

On Postone¹

Postone's project – as he explains it – is to identify, or rethink, what is capitalist about capitalism. He notes that capitalism has assumed various 'social-political-economic-cultural configurations' in its history, and Postone enquires as to what is common – 'core' – to each of them. But this procedure, even if carried out 'retrospectively', is problematic; the question, in that it already assumes what it seeks to explain, is circular. If what is core to configurations of capitalism needs identifying, by what standard are these 'capitalisms' capitalist?

The difficulty is that Postone rules out a non-circular approach to this problem with his judgement that that the 'mature' Marx historically relativised what were for him previously 'transhistorical notion', restricting their validity to the capitalist mode of production. Thus, by situating his project within a rethinking of Marx in which 'Marxist' categories apply to where the operation of capitalist production predominates and here alone, Postone is left without categories by which to judge capitalist society (if I can for the moment use such a question-begging term) against other ones. Capitalism can only be analysed within its own terms of reference, and, as such, has to be assumed into existence.

Now, not to make too much of a fuss about it, I simply think that to say that Marx did historically relativise his concepts in this way is just wrong – wrong, in the sense of what it was that Marx said. On my reading, Marx deployed concepts of a historically specific character and concepts of a historically general character. In fact, what was specific to Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production on my reading of it was not to identify what was specific to capitalism but to identify what *was* specific to it and what was *not*. What I would argue – and this, naturally, is only *my* interpretation – is that what Marx set out was a distinction between material content and social form, in which what was specific to capitalism was the set of social determinations within which material production occurred. Indeed, I would go further and say that, from this, what distinguishes different modes of production from one another is what is different at the level of social determination (by which term I would understand as the character of the operative relations of production), and I would argue that this would be entirely consonant with what Marx set out to do.

Thus Marx's notion of the 'fetish' (i.e. what Marx understood as the 'fetish-like character of the commodity') was not just to show 'how that which is historically specific to capitalism can appear to be transhistorical' but to show how that which is historically specific to capitalism can appear to be 'transhistorical' if what is social is conceived of as material, if, concretely, what are social determinations are conceived as being material ones.

This is how I understand what Marx is trying to say at the opening of the *Grundrisse*:

The object before us, to begin with, material production.

Individuals producing in Society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure. [...]

Whenever we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development – production by social individuals. It might seem, therefore, that in order to talk about production at all we must either pursue the process of historic development through its different phases, or declare beforehand that we are dealing with a specific historic epoch such as e.g. modern bourgeois production, which is indeed our particular theme. However, all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics. Production in general is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition. Still, this general category, this common element sifted out by comparison, is itself segmented many times over and splits into different determinations. Some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few. [...]

¹ A comment on Moishe Postone, 'Rethinking the Critical Theory of Capitalism',

<<http://www.principiadialectica.co.uk/blog/?p=48>>. This note was first posted to the Marxmail mailing list (<<http://www.marxmail.org/>>).

This procedure leads Marx to trace the complex of determinations that lie behind ‘socially determined individual production’ in its concrete manifestation in then contemporary society, which led him to the conclusion that ‘the first category in which bourgeois wealth presents itself is that of the commodity’, from which, as the starting point for the exposition laid out in *Capital*, Marx built up the complex picture of bourgeois society as a ‘rich totality of many determinations and relations’.

Against this approach, for Postone, since what characterises capitalist society is not historically specific social forms but historically relativised ‘categorical totalities’, capitalist society, rather than standing as one historically specific social form amongst others now presents itself as *sui generis*. Thus the commodity, rather than referring to a historically specific social form of wealth now designates a whole ‘category of practice’. Capital, by the same token, now becomes a historical Subject, capital S, in its own right. Capitalism, thus dehistoricised, becomes not one stage of human history, but equivalent to human history itself.

There seems to be more than an element of reification to all this. Capital, which is a social relation before it is a thing, becomes, as would befit a social relation of ‘quasi-objective’ character, itself generative of the social relations within which of which it constitutes itself (not apparently, not as a way of speaking, but really so), social relations themselves no longer explicable through the existence of owners of capital and sellers of labour-power.

Given that human history is reduced to the capitalist mode of production, and the self-acting historical Subject is capital itself, it seems difficult to conceive within this system of what could bring it down – certainly not the socialist revolution on this model, which might go some way to explain Postone’s judgement on the Russian revolution and the Soviet experience (a revolution ‘against the flow of history’). That Postone thus leads us to such profoundly depressing political conclusions does not in itself demonstrate that he is wrong (although I think that he is); the way he gets there does, I think, demonstrate that he is not consonant with what Marx thought. Whether Marx, was right, is, of course, another question.

Now, it is not clear on the strength of this article whether this theoretical base leads automatically to the frankly outrageous and deeply reactionary characterisation of ‘Muslim fundamentalism’ as fascist (‘it very strongly echoes National Socialist ideology’). Nevertheless, for me, this judgement alone would be sufficient to cast real doubt as to the value of Postone’s analysis for Marxists.

León

March 2008