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On Transhistorical Abstractions and the Intersection of Historical Theory and Social Critique

Reading Marx as a critical social theorist, Moishe Postone designates the Grundrisse (1857–8) as the first of Marx’s ‘mature’ writings. In this, he disagrees with Marx’s own retrospective, written in 1859, which points to the first sketch of the materialist conception of history in the German Ideology (1845) as his work of self-clarification and, presumably, his entry into maturity.1 My point in raising this is not simply to quibble about when Marx matured, but to note that this question of intellectual biography has a methodological flip-side that involves the relation between historical theory (the materialist conception of history developed in The German Ideology) and the analysis of a specific socio-economic form (developed in the Grundrisse and Capital). A joint consideration of these two matters gives rise to the following questions: was Marx’s work ‘only’ a critique of capitalism? Was his entire intellectual career a continual shedding of his various theoretical skins until he was able to focus exclusively and clearly on capitalism? Were those metamorphoses all

sublated in *Capital* as the materialist counterpart to Hegel’s *Logic*? Or did Marx construct his critique of capital by deploying the fundamental guiding threads that made up his materialist conception of history in a historically-specific manner – in which case they would be applicable to other socio-economic forms.

Perhaps the best way to present the problem is by reflecting on Postone’s own description of his intention to reinterpret Marx’s critique of capitalism by ‘reconstruct[ing] its systematic nature and recover[ing] its internal logic’.\(^2\) Necessarily central to this ambitious reconstruction is the attempt

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\text{to interpret the fundamental categories of Marx’s critique of political economy}
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in \text{as logically coherent and systematically powerful a way as possible, in}
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\text{order to work out the theory of the core of capitalism – that which defines}
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\text{capitalism as such throughout its various stages – implied by those categories}.\(^3\)
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Refuting those who narrowly understand Marx’s categories in purely economic terms, Postone claims that in order fully to grasp ‘the breadth and systematic nature of Marx’s critical theory’, those categories must be understood ‘as determinations of social being in capitalism’.\(^4\) And his reconstruction most successfully demonstrates that Marx’s ‘analysis of labor in capitalism is historically specific, and [that] his mature critical theory is a critique of labor in capitalism, not a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor’.\(^5\) The ‘radical’ character of *Capital*, he shows, is that it does not stop at a critique of the social distribution of wealth, but digs deeper to expose the roots of the problem, demonstrating that ‘the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist totality [is] intrinsic to the realm of production itself’.\(^6\)

This understanding of *Capital’s* focus on the very constitution of labour in capitalism enabled Postone, in a prefatory section, to sharply differentiate Marx’s critical theory from ‘traditional Marxism’. Despite its success, traces of a problem concerning categorial construction begin to appear in the course of this differentiation. The categories of traditional Marxism are, Postone correctly argues, transhistorical and ontological – ‘labour’, for example, being treated as the ‘transhistorical essence of social life’, ‘the ontological ground of society – that which constitutes, determines, and causally controls social

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\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Postone 1993, p. 18.

\(^5\) Postone 1993, p. 22.

\(^6\) Postone 1993, p. 124.