

Critique of Moishe Postone's concept of labour

Without a doubt Moishe Postone deserves credit for being the first to have deconstructed bourgeois labour ontology, transhistorical labour concepts and the positivity of abstract labour in traditional Marxism and to have made a beginning at overcoming them; and in fact doing this to some extent long before the critique of labour developed by the German language approaches to value-critique since the end of the 1980s. Postone's similarly argued theory has its roots in the 1970s, had its elaboration in the course of the 1980s and has been presented in advanced form since the beginning of the 1990s. In Germany the critique of value and labour largely emerged independently of any Postone reception, which may be taken as an indication of the fact that further development and transcendence of Marx's theory in the direction of a radical critique of labour to some extent was in the air as a response to the categorially conceptless bourgeois debate on the 'crisis of the working society' which had already been opened theoretically at the end of the 1950s by Hannah Arendt and had achieved unimagined topicality and urgency in the course of the world crisis of the third industrial revolution (growing structural mass unemployment).

According to Postone:

[T]he meaning of the category of labor in [Marx's] mature works is different from what traditionally has been assumed: it is historically specific rather than transhistorical. In Marx's mature critique, the notion that labor constitutes the social world and is the source of all wealth does not refer to society in general, but to capitalist, or modern, society alone.¹

1. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* p4

In this respect, Postone breaks definitively with the labour positivism of all previous schools of Marxism and makes the differentiation that:

This approach to Marx's mature critical theory has important implications which I shall attempt to unfold in the course of this work. I shall begin to do so by distinguishing between two fundamentally different modes of critical analysis: a critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of labor*, on the one hand, and a critique of labor in capitalism, on the other. The first, which is based upon a transhistorical understanding of labor, presupposes that a structural tension exists between the aspects of social life that characterize capitalism (for example, the market and private property) and the social sphere constituted by labor. Labor, therefore, forms the basis of the critique of capitalism, the *standpoint* from which that critique is undertaken. According to the second mode of analysis, labor in capitalism is historically specific and constitutes the essential structures of that society. Thus labor is the *object* of the critique of capitalist society.²

Work as the standpoint of critique or work as the object of critique, put like this the contrast is brought to a head, as has already been indicated above. Whereby in point of fact the issue is labour as a category or essential determination and not as a mere accidental, categorial, but nonetheless affirmative critique of labour, as for example in Autonomism (namely the character of wage-labour as external dependency, lousy conditions of work, etc.) From this new, negative essential determination of labour Postone is then able to roll out the circulatory or distributional shortcomings of the hitherto Marxist critique of capitalism, and so unfold the (already quoted) critiques of the corresponding theories of Lukács, Sohn-Rethel, et al. Estimation of Postone's achievement increases even more given he has been condemned for over a decade to being a completely solitary figure. Publications in which his approach has been further developed have largely gone without comment; even in diverse collections of articles he has remained an unexpected foreign body who

2. Ibid. p5-6 (emphasis in the original)

is denied any adequate discussion in the academic community (especially from the German representatives of critical theory) since that would go way beyond the ingrained patterns of thought. What is even more admirable is the tenacity with which Postone has followed his theoretical path and further developed his approach.

It is this isolation from any discourse over such a long period of time that might be responsible for Postone not having thought through his critique of labour, in the sense of the abstraction 'labour', to its logical conclusion. When he speaks, as in the quote above, of "labour in capitalism" this way of expressing it also implies 'labour' outside of capitalism; the problem of abstraction with respect to a concept of 'activity in general' as human alienation and of real abstraction as its unconscious activity is in this way inadequately illuminated and the critique remains incomplete.

Postone's analysis encounters this dilemma every step of the way. He would like to cordon off "labor in capitalism" from a supposedly unproblematic, self-evidently presupposed category of 'labour' that is no longer a theme for discussion by postulating that only in capitalism are "the fundamental categories of social life ... categories of labor." this is by no means self-evident, and it cannot be justified merely by pointing to the obvious importance of labour to human social life in general.³ Postone therefore accepts without further examination the reference to an allegedly "obvious importance of labor" for social life as such, but does not want to content himself with this in that he emphasises that only in capitalism does labour have its specific role as principle of social synthesis. He does not even pose the question whether or not an abstract-universal concept of labour makes any sense at all outside of this modern constitution of society, or even if it has ever existed.

Postone even has a double concept of the labour-abstraction inasmuch as this supposedly unproblematic concept remains much as ever as a transhistorical category. Accordingly Postone maintains, "that the form of labor and the very fabric of social relations differ in various social formations."⁴ Capitalism therefore differentiates itself from other formations not in being the only one to have produced the "form of labor" (to which corresponds the "subject form", likewise only valid for the modern constitution of society), but solely through the "form *of* labor."

3. Ibid. p22

4. Ibid. p25

It is therefore only a difference in form in respect of a transhistorical and thereby ontological issue once again, just as in the aporetic argumentation from Marx. Specifically capitalist, according to Postone, would therefore be the socially synthesising function of labour understood only as the “expenditure of direct labor time”⁵ in the production process:

This social quality, which is historically unique, distinguishes labor in capitalism from labor in other societies.⁶

Naturally, this creates a certain confusion in respect of the transhistorical or specifically historical (only belonging to Modernity) validity of the concept of abstract labour. Postone has an uneasy sense of this when he formulates from time to time the apparently unproblematic ontological-transhistorical concept of labour that now haunts him in ways that nonetheless involuntarily express its problematic nature:

Various sorts of what we would consider labor exist in all societies.⁷

This formulation already implies that “we” (modern human beings socialised into the category of labour) “normally” also “consider labor” as something existing in other societies that really does not correspond to this abstraction. This becomes clearer when Postone speaks of “laboring activities”⁸ in non-capitalist societies. This curious expression clarifies the implicit scruple Postone has in respect of the transhistorical category of labour that has been in a certain sense carried over secondarily, without, however, being made explicit. In this connection Postone returns again to the relation of abstraction to real abstraction in respect of the concept of labour, namely on the basis of Marx’s formulation of the double-character of labour as concrete and abstract:

This initial determination of the double-character of labor in capitalism should not be understood out of context

5. Ibid. p25
6. Ibid. p48
7. Ibid. p150
8. Ibid. p150

as implying simply that all the various forms of concrete labor are forms of labor in general. Such a statement is analytically useless inasmuch as it could be made of laboring activities in all societies, even those in which commodity production is only of marginal significance. After all, all forms of labor have in common that they are labor. But such an indeterminate interpretation does not and cannot contribute to an understanding of capitalism precisely because abstract labour and value, according to Marx, are specific to that social formation. What makes labor general in capitalism is not simply the truism that it is the common denominator of all various specific sorts of labor; rather, *it is the social function of labor which makes it general*. As a socially mediating activity, labor is abstracted from the specificity of its product, hence, from the specificity of its own concrete form. In Marx's analysis, the category of abstract labor expresses this real social process of abstraction; it is not simply based on a conceptual process of abstraction.⁹

Although Postone stresses here the specific way in which labour in capitalism is general, which alone makes sense of such a concept of the general, he nevertheless admits that in itself the purely conceptual abstraction 'labour' in the sense of an apparently straightforward general term is rational, but he then conceives of this abstraction (contrary to Wolf, above) as being "analytically useless" and a "truism", in order to set it against the incompatible capitalist labour-abstraction as the social synthesis. What Postone overlooks is that the mere general term 'labour' is "analytically useless" precisely because it quite simply represents something other than a "truism". As such a "truism" it can only manifest itself within capitalist relations, because the merely conceptually understood abstraction is nothing other than a mental reflex of the real abstraction belonging to Modernity alone and as such not even existing historically in this manner.

Postone's final lack of clarity regarding the abstract concept of labour continues with reference to those statements of Marx concerning

9. Ibid. p151-152 (emphasis in the original)

a supposedly transhistorical “economy of time” involving a moment of value-determination going beyond capitalism, upon which Rubin, Lukács, Wolf, etc. have emphatically based themselves. Postone takes up this argument as well, assessing it, however, noticeably differently and less affirmatively:

Marx’s statement that considerations of labor time would remain important in a postcapitalist society does not, therefore, mean that the form of wealth itself would be temporal rather than material. [...]

Although an economy of time would remain important, this time presumably would be descriptive... [H]ence, the relation between considerations of time expenditure and wealth production could be essentially different than in a situation where value is the social form of wealth. [...]

Marx’s notion of a possible postcapitalist economy of time, therefore, and his analysis of capitalism in terms of a temporal form of wealth are not identical and should be distinguished.¹⁰

However, it is true that Marx himself quite simply did not make this distinction, but rather explicitly characterised the continued effect of an “economy of time” as the continued effect of a moment of the value-form having beyond that an ontological-transhistorical character. In other words: Marx does not see the difference sketched out above between historical time concepts and time-form; what counts for him is just the abstract flow time of Newton, Kant and modern business management. The difference that Postone quite rightly opens up actually forbids us to speak of the “economy of time” remaining “important”. Postone wisely speaks of “an” rather than “the” economy of time, but a qualitatively different way of telling the time would simply no longer be abstractly “economic”, as if saving time were a value in itself regardless of the content. Postone’s insight clashes with his (half hearted) clinging to the letter of the concept in respect to both the abstract concept of time and the abstract concept of labour.

10. *Ibid.* p379-380

This dilemma is repeated once again in the discussion of the so-called 'necessity' in the sense of 'necessary labour'. As is well-known Marx introduced this determination in a two ways, on the one hand as the socially average necessary labour relative to the expenditure of human energy in capitalism on the basis of a given standard of productivity (that is purely immanent to capitalism), and on the other hand as the transhistorical necessity of labour as such, as the 'realm of necessity', a residual element of which has to remain even after capitalism, beyond which the 'realm of freedom' could arise.

Postone does not criticise the latter determination, although he really ought to given his own argument, but instead doubles the concept of the 'necessity' of 'labour' in a similar way to that of the economy of time by postulating that:

[O]ne must also, in considering the relation between labor and social necessity, distinguish between transhistorical social necessity and historically determinate social necessity. An example of the former sort of necessity, for Marx, is that some form of concrete labor, however determined, is necessary to mediate the material interactions of humans and nature and, hence, to maintain human social life. Some such activity, according to Marx, is a necessary condition of human existence in all forms of society. [...]

As a result of its dual character, then, commodity-determined labor, in Marx's analysis, is bound to two different forms of necessity, one transhistorical, and one specific to capitalism.¹¹

On the back of the concept of 'necessity' in respect of use-value (whose logical dependence on value-socialisation Postone similarly fails to raise thematically) yet another explicitly ontological concept of labour smuggles itself into the otherwise completely incompatible line of argument. It might be that the blame lies with Postone's attempt to present the critique of labour and value as a new way of reading an intrinsically closed, so to say contradiction free and 'whole' Marx, which can only lead to inconsistencies. What is much more reasonable is to open up the

11. Ibid. p380-381

contradiction in Marx between the ontology of labour on the one side, and the critique of labour and value on the other, corresponding to his historical situation.

The relapse into the ontology of labour becomes quite clear as soon as Postone speaks about the perspectives of a postcapitalist society. For him this implies “the possibility of a different process of production, one based upon a newer, emancipatory structure of social labor”.¹² The issue of “nonalienated labor is that it is free of relations of direct and of abstract social domination”.¹³ This is the way Postone lapses, in this respect, into the jargon of the old labour movement, even if with a paradoxical twist:

The emancipation of labor requires the emancipation from
(alienated) labor.¹⁴

Significantly, the adjective that is supposed to solve the paradox stands in brackets and contributes nothing to the explanation. Leave it out and the paradox stands there in its pure form, uniting only externally the two opposed paradigms: the emancipation *of* labour cannot have the same meaning as the emancipation *from* labour. The very thing that human beings have to emancipate themselves from is already stuck in the abstraction ‘labour’ as such, as an essential concept of negative social organisation. It is not a matter of a real paradox conceptually reproduced, but of a conceptual contradiction of Postone himself (similar to Marx’s aporia in respect of the concept of labour).

This contradiction in Postone’s line of argument continues in respect of the totality of capitalist sociability as well. On the one hand he emphasises that it is abstract labour that creates this totality and therefore both of them are to be ‘abolished’ together. However, at the same time he extends certain moments of this totality beyond capitalism, in the bad Hegelian sense of an affirmative ‘sublation’ (whereby it is exactly the essence that is maintained); and indeed this is particularly clear in respect of the political sphere, which he obviously does not understand as historically specific, but as ontological. Instead of formulating the critique of labour consistently also as a critique of democracy, Postone would

12. Ibid. p26

13. Ibid. p33 fn48

14. Ibid. p33

like to carry out “a renewed democratic critique of capitalism”¹⁵ and preaches a “postcapitalist democracy”;¹⁶ a contradiction in terms which toes the line of the affirmative concept of democracy within traditional Marxism which precisely at this point corresponds to that circulatory and distributive limitation on the concept of capital.

These criticisms should not and cannot, however, detract from Postone’s merit as the first to have made the breakthrough to overcoming the modern ontology of labour that is also present in traditional Marxism as self-evidently valid. This groundbreaking achievement cannot be honoured highly enough. Despite the baggage of moments of ontologisation, Postone’s decisive difference from labour movement Marxism consists in denying labour under capitalism, including that engaged in the material production process, any transhistorical character whatsoever. He states quite clearly that:

[T]he labor which constitutes value should not be identified with labor as it may exist transhistorically. Rather, it is a historically specific form that would be abolished, not realized, with the overcoming of capitalism.¹⁷

The ontological and transhistorical concept of labour that nonetheless remains over in Postone is only an empty embarrassment, the ghost of an actually already overcome understanding; and, by the way, one that is also inconsistent since if there really were ‘labour’ in a transhistorical sense, it would also have to exist in capitalism which after all does not exist outside of history. Either there exists an ontology of labour, or there does not; but what cannot be is that it exists before and after capitalism, but not in capitalism. That would be too much of the historically specific. If the “labour in capitalism” represents a purely historical, negative relation, there cannot be any “other” transhistorical labour, rather this abstraction belongs as a socially universal relation solely to commodity producing Modernity and its historical formation. Even the mere conceptual abstraction ‘labour’ is as a concept of social universality bound to this

15. *Ibid.* p15

16. *Ibid.* p41

17. *Ibid.* p29

relation; the concept as a concept is a product of the foregoing real abstraction and is not to be understood apart from this as transhistorical.