

# Preliminary Comments on Moishe Postone’s “Time, Labor, and Social Domination”

By Postliterate

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Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is an incredibly enticing project because it offers a wholesale reply to the dilemma posed by Baudrillard in *The Mirror of Production*, which is: How can Marxism effectively free itself from the categories of political economy, from its thought processes, metaphysics and ontology, etc.? As Baudrillard points out, the common understanding of Marx seems to only give a half-answer, that is, by critiquing exploitation, class, and market inefficiencies, but whilst putting undue trust into the categories of labor and productivity. Baudrillard doubles down on this, claiming that many Marxian doctrines feed directly into political economy’s logic by positing man as defined by her labor, that labor is transhistorical, that productivity is the law of the land, etc. In other words, in trying to free itself from modernity, Marxism appears only to adopt its categories a priori.

Postone offers a way out: by attacking the idea that Marx even claimed labor or productivity to be a transhistorical condition. A simple look through the [Gothakritik](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm) → <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm> and [Marx’s draft for an article on Friedrich List](http://hiaw.org/defcon6/works/1845/03/list.html) → <http://hiaw.org/defcon6/works/1845/03/list.html> finds seemingly opposing ideas of “labor” as a historically specific category under modernity; whether or not

these are merely issues of semantics or genuine conflicts in Marx's thought, hopefully Postone will address, as well as how this dilemma plays out in the rest of Marx's thought.

However, it is also likely Postone's thesis will require a degree of departure from Marx. Although Postone frames this departure as one away from "traditional Marxism" (implying his interpretation is more genuine), it remains undeniable that "traditional Marxism" is not a mere mistake. The view that communism is the mere application of productivity to the whole of society — the interpretation Postone decries as distributionist — is certainly present to some degree in the *Gothakritik* or the French Edition of *Capital*. It remains true that Marx expressed mild embarrassment over these texts, but they were still written and eventually published. Postone's reinterpretation, then, necessarily departs from the Marx of the French Edition of *Capital* in favor of the Marx of the *Grundrisse*, and other such analogies. There does exist another Marx, a Marx which saw a world beyond labor, but only in fits and starts. Postone probably should accept that he will be going beyond Marx in some ways — taking areas of Marx's work farther than Marx ever intended to — merely by attempting such a project.

Postone's project also gives an easy answer to the failures of 20th-century socialism, and an imminent critique of "actually existing socialism" and its theoretical derivatives. By attempting to describe capitalism from a more abstract and historical position, he lands the possibility of a much deeper critique of social domination than "traditional Marxists" or even anarchists alone can. Moreover, by pertinently addressing the condition of postmodernity, he highlights the historical boundaries of "traditional Marxism" out of the same critiques provided by Baudrillard (although I doubt Postone read Baudrillard.) Whether or not the answers Postone gives to the crisis of Marxism and of 20th-century socialism are simply *too easy* and fail to capture the complexity of things, is not clear for now.

Finally, there is a potential pitfall I see in Postone's project which I hope will be anticipated by him over the course of his work, which is: How does Postone understand abstract social domination in capitalism as sepa-

rate from past mechanisms of control? Moreover, what does he see in these past mechanisms of control that allowed capitalism to form? To what degree can we merely view capitalism as unique from the past and then oppose everything that makes it unique? To what degree does capital create tools for human liberation (i.e. technology), and how do we, in opposing capitalism, not simply create systems which regress to pre-capitalist modes of living? In short, how does Postone see that we can transcend capitalism out of its own mechanisms *and* transcend everything that came before capitalism?