am not sure about this question, because I was not sure that I actually had argued that indetermination is a characteristic of political and social struggle. If you could elaborate a little more, it would be clearer to me what the question is about.

**Q:** What we had in mind is what might occupy the very place that labour is occupying?

**M.P.:** I see. There may be a slight misunderstanding. What I am reacting against is the popular theme in a lot of post-Marxists thought, among academic poststructuralists and especially deconstructionists, that regards indeterminacy itself as a sign of the possibility of resistance: To show that reality is indeterminate, is to show that resistance is possible. And I didn't want my position to be confused with that kind of position. Because for me their notion of indeterminacy is much too indeterminate, just as their notion of resistance is politically very indeterminate. What we have seen in recent decades are many forms of "resistance" that are reactionary. The term "resistance" itself does not tell you anything in terms of emancipation. So I certainly do not share that kind of view. What I was trying to say in that essay is that, already half a century ago,

new forms of mass movements and student's movements arose that were global. Those movements in a sense were expressions of the inadequacy of older analyses of what the nature of struggle was, who the bearer of struggle would be and most importantly, what the result of struggle could possibly be. And I said all of that certitude crumbled. But these new movements never became historically self-conscious enough to grasp that which they expressed historically, or better yet, that of which they were expressions historically. That is, they did not become aware of their own historical situatedness. I think there was a loss of nerve, theoretically. Instead of rethinking what capital is, what the significance of these post-proletarian movements were, and how they suggested a different kind of anti-capitalist struggle pointing toward a different conception of post-capitalism, large parts of what had been a loose amorphous movement turned to anti-imperialism, by which I do not mean the anti-colonial struggle per se, which I supported. Rather, it was a turn to grasping the world in terms of concrete domination and concrete liberation. (I think it is significant that the miserable character of most post-colonial regimes has never been an object of critical analysis among most of the Left). The other turn to issues of concrete domination following the 1960s was the support of dissident struggles in East Central Europe. And again, it is not that I did not sympathize with those struggles.

But in spite of the fact that these struggles and the anti-imperialist forces seemed to represent two completely opposed camps, what they had in common was a focus on concrete domination. If in the one case, it was what they called imperialism, in the other it was the concrete domination of the Soviet state system. And in both cases there was a focus on concrete domination, the destruction of which would somehow be generative of emancipatory civil societies. Both indicated a turning away from the historical task of understanding the new phase of capitalism with its ever-more-abstract forms of domination.

**Q:** Just one point, connected to this. Would you say: there have been certain accounts of newer student movements, like the occupy movement, where people emphasized that a strength of that very movement was or came and arose from their utter indeterminacy at least in the beginning. Such that they did not raise any specific demands, yet the very weakness of that movement was also that very indeterminacy such that the very tipping point is hard to determine where indeterminacy is still productive or flips over being indeterminate. Would you agree with such an account?

**M.P.:** I am not a great fan of the indeterminacy of the occupy movement. It could be argued that if the notion of the future is indeterminate, then the movement

has to be indeterminate. But what the movement did was to actually slide back into all too familiar territory. For example, instead of capital, one had a critique of finance, which for me is very ambiguous politically. Moreover, one of the very great weaknesses of these informal indeterminate movements is that you just have self-appointed leaders who are answerable to nobody. I find this anarchist form to be fundamentally more authoritarian than a structured form, because there is no responsibility. Finally, Bernie Sanders' focus on trade policies as ultimately responsible for the loss of manufacturing jobs is another example of turning to the concrete in order to explain developments that require a theory of capital. The misère of the working class in the US was reinforced by the trade policies, it was not created by them. That is, the people to whom Sanders appealed and, in a different way to whom Trump appealed are people who are told that there are concrete acts or concrete people who are responsible for the state of the world. If, with Trump's racist and xenophobic explanation, it is the Mexicans and the Muslims etc., for the populist Left it is the banks and trade. If it were not for "them" we would have jobs in America. Well, jobs are not going to come back to America. The reasons have much more to do with the logic of capital, than they do with trade policies. But instead of thinking about how we are going to deal with a society where manufacturing jobs are disappearing, about what the



responsibility of the government is in a new situation the populist Left avoids such questions. So I do not think that Occupy is a model. It is an expression of helplessness and anger. So we have elite technocrats on the one hand, and populist anger on the other. Which is of course, as you know, coursing through Europe as well.

**Q:** In *Time, Labor and Social Domination* you praise Alfred Sohn-Rethel's epistemological reading of Marx's categories, a bold attempt to think the irreducible abstractions implicated in by the commodity-form, at the same time distancing yourself from it, on account of Sohn-Rethel's privileging of exchange over production, and his separation of commodity-exchange from the historical emergence of the capitalist mode of production. However, there is yet a third aspect of Sohn-Rethel's project, mentioned in passing in your book: the productive, or even emancipatory, dimension of abstraction and alienation (for example, in scientific abstractions - but also in disciplined militant work, complex social organization etc.). Could you perhaps further develop your critique of Sohn-Rethel, and elaborate your position concerning the potentially emancipatory dimension of abstraction?

**M.P.:** Well, if I can go back to what I was saying before, what I have been trying to get at is a way of viewing the sphere of production in Marx's analysis as a locus of a historical dynamic. It is not

simply a locus where concrete things are produced and people are exploited. It seems to me that a lot of people, including Michael Heinrich, deeply misunderstand what the sphere of production is about. In Marx's critique, the sphere of production is the sphere of the historical dynamic, it is the sphere, in which value exceeds itself and yet reconstitutes itself. And by focussing on exchange, Sohn-Rethel in a sense removes this dynamic from investigation, and falls prey to an opposition which, although Sohn-Rethel was very sophisticated and in no way could be thrown into the same intellectual basket as the Stalinists, nevertheless opposes production to exchange. And I am critical of that position - not because he glorifies production but because he locates the locus of abstraction only in exchange. I think this is a serious mistake, because the real locus of abstraction is the historical dynamic. And yet this is much more difficult to comprehend than the idea of the abstraction of the market. One result is that therefore there is no historical difference in Sohn-Rethel between Greek philosophy and 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and 19<sup>th</sup> century thought. It is all moulded by the real abstraction of exchange. And I think as rich and suggestive as his work was and is, this is a weakness. On the other hand, and this is what you were raising, unlike romantics, Sohn-Rethel says that there is a positive dimension to the realm of abstraction. I agree with him but I would want to modify that slightly:

The realm of abstraction generated as part and parcel of the rise of capital is universalizing. However, it is so in a way that negates particularity. It is part of a system characterised by a dichotomy and a polar opposition between the abstract universal and the specific particular. The abstract universal has an emancipatory dimension. The abstract universality of the social forms constitutes the historical framework within which categories like general human rights or the rights of man, all of the Enlightenment ideals emerge. On the other hand, it is a form of universality which necessarily abstract away from everything particular. Capital generates a system characteristically by the opposition of abstract universality, the value form, and particularistic specificity, the use value dimension. It seems to me that rather than viewing a socialist or an emancipatory movement as the heirs to the Enlightenment, as the classic working class movement did, critical movements today should be striving for a new form of universalism that encompasses the particular, rather than existing in opposition to the particular. This will not be easy, because a good part of the Left today has swung to particularity rather than trying to find a new form of universalism. I think this is a fatal mistake.

**Q:** Your work is one of the few - perhaps alongside Kojin Karatani's theory of different "modes of intercourse" - to criticize the "architectonic metaphor" which

thinks the logic of the modes of production in terms of base/superstructure without giving ground on the centrality of the critique of political economy. What is left of the theory of "modes of production" when we depart not from the objective, towards the subjective, but rather emphasize, as you propose, the simultaneous constitution of the subjective and the objective dimensions of social life under capitalism - how does this affect the very concept of critique?

**M.P.:** Again, I think there is a lot involved here. First of all, I am calling into question historical materialism - which was not really created, by Marx, but later, largely by Engels - that is, the idea that you have successive modes of production. I think analysing Marx's argument in *Capital* calls into question the notion that you have any unified modes of production before the historical emergence of capital, which is unified in the sense that you can begin with a singular principle, the commodity, and you can unfold that to encompass the whole. You cannot find something analogous in other forms of social life, in part because the possibility of unfolding the social whole from a singular point of departure is possible only because, in capitalism, the mode of mediation is uniform. That is what the lesson of the commodity form is. No other society has a uniform, homogenous form of mediation, so it becomes very very misleading to talk about early modes of

production. It is very legitimate to say that certain economies, let's say that of the Romans, were largely slave based, but slavery did not occupy the same place that for example slavery under capitalism does, where it is part of a much larger system. You do not have such a system in Rome or in the Middle Ages or in China. It is much more disparate. Forget about the notion of base-superstructure. It has been so misunderstood, that it is better just to jettison it. It has been misunderstood as the relation between objectivity and subjectivity, whereas the one time that Marx used it, he talks about the institutionalization of forms of thought, which is different. He refers, for example, to juridical institutionalization, not the form of thought itself. The form of thought is intrinsic to the social forms. What remains of critique? First of all, it has to be reflexive. If the categories are categories of thought as well as social being the same holds true for critical thought. No form of thought has transhistorical validity. You cannot argue that everybody else is socially formed and presumably misled and I am not socially formed and stand above and beyond everyone else. The language of modes of production, which is a transhistorical language, allows this transhistorical epistemology to sneak in through the backdoor. So it is better not to have it. The approach I have outlined means that critical theory is valid only so long as its object exists. There is no such thing and there can be no

such thing as a Marxist society, other than capitalism, of course.

**Q:** Generally, there is a great schism between the work of carrying out both a categorical and a localized critique of political economy, on the one hand, and the struggle of different political fronts and militants, which usually base themselves on local analyses of their own political conjuncture, on the other. How do you envision the relation between the critique of political economy and militant political organization today?

**M.P.:** On the one hand one cannot expect that people who try to work out a sophisticated categorical critique are always on the frontlines of movements and one cannot expect that people who are more activistically inclined should be great theorists. There might be exceptions, but generally you cannot expect this. Nevertheless, you can hope that one of the roles of theory, and this sounds very modest but it is very important, is to show which paths are clearly mistaken. You can put a lot of energy and effort into mistaken paths. I remember arguing with people in the 70s, both in the US and in Germany that a movement to return to "nature" where everyone could milk their own cows may have been personally satisfying and a way of living that was richer and more fulfilling. But in no way could this serve as a model to society. To the degree to which people promulgated this romantic

ideal, to that degree they were deflecting oppositional forces, groups, thinkers, from trying to struggle towards defining what would be an adequate path. So, one of the most important tasks of theory has perhaps less to do with indicating exactly what the road to revolution is, than it is to indicating which roads are not the roads to an emancipatory transformation. For example, this argument could have been made with regard to Occupy.

**Q:** Your argument, in *The Holocaust and The Trajectory of the Twentieth Century*, that the concentration camps should be rather understood as the “grotesque anti-capitalist negation” of capitalist modernity - a sort of “factory of ‘destroying value’ (...) of destroying the personifications of the abstract” - serves as a compelling example of the thesis, presented in *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, that the capitalist dialectics of transformation/reconstitution is in fact an expression of the interlacing of two forms of domination, the one based on abstract time and another based on historical time. Crucial consequences could be extracted from this, specially for a critique of emancipatory projects that base their expectations of the future on the release of the “concrete” and the “historical” from the clutches of abstraction. How does your analysis of the categories of time and temporality in capitalism affect the dialectics of utopia and ideology?

**M.P.:** It is a warning. What I tried

to do in the Holocaust essay that you refer to is two things at once. I tried to help people to understand that there is a difference between mass murder and extermination. It is not a moral difference. It is not that one is worse or better than the other. Just analytically, you cannot understand the Holocaust if you subsume it under categories of Xenophobia, race hatred and mass murder. It has a sense of mission and purpose that others forms of racism, I would argue, do not. Not only that, it is utopian. It is utopian very much in the sense of attempting to release the concrete from the clutches of abstraction. That notion of emancipation informed the Nazis’ so called “German Revolution”. The Jews, within this worldview, became in a sense, not only the personification of capital, but also the *source* of its abstract domination. I think that the Holocaust should serve as a significant warning against all of the forms of utopia that reify the concrete and vilify the abstract -- instead of seeing that both, the abstract and the concrete, as well as their separation are what makes up capital. That is the first point. The second is, that capital, (and this is based on my reading of Marx), is not simply an abstract vampire sitting on top of the concrete whereby one could simply get rid of it, like taking a headache pill. Within this imaginary, capital is considered extrinsic to the concrete, to production or labour. Capital, however, actually molds the concrete. It empties labour increasingly of its

meaningfulness. At the same time it is an alienated form of human sociality, of human capacities. As such, it is generative of socially general forms of knowledge and power, even if it generates them historically in a form that oppresses the living. Yet, in many respects, precisely this becomes the source of future possibilities. That is, living (proletarian) labour is *not* the source of future historical possibilities. Rather, what has been constituted historically as capital is that source. Now, I know this sounds like I am turning everything on its head. I am saying that the category of living labour in Marx is not the source of emancipation. Rather, dead labour is. Maybe this sounds like a provocation, but it needs to be thought about.

**Q:** Do you think or would you argue that any fundamental change to the dynamics and structure of capitalism is also always dangerous, not only in the sense of coming with the threat of relapsing into what one wanted to overcome, but also in actually running the risk of making it worse? One could think of W. Benjamin's saying that behind every fascism there is a failed revolution. And also, would you say that one nonetheless has to take the risk of failing at revolutionizing (and thus the risk of fascism) or did something change with and after the 20<sup>th</sup> century (such that the imperative is rather and always first to avoid the risk of fascism and thus has to rethink under revolution and political transformation from this perspective)?

**M.P.:** I think this is a very complicated set of issues. On the one hand I do not think that the risk of fascism, which is a very great risk, is such that we should not try to change anything. Because it is not as if we are living in a static system where you could say leave well enough alone, do not rock the boat. Rather, the boat is being rocked, it is being rocked by structural historical developments. There is a real danger of fascism, and this is where the communist reductionist analysis of fascism has done us a tremendous disservice. Fascism isn't simply a movement manipulated by the reactionary ruling classes, it is also not simply an expression of the decline of the traditional classes. Rather the movement toward a new fascism in part expresses the pain experienced by people as a result of capital's transformation in the absence of a political movement that makes sense of that pain in ways that are not either anti-Semitic or that scapegoat various groups in a xenophobic or racist way. I think that this is particularly current today. A phenomenon like Donald Trump, some wings of the supporters of Bernie Sanders, the Brexit movement, the right in France – these are no longer expressions of the traditional reactionary classes, but expressions largely of the declining industrial working classes. It is not enough for the Left simply to call them racist, xenophobic and small minded – even though they really are racist, xenophobic and small minded. And it would be a terrible mistake

to opportunistically adopt their mindset, even if one takes their misère seriously. In that case one is not adequately confronting the crisis of industrial capital. Instead, we need another way of viewing the world, beyond identitarian politics of the left as well as the Right. As members of a cosmopolitan configuration, we cannot simply say that multi-culturalism is cool because we very much enjoy walking through the streets of a city like London which is a true Metropole and experiencing in a thousand small ways the globality of it all. We cannot just write off everybody in the North of England. The fact that they have made a mistake does not mean that there were no good grounds for them to feel radically dissatisfied. So, the new danger of fascism, and I am using “fascism” now in a very loose sense, is generated by the pain and misère caused by the dynamic of capital. It used to be that many on the Left tried to address the crisis-prone nature of capitalism with program of full employment and forms of social security that were based on such full employment. That will not work anymore. I do not decry such a program because it was reformist. It made perfect sense in its time. It does not, however, make sense now. So, the Left has less and less to say in terms of an *analysis* of the situation — other than to present itself as anti-racist, cosmopolitan and globalizing. All that is going to do is create anger on the part of those who actually feel the blows of the globalized economy.

**Q:** One takes seriously those who one cannot take seriously. And so one could say that if the only political articulation that is given to that kind of dissatisfaction is a sort of fascism, one can even see a failure of the Left to do something about this.

**M.P.:** Yes.

**Q:** One of the prevailing positions in the Left today is the idea that we need new forms of political organization which privilege immanence over transcendence, multiplicity over unity - and concrete, local engagement over abstract mediations. What are, in your account, the limits of the traditional instruments of struggle of the Left (party form, unions, etc.)? Furthermore, does your critique of the teleological vision of the proletariat entail a populist conception of the construction of political agents?

**M.P.:** I think I already touched on some of this. Privileging immanence over transcendence, multiplicity over unity, and concrete local engagements over abstract mediations is just simply taking one pole of the dichotomies constituted by capital. So, what we unfortunately are seeing all too often is a debate between globalizing intellectuals and economic elites who represent the abstract side, on the one hand, and reactionary and also Left populist activists who take the concrete side, on the other. Neither consider the relationship of the determinate

concrete and the determinate abstract in ways that could at least begin to point to forms of immanent transcendence or transcendent immanence, or a universalism that contains particularity or a particular that instead of being sectarian is a particular that in itself has become more universal. We cannot simply adopt a position that aligns itself with particularities, that looks at various customs and practices elsewhere in the world and simply say that this is their culture. Neither can we simply impose on them something else. First of all what is deemed as their culture very frequently has been a modern reaction in the last 100 or 150 years to defeat and disempowerment, which presents itself a return to “authentic fundamentals”. But it is not. In any case, such “fundamentalisms” should be read as reactions to a globalized world and they have some features that overlap with those of fascism. There is the danger of the Left falling into that rabbit hole. The Left has to begin to ascertain the emancipatory potential of globalization. Many live it without taking the trouble to really analyse their own form of life, and what that implies about another form of globalization, maybe a more emancipatory form of globalization. What you call the turn to immanence and to the particular is essentially romantic and it has plagued or has been a feature of capitalism for the last 200 years and it will continue to be a feature of capitalism. It is generated by capitalism itself, as is the abstract universal, against which it reacts. And purely anarchist

forms of organization are never going to accomplish this historical task. We have to search for and develop new forms of organization, that actually are organized. I am suggesting that an organization has more possibilities for meaningful internal democracy than do most anarchist modes.

**Q:** In *Time, Labor and Social Domination* you argue at one point that one could structurally and systematically compare Hegel's claim that the Absolute is substance but also subject to Marx's determination of capital as self-valorizing value whereby capital would be precisely the anonymous, impersonal form of domination that is the substance as well as subject of capitalism. In Hegel, this history of spirit (and also of Absolute spirit – i.e. the Absolute as spirit) necessarily comes to an end (which for him is the precondition for it to be continued in a non-predetermined manner), would you say that something similar might be said about Marx? Might one first need to and embrace – as someone like Jean-Pierre Dupuy, the French theorist of catastrophes seems to do – the end (of capitalism and emancipation, etc.) to ultimately gain a new perspective on emancipation?

**M.P.:** I do not think that capital as the Geist necessarily comes to an end. One of the important differences between Hegel and Marx is that for Hegel the coming to an end entails the full realization of the totality. For Marx, if capital comes to

an end, this will not entail realizing itself, but giving way to a new form of living that is been rendered possible and conceivable by capital itself. It entails the overcoming of capital on the basis of capital. The anarchist' understanding of an emancipated society is usually that of a local model. I do not know how one imagines a globe which has been constituted historically now returning to local communities that have tenuous relations with other communities that are not close by. I think that anarchism today can be seen as a misguided if understandable reaction to the kind of bureaucratization of civil society and of the state that is characteristic of advanced capitalism. But it is not adequate to the catastrophe to which we are heading. I think there is a reason why there have been so many dystopian films in the last generation. What we can have is an image of complete social collapse. Capitalism would not necessarily collapse economically, as a system of social mediation of wealth. But the society to which it gave rise would collapse. The result would be a form of social life that would either be Hobbesian -- brutal nasty and short (think of Mad Max) -- or it would be militarily controlled. We are on the verge of this sort of social collapse. I say this although I am not a friend of theories of catastrophe at all. I do not like apocalyptic visions, they have usually been destructive.

**Q:** Dupuy makes a slightly different argument because he argues that

our way of our own future is part of the catastrophe that is already taking place. Say our way of dealing with the ecological crisis rely on a framework of calculation that has to remain stable and we are acting under the assumption that this is the case and that there is not tipping point reached that would change the framework itself. But there might be a point of irreversibility precisely as an effect of our way of dealing with a catastrophe that we want to prevent (assuming we can manage it), because the catastrophe is certainly going to happen if we do seek to prevent it the way we do.

**M.P.:** That makes more sense to me. But, the people who argue for the importance of the limiting the rise in temperatures to two degrees are aware of a dilemma. If you tell everyone the environmental catastrophe is now irreversible, this will either induce people to reject this position as simply alarmist or to say that then there is nothing we can do about it. The people I know who think there definitely there will be a catastrophe are American right wing survivalist, who build their underground shelters, spaces stocked with a lot of food, arms, etc. This may be laughable as a response, but it is an immediate response. This is not directly what Dupuy is arguing. But it seems to me, we are faced with a catastrophe and it is only slowly dawning on people that it is a major catastrophe and I do not think that a catastrophe should be embraced.



**Q:** Before you said that Jews became the object of an abstract domination. Can we maybe make a comparison the refugee crisis?

**M.P.:** I do not think so. But this does not mean that the racism and xenophobia directed towards the migrants is not real and reactionary and a real problem. But I think that antisemitism really is something else and that the Left is insensitive to it. Antisemitism is about who controls the world. No one thinks that the Syrian, Afghani, or African refugees control the world. They regard them as a threat to their way of life. This is different. That is more like the Southern Whites in the US regarding the Blacks as a threat to their way of life if they ever got full civil rights. There is a difference. No one in the South ever thought that the Blacks ruled the world. No one thinks that the refugees rule the world, that they are behind the banks, for example. If anyone rules the world within the framework of this kind of populist thinking, it is America and Israel and this has a great deal to do with antisemitism. To make this distinction does not mean to say that antisemitism is bad and being against refugees is not quite as bad. It is very bad and people make use of it, as a way of making sense of the misère of their lives. This misère has a great deal to do with the austerity politics of Europe as well as the creeping crisis of proletarian labour, of which now the refugees are becoming the unintended victims.

**Q:** One last question about the

Brexit, that just occurred. It comes out of a nationalist movement, which is peculiar because it seems what they want to regain is their autonomy. But they will nonetheless be fully depended on EU politics. So, it seems Britain exited the very position of still being able to influence the political framework that will continue to determine it. What do you make of this situation?

**M.P.:** Well, I was struck, and I am not an expert on this, looking at various opinion polls and graphs, not only by the demographic differences (London, Scotland are for Europe and the rest of England and Wales, surprisingly, are for exit, and Northern Ireland for Europe – it could mean the end of the UK), but by the fact that for the people who wanted to remain, for them the main issues were economic. For those who wanted to leave, underneath it all, the main issue was immigration. In a sense, immigration has to be understood as a metaphor. For, after all, how many migrants reach England? Not that many. They also feel, what the Germans call “überfremdet” (over-infiltrated by foreigner, CC), but not because of the Syrians coming, but because of the Poles and the Rumanians who have already come. It is always a mistake during periods of economic difficulty to open the floodgates. And one of the reasons why I say that is that, given EU decisions on the free movement of people, the British government decided not to phase in such policies, but to open their borders to EU Nationals all at once. If you

were a Polish worker, you would have the right to work in Germany and in Great Britain. However, you could get in immediately into Great Britain, while it would take a while to get into Germany, because Germany chose to phase in the movement of people. But this is only one level. The real background is that the manufacturing economy has been going downhill for a long time. No one discusses and explains this massive structural change to those who are affected and least not in Great Britain and in the United States. The people working in the coal economy in the US, the coal workers, believe their economic decline is because of environmentalism and government regulations. No one points out to them that more coal is now produced than in the past, using much less labour. The firms hide this by blaming the government. In America the popular reaction against this crisis of labour takes a form of right wing populism: we are against the government and the immigrants. In Europe, it takes the form of being against the migrants and being against Europe. I have only had a small taste of the British press. It is unbelievably bad. No wonder the *Guardian*, which is not that great a newspaper, but is a decent paper, stands out like a shining jewel, a beacon against racist xenophobic lies. Boris Johnson apparently, and I only found this out last week, made his name working as a reporter for the *Telegraph* in the 90s, when he was stationed in Brussels. And he is the one who came up with the stories of

faceless bureaucrats determining how big cucumbers or condoms could be. Most of what he wrote was empirically false, was nonsense, yet for the British press that made no difference; they almost all jumped on board. I think what has happened is that many people feel disempowered in the face of these structural transformations. At the same time, the European Union has a strong democratic deficit. There are only two ways to go. One is to democratize Europe and the other is to go back to nation states. There seems to be very little movement towards democratizing Europe. So, the only other reaction, which is one of frustration, is just to leave the whole thing. And I do not know when the six ministers meet, just now in Berlin, if this is even on their agenda. Or if they are just going to punish the British for leaving.

**Q:** And then the danger is that the EU might just continue to go on as if nothing happened.

**M.P.:** Right. Just like the Euro the EU has to be fundamentally reformed. Now, I do not know if there is any possibility, given the fact that there are 26 countries and everything has to appear in 26 languages, and the political culture of most of these countries is questionable.

Vienna/Chicago/Berlin/Prishtina  
June 2016