Concept

The fact that the production of use-values, or goods, is carried on under the control of a capitalist and on his behalf does not alter the general character of that production.\(^1\)

In *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Moishe Postone aims at recovering the internal logic of the Marxian critique and ‘to interpret the fundamental categories of Marx’s critique of political economy in as logically coherent and systematically powerful way as possible’.\(^2\) The key to this recovery is the claim that ‘labor grounds its own social character in capitalism’,\(^3\) inflated into the single structuring principle which sustains capital. Since the self-grounding or self-mediation of labour in capitalism has not hitherto been recognised, its appearance in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is that of a revelation. Certainly, it is deployed to reveal the limitations of ‘Traditional Marxism’, defined as any account of Marx’s theory

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\(^1\) Marx 1976, p. 284.
\(^3\) Postone 1996, p. 151.
that is not illuminated by this category. According to Postone, labour – ‘historically specific rather than transhistorical’, as he interprets it – is the category Marx employed in his mature writings. The lines quoted above are not intended to demonstrate that Postone’s interpretation of Marx’s concept of labour is simply wrong, but rather to indicate that Marx’s writings are insufficiently univocal to support the type of uncompromising interpretation Postone makes of them. At one point Postone is on the verge of recognising this difficulty. ‘The definitions [Marx] provides of abstract labor in Capital, Chapter One,’ he writes, ‘are very problematic’. But, unlike some contributors to the value controversy which dates back to the early 1970s – and a body of literature that Postone scarcely acknowledges –, he does not explore the unresolved ambiguity which allows Marx’s writings to be cited in support of radically different interpretations of the theory of value. To the contrary, he builds this ambiguity into his own work, where the resulting inconsistencies put his already questionable notion of labour as self-grounding or self-mediating under intolerable strain.

Quotations from Capital cannot settle the ambiguity that Marx left unresolved in his theory of value and labour, but they are useful as illustrations of it. Take for instance, two sentences from the first section of Chapter One of Capital, quoted by Postone:

Socially necessary labor-time is the labor required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labor prevalent in that society.

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4 According to Postone, ‘[t]he term “traditional Marxism” refers not to a specific historical tendency in Marxism but more generally to all theoretical approaches that analyze capitalism from the standpoint of labor and characterize that society essentially in terms of class relations, structured by private ownership of the means of production and a market regulated economy. Relations of domination are understood primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation’. Postone 1996, p. 7.

5 Postone 1996, p. 4.

6 As Postone puts it: ‘… [M]arx’s [mature] analysis does not refer to labor as it is generally and transhistorically conceived – a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating specific products in order to satisfy determinate human needs – but to a peculiar role that labor plays in capitalist society alone. As I shall elaborate, the historically specific character of this labor is intrinsically related to the form of social interdependence characteristic of capitalist society. It constitutes a historically specific, quasi-objective form of social mediation that, within the framework of Marx’s analysis, serves as the ultimate social ground of modernity’s basic features’, Postone 1996, pp. 4–5.


8 Postone 1996, p. 190.