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Postone's Marx: A Theorist of Modern Society, Its Social Movements and Its Imprisonment by Abstract Labour

In the first section of this essay, I will outline some of the basic arguments of Moishe Postone’s book, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, focusing on the pivotal concepts abstract labour, class, value and time. After outlining abstract labour – the most basic category in Postone’s conception – I will explore Postone’s concept of class. The discussion of the concept of value refers back to that of abstract labour. The concept of time will take the most of this section because it seems to me to be Postone’s most original contribution. Its implications for the concept of history are pivotal to what I will develop in the third part of this essay. In the second section, I will contrast the presentation of Postone’s conception with a discussion of some of the criticisms raised by reviewers of the book. In the third part, I will explore the relevance of the concepts of time and history for understanding the historical dynamic specific to modern bourgeois society and the logic of social movements in this society.

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1 This essay owes a lot to comments by Lars Stubbe, Hamburg and Christine Achinger, Nottingham, on earlier drafts, and the latter’s unpublished presentation on Postone (Achinger 1999).
Moishe Postone’s readings of abstract labour, class, value and time

Mediation by abstract labour as the ‘social mediation in capitalism’ is the focal point of Moishe Postone’s ‘reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory’. Postone states that Marx’s theory of capitalism is a critical theory of the nature of modernity itself, namely of modern society as a directionally dynamic society based on a unique form of social mediation that is abstract and impersonal. It aims to show that labour in capitalist society plays a historically unique role in mediating social relations. The real abstraction of life under capital is also the source of the typically modern intellectual reflections of abstraction:

The peculiar nature of social mediation in capitalism gives rise to an antinomy – so characteristic of modern Western worldviews – between a ‘secularized’, ‘thingly’ concrete dimension and a purely abstract dimension, whereby the socially constituted character of both dimensions, as well as their intrinsic relation, is veiled.

In commodity-determined society, the same labour appears twice, as concrete useful labour and as abstract value-creating labour. Abstract human labour is considered the ‘social substance’ common to all particular forms of productive activity. This overall commonality appears to be the ‘expenditure of human energy in (any) physiological form’, that is a transhistorical, physiological residue. But, as Marx stresses, the objectivity of values is ‘purely social’. Being the core structure of a historically specific social formation, that of the capitalist mode of production, abstract labour is not a transhistorical substance, but a historically and socially determined one. The statement that, in any society, humans interact with nature is a truism of little explanatory power. The point is how interaction constitutes society: ‘[L]abor as such does not constitute society per se; labor in capitalism, however, does constitute that society’.

Concrete labour is understood hereby as any intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion; abstract labour is the function of such labours

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2 Postone 1993, p. 4.
3 Postone 1993, p. 16.
5 All the following is, of course, based on the concept of the commodity-form in Marx 1976, Chapter One.
7 Ibid. Wording by I.I. Rubin.