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**Review of Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge University Press. 424 pages. ISBN 0-521-39157-1.**

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Moise Postone has written a book that makes a significant contribution to the reevaluation of Marx taking place in the post-communist world. Now that no state orthodoxy pretends to monopolize the field, it has become much easier to propose daring new interpretations of Marxism. Yet at the same time, Marxism has lost the authority it derived from its connection, however tenuous, with an actual historical movement.

"Post-Marxism" deals with this situation by rejecting some aspects of a construct it calls "traditional" Marxism, tied to the Soviet debacle, while retaining other aspects of Marxist thought that are relevant to contemporary ecological, feminist and other social movements. Postone offers the first interpretation of Marx as a kind of post-Marxist, whose deepest theoretical commitments are diametrically opposed to the tradition and congruent with contemporary movements of resistance.

He is aware of the paradoxical aspect of this project and concedes that there are "'traditional' elements" in some of Marx's works (19). His choice is a methodological one: to extract a still viable Marx from the mass of Marx's writings even at a certain philological risk. However, the danger of fundamentally distorting Marx's position is considerable for among the traditional elements Postone casts overboard are such basic Marxian assumptions as the concept of proletarian revolution. While one might not want to have to defend this concept today, it is hard to imagine a coherent reconstruction of Marx's thought that leaves it out. We will see how far Postone succeeds in this ambitious project.

The most important contribution of Postone's book is a very careful and thorough presentation and analysis of the basic categories of Marx's *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Postone breathes new life into the Marxian theory of value, just when most critics of Marxism had decided they could safely ignore it for the duration.

Postone argues that Marx's concept of "value" is not identical with "wealth" as in classical economics, but refers to the mutual mediation of the products of labor by which they are constituted as commodities. This mediation can be understood as the embodiment of "abstract labor" in the commodities. The concrete labor which goes into making the products is not itself the effective measure of value under capitalism, but only the average time actually required at the given stage in economic evolution to produce them. It is this average which Marx calls abstract labor.

The effectiveness of this distinction between concrete and abstract labor is of course guaranteed by the market, where differences in the concrete labor embodied in goods are averaged out in the practice of buying and selling commodities. On the

market, then, what might otherwise appear as a merely conceptual entity, a certain theoretical average, becomes socially active. This is what Marx calls a "real abstraction," an abstraction that has achieved institutional reality.

Marx's theory is based on this double character of labor as a concrete use value productive of "real wealth," and as an abstract measure of value. While he does argue that labor in this double form is determining for capitalist social life, Marx does not project this hypothesis back onto earlier stages of economic history, nor does he privilege labor in relation to other institutions in the history of the species. Its privilege under capitalism is specifically tied to the commodity form and has no transhistorical significance. Marx's theory thus belongs to capitalism as its immanent critique.

Because value measures wealth under capitalism, and governs the behavior of capitalists and workers thereby, capitalism possesses a specific historical dynamic. This dynamic is expressed concretely in the gradual transformation of production from handicraft to industry in the course of which labor is deskilled and subsumed under capital. This process leads to the creation of a specifically capitalist technology and labor process. Working class struggle plays an unwitting functional role in furthering that evolution, to which it is a response.

At the most general level, this historical dynamic has a peculiar temporality based on the ever rising threshold of value as technical progress continually reduces the average time required to produce the same amount of goods. Although the quantity of material goods increases and technology advances, capitalism always finds itself at the same place in terms of value, ever striving toward higher and higher levels of achievement in the race to produce for production's sake.

This dynamic contains the internal contradiction of capitalism. Postone is persuasive when he insists on the basis of his analysis that that contradiction is not between capitalist relations of distribution and industrial production, nor between capitalists and workers. Rather, capitalist temporality drives technical progress toward a stage in which human labor, the measure of value, is less and less important to production. The system continues to be governed by a factor, labor, which was once its heart and soul, but which is increasingly marginal. That is the real contradiction Marx identifies in capitalism.

As wealth accumulates independently of human labor, the absurdity of capitalism becomes more and more apparent. It no longer makes sense for human beings to be mere puppets of the structure of their own laboring practices. The potential is there for a completely different way of producing and living. The powerful industrial system could be applied "reflexively" to its own reconstruction in a more humane and ecologically sound form that would measure wealth not in terms of value but in terms of human needs democratically articulated in the public sphere.

The idea of socialism implied in this analysis is very different from the Soviet model of a planned, collectivist society. The Soviet Union retained the mode of labor and social mediation characteristic of the capitalist industrial system, and merely generalized the principle of value in its planning system. This was not socialism but state capitalism, an amalgam which is not a contradiction in terms, but rather a logically possible outcome of the structure of Marx's categories.

Socialism is not about realizing the principle of labor, value, in a more rational form, but about abolishing labor as it exists under industrialism, and with it value itself.

The goal of Marxism is thus the abolition of the proletariat and not a proletarian revolution that would simply generalize the condition of alienation to the whole of society, as we have seen in the case of so-called "actually existing socialism."

This brief summary barely gives a hint of the richness and complexity of Postone's reconstruction of Marxian economic theory. However, I must now move on to consider the second major aim of his book, the critique of what he calls "traditional" Marxism.

My problems begin here with his very broad definition of the term. He distinguishes between a critique of labor--Marx's critique--and a critique from the standpoint of labor--traditional Marxism. The former aims at a radical transformation of industrialism that would eliminate labor's privileged position as measure of value, while the latter attempts to further the interests of labor in its capitalist form. Traditional Marxism would presumably be based on the standpoint of labor, and would have no conception of the Marxian abolition of the proletariat.

This distinction is a real one; there have certainly been strong currents in the labor movement which identified socialism with the generalization of the proletarian condition in an industrialism governed by a plan rather than markets. However, Postone wishes to extend this qualification to every Marxist theorist for whom the working class could become the subject of anti-capitalist revolution. But if the term "traditional Marxist" embraces Horkheimer and Lukács indifferently with Kautsky and Stalin, it is hardly useful. What has gone wrong here?

Postone simply assumes that wherever Marxists refer to the proletariat, they mean the capitalist category of "labor," which is of course immanent to the existing industrial system. Furthermore, he assumes that in relying on the proletariat they must necessarily posit labor as a transhistorical principle. Thus "proletarian revolution" means the return to itself of a transhistorical subject, the human essence as embodied in labor, that was alienated by capitalism.

On this basis, Postone claims that when Lukács writes about proletarian revolution, he must be calling for a generalization of capitalist industrialism rather than the reflexive transformation of industrialism in which socialism really consists. But is this true? What does Lukács actually say? In *History and Class Consciousness*, the work on which Postone comments, Lukács writes, "The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle" (1971: 80).

It seems to me we are a long way from the position Postone calls "traditional Marxism" which affirms labor rather than calling for its abolition. And this is no isolated statement; Lukács' whole theory is intended to show how, starting out from the specific degradation of its life and work under the reign of the law of value, the proletariat can break with capitalist forms of thought and action and realize the potentialities for a very different type of society contained and repressed in capitalist industrialism. The proletariat alone can break what I call the "circle of practice": practice posits a world structured in forms that in turn command the practices that reproduce that world.

Lukács attributes this position quite believably to Marx. The problems, of course, are in the working out of it. I cannot go into these problems in any detail here. (The interested reader might want to look at my book *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986).) Lukács tries to show that the standpoint of the proletariat is not merely immanent to capitalism, as Postone claims,

but opens up the possibility of a broader view in which the most fundamental limitations of that system finally become visible. Lukács calls that broader view, in which capitalism is relativized with respect to the social world it structures and its own potentialities, the "totality." Totality is thus not merely the universalization of the value principle as Postone contends, but in fact corresponds with the critical standpoint he himself takes up on the basis of Marx's immanent critique.

Now, it is quite possible that Lukács was wrong about the proletariat, and certainly his views cannot easily be linked up with the new social movements today. But there are fundamental theoretical questions at stake here that I believe Postone himself will have to face if he delivers the next installment of his theory as promised. These problems concern the transition to socialism, an aspect of Marxism that lay outside Postone's scope in the work under review.

For Marx's theory to satisfy the conditions of a post-Hegelian critique of society, it had to go beyond mere moral exigency to offer a plausible path to its own realization. The potentialities it identifies in capitalism must have a concrete historical chance to count at all. This means that hope in the future must be based not on absolute principles, but on real social processes going on in the present.

Marx's innovations include not only a theory of the contradictions of capitalism, but the first sketch of a radical standpoint epistemology that valorizes the view from below, that shows how that view might overflow the reified boundaries of an oppressive social identity and thereby point beyond the given society. Perhaps there is something in this general approach that can be of value to us today, even if we no longer share the assumption that the proletariat alone is the subject of the revolution.