Intervention

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The Politics of Beyond ‘Capital’

My cup runneth over. Not only did the four contributors (and the editor) for the Historical Materialism symposium on Beyond ‘Capital’ (HM 14, 2) celebrate the general project and its most important arguments but, in questioning some aspects, they push me to expand on matters not developed and, even, not fully comprehended. What more could I ask for?

Beyond ‘Capital’ is about class struggle. Not only the struggle of capital against workers (given the drive of capital for surplus-value) that Capital introduces but also the struggle of workers against capital because of ‘the worker’s own need for development’. And this means that we not only see another side of capitalism; we also see another side of capital – how, in order to defeat workers, every aspect of capital necessarily contains within it the drive to increase the degree of separation among workers.¹

¹ I develop this argument further in the Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture for 2005 (Lebowitz 2006a). Until we consider the side of wage-labour explicitly, we cannot understand capital as permeated by two-sided class struggle; this seems to be the basis of disagreement with Werner Bonefeld, who appears prepared to accept capital as it first presents itself.
Beyond “Capital” is about political economy. Not only Marx’s critique of the political economy of capital but also that other political economy he noted – the political economy of the working class. In developing the latter, we see that it both demonstrates the one-sidedness of tendencies and concepts presented in Capital and also points to the alternative society of associated producers.

The book sums up its arguments by proposing that the continuation of Marx’s work involves revealing capital as the workers’ own product turned against them, working for unity in struggle, stressing the centrality of revolutionary practice for the self-development of the collective worker and setting out the vision of a feasible alternative.2

Not good enough, say several contributors: where is the political theory? Their comments, the editor Pablo Ghigliani notes, suggest that ‘the gap between class struggle within capitalism and revolutionary action is only slightly touched by Beyond “Capital”.’3 Since I agree with him about the ‘centrality for socialist politics’ of this question, I accept his recommendation that the political theory implicit in the book be the focus of my reply.4

Colin Barker concludes his excellent contribution to the symposium by stressing the need to go beyond a political economy of the working class to a political theory for the working class. Revolutionary socialism, he proposes, needs revolutionary theory – theory which is not only ‘oriented to the self-production of a movement with the real capacity to revolutionise the world and in the process itself and its participants’,5 but which also can be ruthlessly realistic about the strengths and weaknesses of the workers’ movement (thereby providing guidance on matters of strategy and tactics).

Barker’s sense that Beyond ‘Capital’ lacked such a theory is supported by the most challenging of the essays, that by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin. Why did I not go beyond the citations of Marx to engage the ‘vast Marxist literature on working-class politics’ and to consider the 150 year-old history

3 Ghigliani 2006.
4 Since the symposium contributors deserve my reaction to their concerns and doubts on other matters, I will try to incorporate these briefly in the context of my response. The criticism by several contributors of my lack of consideration of the ‘competition of capitals’, however, raises specific methodological issues and is the subject of a separate appendix.
5 Barker 2006.