

# MOISHE POSTONE'S CRITICAL THEORY

A Tribute

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## ABSTRACT

This paper was presented orally at the *11th International Critical Theory Conference in Rome*, held in May 2018. Just two months after the passing of theorist Moishe Postone, I decided to change the theme of my presentation, which would deal with Marx and the category of mode of production, and pay this tribute to Postone's theory.

## KEYWORDS

Moishe Postone; critical theory; capital; Karl Marx, theory of history; historical materialism; dialectics

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# A TEORIA CRÍTICA DE MOISHE POSTONE

Um tributo

## RESUMO

Este texto foi apresentado oralmente na *11th International Critical Theory Conference in Rome*, que ocorreu em maio de 2018. Apenas dois meses após o falecimento do teórico Moishe Postone. Por isso, na ocasião, decidi mudar o tema de minha apresentação, que trataria de Marx e da categoria de modo de produção, e prestar esta homenagem à teoria de Postone.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Moishe Postone; teoria crítica; capital; Karl Marx, teoria da história; materialismo histórico; dialética

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## Introduction

On March 19th, 2018, professor Moishe Postone passed away. Therefore, instead of talking about Marx and the category of mode of production, I decided to take advantage of this chance to present some aspects of the critical theory developed by Postone, mainly in the book *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993). I shall begin with a brief summary of his theory, following with the issue on the revolutionary subject and I will bring this communication to a closure with some critical remarks.

Postone, although claiming not having been discussed inside the Critical Theory<sup>1</sup> tradition, was an extremely important researcher to that field and to Marxism. In my research, particularly, his work was central in my reconstruction of the category mode of production throughout Marx's intellectual development. In a more determinant way, two central aspects of his work guided my readings of the *Grundrisse* via the category mode of production. First, the idea that a theory is only valid within a determined sociohistorical context. That is, there wouldn't be theories or categories of analysis transhistorically valid. Second, the recovery of the notion of real subsumption of labor under capital, in a specific sense, which will lead to the idea of the treadmill dynamic. With these two clues, I found a correlation between fixed capital and mode of production in the *Grundrisse*. The fixed capital [Fixes Capital, Capital fixe] would be the development index of the capitalist mode of production, operating since then as a criterion for the emergence of the real subsumption. These two ideas are just a small part of a theory with multiple dimensions.

Among other things, Postone addresses, in a controversial way, issues on the labor theory of value (identifying theory of value with theory of fetishism, providing a new interpretation of abstract labor), on the dialectical method (the correlation between Marx and Hegel, the notion of a transhistorical theory

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<sup>1</sup> Postone states to Briaies that he didn't get any answer to his critiques: "Well, certainly not from Habermas, neither from his followers, because they keep a great distance from everything that has to do with Marx" [Bueno, por lo menos de Habermas seguro que no, ni tampoco de los seguidores de Habermas, porque ellos mantienen una enorme distancia con todo lo que tiene que ver con Marx] (Briaies 2014: 59; statement made by Postone; our translation)

is presented in a new perspective), on the historical dynamic specific to capitalism (through a reinterpretation of the concept of capital) and on the issue of the revolutionary subject (no longer identified with the proletariat). Not only that, Postone intends to overcome the dichotomy structure and action. In parallel, Postone criticizes all previous Marxists interpreters (from Lukács to Althusser, for example), with the concept of traditional Marxism, as well as trying to show paths not taken by the critical theory all the way up to Habermas.<sup>2</sup>

By reinterpreting Marx's critical theory, Postone's objective is to produce a theory able to criticize the nature of the modern capitalist society in its various concrete formations.<sup>3</sup> On a different way, Postone tries to work out a sufficiently abstract characterization of capital that would be able to provide us with critical elements to analyze the various concrete historical formations of the capitalist society.<sup>4</sup> On this issue, I bring in advance an external critique to Postone. His theory remains in an extremely elevated level of abstraction. After all, what would it mean to abolish [*aufheben*] the abstract domination? Or to

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2 Moreover, accordingly to Postone, the problem of Habermas's theory comes to the surface when faced with the ongoing economy crisis. In an interview Postone claimed: "It can be said a lot of things about the crisis, however those things have little to do with the Habermas's theory" [Se pueden decir muchas cosas sobre la crisis, pero éstas no tienen mucho que ver con la teoría de Habermas] (Briales 2014: 59; statement made by Postone; our translation)

3 "Each configuration has elicited a number of penetrating critiques – of exploitation and uneven, inequitable growth, for example, or of technocratic, bureaucratic modes of domination. Each of these critiques, however, is incomplete; as we now see, capitalism cannot be identified fully with any of its historical configurations. This raises the question of the core nature of that social formation" (Postone 2004b: 56).

4 "I argue that, at the heart of capitalism, is a historically dynamic process that is associated with multiple historical configurations" (Postone 2004b: 57).

abolish [*aufheben*] value? These are serious political issues, and in a certain way, recognized by the author in different interviews.<sup>5</sup> Now back to the previous issue. To provide such general analysis of capitalist society, Postone needs to reinterpret the concept of capital as a concept that relates to a determined form of historical dynamic.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, capital would be the Hegelian subject or the Geist capable of producing a historical dynamic.

Simultaneously, Postone moves away from the reconstructions of Marx undertaken by traditional Marxism and criticizes the paths of critical theories up to Habermas. To do so, Postone states that the Marxist theories up till then were critics of capitalism from the point of view of labor, and not critics of labor in capitalism. That is, they assumed labor as a transhistorical category from which it would be possible to expose capital's exploitation. That way, traditional Marxism understands the capitalist society as a society dominated by antagonistic class relations, structured by the private ownership of means of pro-

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5 "If it is stated that the logic [of capital] leads to the abolition of proletarian labor, then, one must admit that it raises very serious political issues: how do you organize yourself? Because you can no longer simply organize yourself around the working classes interests. You would have to organize yourself – and that's very difficult, around the idea of a new social organization that would be a lot more than just the collective distribution of goods." ["Si se afirma que la lógica [del capital] lleva a la abolición del trabajo proletario, entonces, hay que admitir que se plantean asuntos políticos serios: ¿cómo te organizas? Porque ahí ya no te puedes organizar simplemente alrededor de los intereses de la clase trabajadora. Habría que organizarse, y esto es muy difícil, bajo la idea de una nueva organización social que fuese mucho más que la distribución colectiva de los bienes y servicios"] (Briales 2014: 62; statement made by Posotne; our translation).

6 "I argue that at the heart of capitalism is a historically dynamic process, associated with multiple historical configurations, which Marx sought to grasp with the category of capital" (Postone 2009a: 37).

duction and regulated by the market. Domination would primarily be a type of class domination, and the extraction of surplus value would be the focus of capitalist exploitation. The relations of production and the forces of production, in this interpretation, would be in contradiction insofar as the market and the private property (relations of production) would oppose themselves to the industrial mode of production (forces of production). The forces of production would be the locus of the emancipated society. In that sense, one should abolish the regulation of production by the market by setting in its place the collective planning, and abolish private property in favor of the collective ownership of the means of production. In short, traditional Marxism would focus its critiques on the mode of distribution and not on the capitalist mode of production.

In an analogous way, Postone pinpoints in a transhistorical interpretation of the category of labor the impasses of the critical theory. There are three key moments in which Postone demonstrates that the pessimistic turn of the critical theory and its unfolding into Habermas does not only concern the historical context of the World Wars, of Nazism and fascism, but also concerns the limited understanding of the historical configuration of capitalism. We are referring to Chapter 3 “Limits of traditional Marxism and the pessimistic turn of Critical Theory”, Chapter 6 “Habermas’s critique of Marx” from *Time, Labor and Social Domination* and Postone’s chapter “Critique, state, and economy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*. Briefly, Postone’s thesis is that the category of labor in Marx has not only a technical dimension, but also an interaction dimension.

Labor in capitalism would be a form of social mediation that passes through and forms the entire capitalist society.

A series of issues presents itself to Postone while trying to demonstrate that labor is the form of social mediation only in capitalism and that the labor theory of value is a theory of a specific form of wealth in capitalism. To do so, our author must appeal to the *Grundrisse* to reread the categories of the critique of political economy of the *Capital*. In the *Grundrisse*,<sup>7</sup> Postone finds the categories of material wealth and of value,<sup>8</sup> and with these categories, Postone points out that the central contradiction to capitalism is not the one between capital and labor, but rather, the one between the productive potential of material

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7 “My reading of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, a preliminary version of his fully developed critique of political economy, has led me to reevaluate the critical theory he developed in his mature writings, particularly in *Capital*” (Postone 2003: 15; 2014a: 30). It could be argued that in Postone’s interpretation of Marx, the *Grundrisse* becomes the source of understanding and reading of *The Capital*. However, it is not self-evident why one should read *The Capital* from the standpoint of a set of notebooks from 1857. Postone argues that the *Grundrisse*, in so far as it is not a completed work and thus not fully structured, may shed some light on “the general strategic intent of Marx’s categorial analysis” (Postone 2003: 21). Furthermore, the analysis of capitalism in the *Grundrisse* would still have contemporary significance.

8 “What underlies the central contradiction of capitalism, according to Marx, is that *value* remains the determining form of wealth and of social relations in capitalism, regardless of developments in productivity; however, *value* also becomes increasingly anachronistic in terms of the *material wealth*-producing potential of the productive forces to which it gives rise” (Postone 2003: 197; 2014a: 229, emphasis added). Further remarks about the central contradiction: “The basic contradiction in capitalism, seen thus, is grounded in the fact that the form of social relations and wealth, as well as the concrete form of the mode of production, remain determined by value even as they become anachronistic from the viewpoint of the material wealth-creating potential of the system” (Postone 2003: 232; 2014a: 268). And: “It suggests that Marx’s notion of capitalism’s fundamental contradiction is ultimately one of a contradiction between the *potential* of the species-general capabilities the have been accumulated, and their *existent, alienated form* as constituted by the dialectic of the two dimensions of labor and of time” (Postone 2003: 360; 2014a: 418).

wealth and the social measure of wealth conducted by the value.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it is in the *Grundrisse* that Postone finds the notion of an abstract domination and the idea that Marx would have abandoned the possibility of establishing a theory with transhistorical categories.

Unfortunately, since I will not be able to develop all these aspects in this communication, I decided to follow my presentation with the importance of Lukács in the interpretation of Postone, in the sense that he points to a new interpretation of the historical subject and, from that, demonstrate how Postone understands the political role of the labor movements and of the social movements. Lastly, I will present some of my general critiques to Postone's theory, bringing my presentation to a closure.

## Subject, historical agency and social movements

Postone owes a great intellectual debt to Lukács, precisely the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* [*Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923)].<sup>10</sup> This is especially true in the aspect that Lukács' theory does not assume the categories of Marx's

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9 Evidently this specific form of wealth that is measured by value is linked to the role of labor in our society. About this, writes Postone: "He [Marx] analyzes value as a historically specific form of wealth, which is bound to the historically unique role of labor in capitalism; as a form of wealth, it is also a form of social mediation" (Postone 2009a: 39).

10 "This reading of *Capital* appropriates Lukács's understanding of Marx's categories as subjective and objective, cultural and social" (Postone 2009b: 71).



mature critique as only economical categories. The commodity form (*Warenform*) does not only concern the economic sphere. Rather, Lukács operates with these categories as containing not only objective, but also subjective dimensions, expressing modern social life.<sup>11</sup> One of the bases of this standpoint regarding the economical categories would be the famous passage in the Introduction (*Einleitung*) to the *Grundrisse* known as *the method of Political Economy*, it follows:

In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject [*Subjekt*] – here, modern bourgeois society [*moderne bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]– is always what is given, in the head as well in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being [*Daseinsformen*], the characteristics of existence [*Existenzbestimmungen*], and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore thus society by no means beings only at the point where one can speak of it *as such*; this holds *for science as well* (Marx 1993: 106; Marx 2011: 59).

Another crucial aspect of Lukács' theory to Postone, but now in a negative sense, is in the way that Lukács interprets the Hegelian *Geist* (Spirit - *Geist*) in an anthropological manner. Hegel, according to Postone's interpretation, appeals to the notion of *Geist*, as the world-historical Subject, to overcome the dichotomy of subject and object. Lukács, in turn, identifies the *Geist* with the proletariat. However, Marx himself, according to

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<sup>11</sup> "Lukács's theory of praxis – especially as developed in his essay, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' – does not grasp the categories of Marx's mature critique, such as the commodity, simply as economic categories. Instead, Lukács interprets them as determinations of both subjective and objective dimensions of modern social life" (Postone 2009b: 64).

Postone, attributes in a materialist manner the features that would be of the *Geist* to the concept of capital. From that, Postone concludes:

This, in turn, indicates that the most fundamental social relations at his [Marx's] critique's center cannot be adequately understood in terms of social class relations but as forms of social mediation expressed by categories such as commodity and capital. Marx's Subject is like Hegel's: it is abstract and cannot be identified with any social actors; moreover, it unfolds temporally independent of will (Postone 2009a: 70).

This way, Postone starts to re-elaborate the concept of capital, now understood in the terms of the Hegelian *Geist*, as possessing the capacity to produce a peculiar historical logic to capitalism. This leads to the statement that there's one and only a historical logic in capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

In this reconstruction, Postone, on the one hand, demonstrates that the logic of capital points beyond the working class,<sup>13</sup> and, on the other, if the historical subject becomes the

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12 "The existence of a historical logic is not, within this framework, a characteristic of human history as such but, rather, a historically specific, distinguishing feature of capitalism that Hegel (and Lukács, and most Marxist thinkers) projected transhistorically onto all of human social life as History" (Postone 2009b: 72). It follows that Postone rejects any attempt to work out a historical materialism or a theory of history from Marx's mature work.

13 For Postone, the logic of capital points beyond the working class: "the logic of capital points beyond the [working] class. Most of the theories based on class (...) are going to point to a form of State Capitalism or to a Social Democracy" ["es que la lógica del capital apunta más allá de la clase [trabajadora]. Y la mayoría de las teorías basadas en la clase, creo que después del siglo XX podemos afirmar que, o van a apuntar a una forma de capitalismo de Estado, o a una socialdemocracia"] (Briales 2014: 61; statement made by Postone; our translation). This has a political implication. If the capitalist logic points beyond the working class, how should we organize ourselves? We cannot simply organize ourselves around the interests of the working class. But according to

capital, that means that the social movements, although having historical agency, are not historical subjects. Postone discusses this issue in an interview:

I would like to tell apart between the Hegelian subject and the historical agent. I believe that the working class has and has had historical agency, however, it is not a subject. I think Marx meant as he has described the category of capital with help of Hegelian language is that the subject is a category of the alienated history and that emancipation implies overcoming subject [that means overcome the capital as historical subject].<sup>14</sup>

These two issues imply a new notion of emancipation and of emancipatory action, with serious political implications. A necessary condition for emancipation would be to abolish value as a form of social mediation. But, to do so, brings up the issue of who or what would be the possible agent of this determinate negation of capitalism. For Postone, the class struggle<sup>15</sup> only places itself inside the framework of capitalism, not necessarily

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what interests then?

14 “Me gustaría distinguir entre lo que es ser sujeto hegeliano y agente histórico. Creo que la clase trabajadora puede y ha tenido agencia histórica pero, sin embargo, no es el sujeto. Creo que lo que Marx apuntaba al describir la categoría de capital con el lenguaje de Hegel es que el sujeto es una categoría de la historia alienada y que la emancipación implica la superación del sujeto” (Postone’s interview to *Periódico Diagonal*, 2013; our translation).

15 “According to the logic of Marx’s analysis, the working class, rather than embodying a possible future society, is the necessary basis of the present under which it suffers; it is tied to the existing order in a way that makes it the object of history.” (Postone 2003: 357; 2014a: 414). “[T]his approach rejects the idea that the proletariat represents a social counterprinciple to capitalism. According to Marx, manifestations of class struggle between the representatives of capital and the workers over working-time issues or the relationship of wages and profits, for example, are structurally intrinsic to capitalism, hence an important constitutive element of the dynamic of that system” (Postone 2003: 36-7).

pointing beyond it. In other words, the interests of the working class would not be emancipatory on its own.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the development of capital itself would lead to the crisis of labor.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, according to Postone, on the one hand, there would be a lack of an adequate concept of capital to the social movements, that would be able to cope with a historical view for the long-term,<sup>18</sup> and, on the other, it would be necessary to focus on the attempt of creating some sort of internationalism.<sup>19</sup>

16 In an interview to Silvia Lopez, Postone states yet again that the abolishment of capitalism is the abolishment of proletarian labor and, in an analogous way, that defending the interests of the working class doesn't hold any correlation with the overcoming of capitalism. "Rather, overcoming capitalism implies overcoming proletarian labor as sine qua non condition. [...] there is not a linear continuity between defending labor class interests and overcoming capitalism" ["Más bien, la abolición del capitalismo requiere la abolición del trabajo proletario como condición sine qua non. (...) no hay una continuidad lineal entre la defensa de los intereses de los trabajadores y la superación del capitalismo"] (López 2012: 379; statement made by Postone; our translation). "This implies [Postone's critical theory] that there is no linear continuum between the demands and conceptions of the working class historically constituting and asserting itself and the needs, demands, and conceptions that point beyond capitalism" (Postone 2003: 37; 2014a: 54).

17 Postone presents his take on the ongoing crisis: "I argue [instead] that the real development of capital leads precisely to a crisis of the labor and not to his expansion, and it is this crisis of labor that we are living in now" ["Mi argumento [en cambio] es que el desarrollo real del capital lleva precisamente a una crisis del trabajo y no a su expansión y que esta crisis del trabajo es la que hoy estamos viviendo"] (Postone's interview to Actis and Riesco, *Periódico Diagonal*, our translation).

18 For Postone, the identity movements could be considered post-proletarians, however, not necessarily progressive. What is at stake is how they relate themselves with a long-term social dynamic. "Those movements [of women, of blacks, of gay, of Mexicans] are very important, but their self-understanding should be more connected to long-term historical developments" ["Estos movimientos son muy importantes pero su autocomprensión debería estar más interconectada con los desarrollos a largo plazo"] (Postone's interview to Actis and Riesco, *Periódico Diagonal*, our translation).

19 "I'm trying to retrieve a concept of capital, which I believe left-wing social movements has lost. [...] It is pressing to create a new form of internationalism, that is really international and not just a sum of good and bad nationalism" ["Estoy intentando recuperar um concepto de capital que creo que los movimientos sociales de izquierdas

Unfortunately, I won't be able to develop this issue here. I'll just point to the fact that Postone postulates extremely abstract criteria to evaluate the social movements, that is, the type of universality that guides their political actions.

### **An evaluation of Postone's Critical Theory**

As we can see, in the aspect of his interpretation of the social and labor movements, Postone's critical theory can be very controversial. If, on the one hand, he is probably right to make us pay attention to the necessity of a concept of capital that provides elements to analyze the historical dynamics of our society, on the other, his criteria of evaluation of what would be an emancipatory action can be considered highly abstract and restrictive. Besides, Postone sets as a horizon of work for the social movements the formation of a new internationalism. However, the author does not specify exactly how this would be possible.

There are still two blind spots of his theory that deserve a brief observation. Firstly, Postone, disregarding Marx's writing, completely ignores the category mode of production. Secondly, Postone does not offer any type of theoretical or historical explanation for the emergence of capitalism itself.

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han perdido. [...] es urgente crear una nueva forma de internacionalismo, que sea realmente internacional y no sólo una suma de nacionalismos Buenos y malos”] (Postone's interview to Actis and Riesco, *Periódico Diagonal*, our translation).

## Closing remarks

It is easy to be frightened by this reinterpretation of Marx proposed by Postone. It is still even more tempting, all the times that Postone states that the class struggle, the surplus value, and the class exploitation are not central anymore, to confront him with various citations and passages of Marx's own work which seem to contradict him.

However, this procedure of mobilizing Marx against Postone or, the opposite, Marx in favor of Postone, does not advance the discussions in any way. They are easy expedients. Postone knows that he wrote and stated many controversial things – and even distant from Marx's own writing. Therefore, it will always be possible to hunt down a citation to either support or attack his positions. In the end, if we want to understand what it is of new that Postone's work brings to the debate in Marxism and critical theory, we must accept, to a certain extent, his boundary conditions. Postone postulates as a task to himself to elaborate a theory of the core of capitalism in contrast to the-ories of its past historical configurations.

That way, it's not about unveiling what Marx would have actually said; what is at stake is how, from Marx, can we move away from the theoretical and political dilemmas of the Marxist fortune and of the critical theory tradition. If Postone was successful or not in his undertaking, that is up to his readers.

At last, we must remember that for Postone, it is not about presenting the best theory, nor to assert that his is the best. On

the contrary, the general goal of his work is to suggest a change in the terms of debate.

Although this reinterpretation of the basic categories of Marx's mature critical theory renders plausible the notion that his theory could serve as the basis for a powerful critical social theory of the contemporary world, I do not claim to have demonstrated the adequacy of this theory as an analysis of capitalist, or modern, society. My reinterpretation does, however, transform fundamentally the terms with which the question of the adequacy of Marx's categorial analysis must be posed (Postone 2003: 394; 2014a: 457-6).

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