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The Dual Form of Labour in Capitalist Society and the Struggle over Meaning: Comments on Postone

The revival of anticapitalist protest and resistance may very well represent a new context for recoveries and extensions of critical Marxism.\(^1\) While periods of retreat and decomposition of working-class movements and the socialist Left have invariably produced excited obituaries proclaiming the obsolescence of Marx’s legacy, moments of radicalisation have stimulated rediscoveries of forgotten revolutionary dimensions of Marx’s own thought – one need think only of the recovery of the dialectical core of Marxism by the likes of Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci in the aftermath of the October Revolution, or the Marxist renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, any assessment of a major re-interpretation of Marx’s critical theory takes on heightened importance. We are not simply discussing the strengths and weaknesses of a brilliant theoretical paradigm, we are also debating a critical perspective for ‘storming the heavens’.

\(^1\) I would like to thank Sue Ferguson for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.
Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination*\(^2\) deserves to be read and debated in these terms. Postone offers us one of the most comprehensive and stimulating re-readings of Marx’s thought in many years; his book helps to clear away many cobwebs of confusions. At the same time, I will argue, Postone muddies the water in crucial areas that directly concern prospects for anticapitalist social transformation. These shortcomings – having to do especially with the dialectics of labour, social mediation, meaning, and class struggle – will form the focus of my discussion. But, before proceeding to these, I wish to acknowledge Postone’s achievements.

**Critical achievements**

Postone’s re-reading of Marx performs the valuable service of cutting through a whole host of confusions that have plagued vulgar Marxisms. While these points have been made by previous commentators, this does not detract from the importance of Postone’s book in bringing them together in a particularly coherent account. Six specific critical achievements are worthy of note.

First, Postone effectively debunks views which define capitalism in terms of private ownership of the means of production and market allocation of goods – and which depict the socialist project in terms of freeing modern industrial production from these ‘fetters’. In contrast, he argues that the very relations, structures and inscribed logic of modern production are capitalist. Secondly, he maintains that Marx’s concept of value is a category of the productive process, and not simply one that pertains to the market.\(^3\) Indeed, he suggests that value relations structure crucial forms of experience of all members of capitalist society, particularly the experience of time. Thirdly, he delineates alienation and reification as central categories of Marx’s mature theory, concluding that the transcendence of capitalism crucially involves the abolition of alienated labour. Following from all of the above, he insists, fourthly, that the mere transfer of ownership of the means of production from a class of private owners to the state does not represent the overcoming of capitalism, but merely a change in its form.\(^4\) He thus argues, fifthly, that only a society based upon fundamentally different forms of social mediation – of relations among workers, the means of production, the natural environment

\(^2\) Postone 1996.
\(^3\) Postone 1996, p. 44.
\(^4\) Postone 1996, pp. 7, 40, 45.