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**Subject and Counter-Subject**

Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is a rich text containing much of interest that I cannot discuss here (for example, the notion of ‘abstract time’). I wish to respond to just two of its central ideas. First, he argues that capital is the self-constituted ‘Subject’ of our epoch, glossing ‘Subject’, and its movement, in the Hegelian sense. Here, I agree one hundred per cent. Second, he denies that the critique we require is to be rooted in the social standpoint of the proletariat. Here, I disagree fifty per cent.

**The Hegelian Subject**

To begin with, then, let us review Postone’s position on the ‘subject’ of our epoch and the relevance of Hegel in this. The debate on the relation of Hegel and Marx has too often been posed as a rigid dichotomy: if Marx was not a Hegelian, then he must have rejected all Hegel’s insights, with any residue of Hegel’s turns of phrase being merely stylistic and insubstantial; conversely, if Marx’s debt to Hegel was real, then Hegel’s method must be taken on board wholesale and Marx’s disagreement with Hegel obtains only at the substantive level of social analysis.
Postone takes a middle position through the strategic relocation of Hegelian dialectic from a universal logic to a specifically capitalist one. What Hegel presented in affirmative terms as the historical process of the self-realisation of Spirit, Postone presents critically as the specifically capitalist development of the domination of totalising abstraction. ‘Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism ... that the social relations that characterize capitalism ... possess the attributes that Hegel accorded the Geist’.

In other words, Hegel grasped the contradictory social forms of capitalism but ‘not in their historical specificity’. Thus:

The structure of the dialectical unfolding of Marx’s argument in *Capital* should be understood as a metacommentary on Hegel. Marx did not ‘apply’ Hegel to classical political economy but contextualized Hegel’s concepts in terms of the social forms of capitalist society.

Whereas a simple inversion of Hegel produces a materialist philosophy of history founded in some a priori dialectical schema, the real achievement of Marx’s critique of political economy is to socially specify the forms which Hegel’s concepts absolutise and idealise. In these forms a historical ‘logic’ can indeed be seen; but it is one restricted to the parameters of capitalist development, because its social forms are uniquely constituted through material abstraction in a way that grounds a dialectic. The method corresponds to the object. Postone also correctly argues that the object is developed capitalist society; only there do we see ‘a totalizing category’, namely value.

As Postone says,

other social formations are not so totalized: their fundamental social relations are not qualitatively homogeneous. They cannot be ... unfolded from a single structuring principle, and they do not display an immanent, necessary historical logic.

Postone rightly twits those ‘post-Marxists’ and ‘postmodernists’ who deny the validity of the category of totality, as if Hegel and Marx were at fault; whereas Hegel, uncritically, and Marx, critically, reflect the totalising logic of the value-form which imposes itself in such a manner that all relationships

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1 Postone 1993, p. 75.
2 Postone 1993, p. 81.
3 Ibid.
5 Postone 1993, p. 79.