

MOISHE POSTONE

THE CURRENT CRISIS AND THE
ANACHRONISM OF VALUE
A Marxian reading

Originally published on *Continental Thought Theory*, Volume 1, Issue 4: 150 years of *Capital*, pp. 53. Available on <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/14485/4%20Postone%20Capital%20.pdf?sequence=5/>

I

The election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote, and the wave of right wing populisms sweeping much of Europe, are expressions of a deep crisis of the political legitimacy of liberal democracies, as far-reaching and potentially dangerous as that in the interwar period in Europe.

This political crisis, one expression of which is the unhappy opposition of global neoliberalism and authoritarian nationalism, has its roots, arguably, in the overarching structural transformations of recent decades, which became manifest with the crash of the 2008 and its aftermath. In addition to eliciting the rise of movements such as Occupy and a wave of populisms – both of the Right and of the Left – in a number of countries, the crisis and the Great Recession have given new impetus to attempts to understand contemporary historical developments critically and in an encompassing manner. Relatedly, the term “capitalism” has been reintroduced to broader academic as well as general intellectual discussions as a conception that now appears more analytically adequate than that of “modernity,” which had been more dominant in the postwar decades.

Nevertheless, understandings of “capitalism” have varied considerably. On the basis of a rereading of Marx’s mature works, I suggest that a critical theory of capitalism should grasp it not only as a determinate form of inequality or, relatedly, as a system of exploitation based on class, a category that in recent years has been frequently joined with those of gender and race as categories of identity and oppression. More generally, an adequate critical theory of capitalism should not be understood only in terms of a critique of the dominant mode of distribution – namely, private ownership of the means of production and the market – as has arguably been the case with traditional

Marxism.

Rather, especially as viewed from the vantage of the present, I suggest that capitalism should first and foremost be understood as a historically specific form of social life, at the heart of which is a historically unique abstract form of domination that finds expression in a global historical dynamic. This form of life arose contingently in Western Europe, which it fundamentally transformed even as it also proceeded to transform and constitute the globe. That is, contrary to some assumptions that have become widespread, this form of life is not intrinsically or ontologically Western, but has itself reshaped the West. It cannot, therefore, be adequately grasped in reified culturalist terms. Rather, I would suggest, a theory that could adequately grasp the dynamic character of this form of social life can most rigorously be developed on the basis of a renewed encounter with Marx's mature works.

It is the case, of course, that for many, the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's transformation marked the final end of socialism and of the theoretical relevance of Marx. This demise was also expressed, on another level, by the emergence of other kinds of theoretical approaches, such as post-structuralism and deconstruction, which sought to provide critiques of domination that avoided what they regarded as the pitfalls of grand programs of human emancipation.

The current global crisis, however, has dramatically revealed the fundamental limitations of such newer approaches – including those associated with thinkers as disparate as Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida – as attempts to grasp the contemporary world. It also has exposed the one-sidedness of what had been termed the “cultural turn” in the humanities and the social sciences. The continued existence of severe economic crises as a feature of capitalist modernity, as well as the structural transformations of industrial societies (which recently have generated massive right-wing populist reactions), the existence of “premature de-industrialization” in other parts of the world (where the statist road to national capital accumulation no longer appears as a viable option), the growing financialization of social life, coupled with the prevalence of mass poverty, structural exploitation on a global scale, the dramatic growth of inequality, and – above all – the dual crisis of environmental degradation and the hollowing out of working society, call into question the triumphalism both of neo-liberalism and much of post-Marxism. It seems

that the downfall of what called itself “actually existing socialism” and the efflorescence of post-Marxist thought have not obviated the need for a critical theory of capitalism.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that one can simply return to Marx, as he generally was understood during much of the twentieth century. Both the demise of traditional Marxism and the increasingly manifest inadequacies of much post-Marxism are rooted in historical developments that suggest the need to rethink, as well as reappropriate, Marx.

II

My focus on the historically dynamic character of capitalist society attempts to respond to the pattern of overarching global transformations of the past century. As is well known, researchers such as Piketty, focusing on issues of inequality, have recently established the existence of an overarching historical pattern of changes in inequality that has characterized the past century – from a period of great inequality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to a period around the middle of the 20th century during which inequality was sharply reduced. This was followed after the early 1970s by a reversal – a sharp resurgence of increased inequality.

This pattern not only reveals the extreme skewing of wealth and political power in the contemporary world, but also calls into question understandings of modern historical developments in linear terms – as is arguably the case of modernization theory, for example.

Significantly, this pattern of changes in *inequality* is supranational and parallels other overarching patterns. For example, the average rate of *economic growth* for advanced capitalist countries was relatively low during the first half of the century, then more than doubled in the mid-20th century period – which was the period of lowest inequality. This then was reversed after the early 1970s: economic growth declined as inequality grew. Changes in *rates of GDP per capita* follow a similar pattern. They were relatively low during the first half of the twentieth century, rose during the postwar decades, and fell again after the early 1970s. Similarly, *wages* rose dramatically in the postwar decades, but have stagnated since 1973 in the US. The standard of living of many Americans

has fallen since then – although this only became an explosive political issue in the past decade. Nevertheless, contrary to widespread opinions, *manufacturing* (at least in the US) has *not* declined. The manufacturing share of GDP in the US today is about the same as it was in 1965. What *has* declined is the number of manufacturing jobs.

These patterns – and many others – seem to be interrelated. All of them can be seen with reference to a still larger pattern – the supersession of 19th-century liberal capitalism by state-centric Fordist capitalism from its beginnings in World War I and the Russian Revolution, through its high point in the decades following World War II and its decline after the early 1970s, and its supersession, in turn by neoliberal global capitalism (which might, in turn, be undermined by the emergence of huge competing economic blocks).

What is significant about this trajectory is its global character. It encompassed western capitalist countries and Communist countries, as well as colonized lands and decolonized countries. Although important differences in historical development occurred, of course, from the vantage point of the 21st century they appear more as different inflections of a common pattern than as fundamentally different developments. This does not mean that this pattern is homogeneous or modular. How unevenness is understood, however, depends on how the overarching historical developments of modernity are understood.

The existence of such general developments cannot convincingly be explained in local and contingent terms. They strongly suggest the existence of general structural constraints on political, social, and economic decisions, as well as of dynamic forces not fully subject to political control.

These general patterns also suggest that the theoretical focus on agency and contingency in recent decades was as one-sided as the structural-functionalism it superseded. If the latter achieved widespread currency during the high tide of state-centric capitalism, the former has done so during the neo-liberal epoch. Neither approach, however, thematized their own relation to their historical context. This suggests that, unlike such approaches, a critical theory should be able to problematize its own historical situatedness. That is, it should be reflexive.

These overarching patterns suggest the importance of a renewed engagement with Marx's critique of political economy, for the problematic of

historical dynamics and global structural change is at the very heart of that critique. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the history of the last century also suggests that an adequate critical theory must differ fundamentally from traditional Marxist critiques of capitalism – by which I mean a general interpretive framework in which capitalism is analyzed essentially in terms of class relations that are rooted in private property and mediated by the market, and social domination is understood primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation.

Within this basic framework, there has been a broad range of approaches that have generated powerful economic, political, social, historical, and cultural analyses. Nevertheless, the limitations of the overarching framework itself have become increasingly evident in light of twentieth-century historical developments. These developments include the non-emancipatory character of “actually existing socialism,” the historical trajectory of its rise and decline, paralleling that of state- interventionist capitalism (suggesting they were similarly situated historically), the growing importance of scientific knowledge and advanced technology in production (which *seemed* to call into question the labor theory of value), growing criticisms of technological progress and growth (which opposed the productivism of much traditional Marxism), and the increased importance of non-class based social identities. Together, they indicate that the traditional framework no longer can serve as a point of departure for an adequate critical theory.

And, indeed, I would suggest that a sense of the inadequacy of the traditional Marxist framework has – at least tacitly – informed critical progressive politics for decades. The notion of postcapitalism, of socialism, as a society based on industrial labor, public ownership of the means of production and central planning, began to lose its hold on the imaginaries of many progressive intellectuals, students and workers during the crisis of Fordist capitalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This inadequacy was frequently sensed rather than explicitly theorized. But, I suggest, it was expressed implicitly in widespread critiques of labor and industrial growth, weakening of support for social democratic and communist parties, the growing loss of orientation of those parties, as well as attempts to locate new revolutionary subjects – for example in anti-colonial movements.

What remained elusive was a new imaginary of a fundamentally different

form of social life, of socialism as post-capitalism, that not only would entail revolutionizing the relations of distribution (including property relations), but the relations of production themselves – and hence the nature of social labor. And the absence of such an imaginary has hobbled progressive movements.

Putting aside such considerations for a moment, however, I am suggesting that consideration of the general historical patterns that have characterized the past century, calls into question both traditional Marxism, with its affirmation of labor and history, as well as poststructuralist understandings of history as essentially contingent. Nevertheless, such consideration does not necessarily negate the critical insight informing attempts to deal with history contingently – namely, that history, understood as the unfolding of an immanent necessity, delineates a form of unfreedom.

This form of unfreedom, as I will elaborate, is the central object of Marx's critique of political economy, which grounds the historically dynamic character and structural changes of the modern world in imperatives and constraints that are historically specific to capitalist society. Far from viewing history affirmatively, Marx grounds this directional dynamic in the categories of commodity and capital, thereby grasping it as a form of domination, of heteronomy.

Within this framework, Marx's critique, then, is not undertaken from the *standpoint* of history and of labor, as in traditional Marxism. On the contrary, the historical dynamic of capitalism and the seemingly ontological centrality of labor, have become the *objects* of Marx's critique. By the same token, Marx's mature theory no longer purports to be a transhistorically valid theory of history and social life, but is self-consciously historically specific and calls into question any approach that claims for itself universal, transhistorical validity. These central dimensions of Marx's analysis render his critical theory more adequate to our historical context than either traditional Marxism or post-structuralism.

It should be evident that the critical thrust of Marx's analysis, according to this reading, is similar in some respects to poststructuralist approaches inasmuch as it entails a critique of totality and of a dialectical logic of history. However, whereas Marx treats such conceptions as expressing the reality of capitalist society, poststructuralist approaches deny their validity by insisting on the ontological primacy of contingency. From the point of view of Marx's

critique of heteronomous history, any attempt to recover historical agency by insisting on contingency in ways that deny or obscure the dynamic form of domination characteristic of capital, is, ironically, profoundly disempowering.

III

These contentions are based on a reading that reconsiders the most fundamental categories of Marx's mature critique with reference to the heteronomous dynamic that characterizes capitalism. Within the traditional framework, his categories – such as value, commodity, surplus value, and capital – have generally been taken as economic categories that affirm labor as the source of all social wealth and demonstrate the centrality of class-based exploitation in capitalism. Labor here, understood transhistorically, provides the *standpoint* of the critique of capitalism.

Within this framework, the fundamental core of domination in capitalism is private property – the exploitation of labor by the capitalist class. Labor's centrality to social life is further obscured by the market. That is, in capitalism, the central social significance of labor is suppressed and veiled by the market and private property; they hinder labor from becoming fully realized. Emancipation, then, is realized in a society where transhistorical labor has openly emerged as the regulating principle of society. This notion, of course, is bound to that of socialism as the 'self-realization' of the proletariat.

A close reading of Marx's mature critique of political economy, however, calls into question the transhistorical presuppositions of the traditional interpretation. Marx explicitly states in the *Grundrisse* that his fundamental categories are not transhistorical, but historically specific. Even categories such as money and labor that *appear* transhistorical because of their abstract and general character, are valid in their abstract generality only for capitalist society, according to Marx.

This calls into question many understandings of Marx's categories. I shall briefly refer to Volume I of *Capital* to outline a non-traditional understanding of those categories. That work begins with the category of commodity, which does not refer to commodities, as they might exist in many different kinds of societies. Rather, Marx takes the term and uses it to refer to the most basic

social relation of capitalist society, its fundamental form of social mediation and structuring principle. This form, according to Marx, is characterized by a historically specific dual character (use value and value). He then seeks to unfold the nature and underlying dynamic of capitalist modernity from the dual character of this basic structuring form, from the interactions of its constitutive dimensions. At the heart of his analysis is the idea that labor in capitalism has a unique socially mediating function that is not intrinsic to laboring activity transhistorically.

In a society in which the commodity is the basic structuring category of the whole, labor and its products are not socially distributed by traditional norms, or overt relations of power and domination, as is the case in other societies. Instead, labor itself constitutes a new form of interdependence, where people do not consume what they produce, but where, nevertheless, their own labor or labor-products function as a quasi-objective means of obtaining the products of others. In serving as such a means, labor and its products in effect preempt that function on the part of manifest social relations; they mediate a new form of social interrelatedness.

In Marx's mature works, then, the notion of the unique centrality of labor to social life is not a transhistorical proposition. Rather, it refers to the historically specific constitution by labor in capitalism of a form of social mediation that fundamentally characterizes that society. By unfolding this mediation, Marx tries to socially ground and elucidate basic features of capitalist modernity, such as its overarching historical dynamic.

Labor in capitalism, then, is both labor as we transhistorically and commonsensically understand it, according to Marx, and a historically specific socially mediating activity. Hence, what labor produces, its objectifications – and here I am referring to the commodity and to capital – are both concrete labor products and objectified forms of social mediation. According to this analysis, then, the social relations that most basically characterize capitalist society are very different from the qualitatively specific, variegated, and overt social relations – such as kinship relations or relations of personal or direct domination – that characterize non-capitalist societies. Because constituted by labor, those relations have a peculiar quasi-objective, formal character and are dualistic – they are characterized by the opposition of an abstract, general, homogeneous dimension and a concrete, particular, material dimension, both

of which appear to be “natural” rather than social, and condition conceptions of social as well as natural reality.

The form of wealth associated with such relations, according to Marx, is value – which also is historically specific. Most accounts still treat Marx’s category of value as if it were the same as that of Smith or Ricardo – that is, as a transhistorical category of the constitution of wealth at all times and in all places. Marx, then, purportedly refined and radicalized political economy and, using its categories, proved the existence of exploitation. This very common account, however, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. Marx did not simply refine or radicalize political economy. He did not write a *critical* political economy but a *critique* of political economy. That is, he transformed the object and nature of the analysis. On its most essential level, it no longer is focused primarily on exchange or even on unequal exchange and exploitation. Instead, with his categories, Marx sought to reveal and analyze the forms of mediation structuring capitalist society as a historically specific form of social life, characterized by the opposition and interactions of its abstract and concrete dimensions. These underlie its form of production and its directionally dynamic character.

At the heart of this analysis is a distinction Marx explicitly draws between value – as the historically specific, structuring form of wealth and social mediation in capitalism – from what he calls material wealth, which is measured by the amount produced and is a function of knowledge, social organization, and natural conditions, in addition to labor. Material wealth is mediated by social relations extrinsic to itself. Value, according to Marx, is a self-mediating form of wealth, and is essentially temporal. It is constituted solely by the expenditure of socially necessary labor-time.

Within the framework of Marx’s analysis, the duality of the commodity form as value and use-value underlies the duality of the capital form as valorization process and labor process. This duality generates a dialectical interaction that gives rise to a complex temporal dynamic that both drives value forward and eventually renders it increasingly anachronistic. To claim, as Marx does, that value is historically specific to capitalism is to claim not only that non-capitalist societies were not structured by value, but also that a post-capitalist society would also not be based on value. This, in turn, entails showing that the secular tendency of capital’s development is to render value

increasingly anachronistic.

Let me briefly elaborate by considering Marx's determination of the magnitude of value in terms of socially necessary labor-time. This term is not simply descriptive, but delineates a socially general compelling norm. Production *must* conform to this temporal norm if it is to generate the full value of its products. In the process, the time frame (e.g. an hour) becomes constituted as an independent variable. The amount of value produced per unit time is a function of the time unit alone; it remains the same regardless of individual variations or the level of productivity. It follows – as a peculiarity of value as a temporal form of wealth – that, although increased productivity increases the amount of use-values produced per unit time, it results only in short term increases in the magnitude of value created per unit time. Once the increases in productivity become general, the magnitude of value generated per unit time falls back to its base level. The result is a sort of a treadmill. Higher levels of productivity result in great increases in material wealth, but not in proportional long- term increases in value per unit time. This, in turn, leads to still further increases in productivity.

This treadmill dynamic expresses and constitutes a new form of social domination. The norm of socially necessary labor time is the first determination in *Capital* of the historically specific abstract form of social domination intrinsic to capitalism: it is *the domination of people by time*, by a historically specific form of temporality – abstract Newtonian time – which is constituted historically with the commodity form.

It would, however, be one-sided to view temporality in capitalism only in terms of Newtonian time, that is, as empty homogenous time (as Benjamin would have it). Once capitalism is fully developed, its temporal forms generate ongoing increases in productivity. Those increases, as we have seen, do not change the amount of value produced per unit time. However, they do change the determination of what counts as a given unit of time. The unit of (abstract) time remains constant; the same unit of time generates the same amount of value. Yet changes in productivity redetermine that unit; they push it forward, as it were. This movement is one *of* time. Hence it cannot be apprehended within the frame of Newtonian time, but requires a superordinate frame of reference within which the frame of Newtonian time moves. This movement of time can be termed *historical time*. The redetermination of the abstract, con-

stant time unit redetermines the compulsion associated with that unit. In this way, the movement of time acquires a necessary dimension. Historical time here does *not*, then, represent the negation of abstract time (as Lukács would have it). Rather, abstract time and historical time are dialectically interrelated. Note that, within this framework, neither form of temporality is a purely cultural construct; instead, both are moments of a historically constituted process. Both, within the framework of Marx's analysis, emerge historically with the development of the social forms of capitalism – whereby they are constituted as structures of domination.

Rather than considering temporality as a pre-given, unmoving frame within which all forms of social life move, then, such a theory grasps capitalism as a very peculiar organization of social life that constitutes its own, historically specific temporality; It is structured by historically unique forms of social mediation that are intrinsically temporal. These forms underlie a peculiar historical dynamic that is both historically specific and global. The temporalities of capitalism, then, are not extrinsic to it, but are intrinsic to its structuring social forms.

This historically new form of social domination is one that subjects people to impersonal, increasingly rationalized, structural imperatives and constraints that cannot fully be grasped in terms of class domination, or, more generally, in terms of the concrete domination of social groupings or of institutional agencies of the state and/or the economy. It has no determinate locus and, although constituted by determinate forms of social practice, appears not to be social at all. I am suggesting that Marx's analysis of abstract domination is a more rigorous and determinate analysis of what Foucault attempted to grasp with his notion of power in the modern world. Moreover, the form of domination Marx analyzes is not only cellular and spatial, as in Foucault, but also processual and temporal – it generates a historical dynamic. Rather than presupposing history, Marx now seeks to ground an ongoing dynamic of history as a historically unique characteristic of capitalism. That is, he historicizes History.

At the heart of this analysis is the peculiar treadmill dynamic I've outlined, which underlies a very complex, non-linear, historical dynamic that is at the heart of capitalist modernity. On the one hand, it is characterized by ongoing, even accelerating, transformations of more and more spheres of life –

production, technology, patterns of habitation, transportation, communication, education, and forms of interpersonal relations. At the same time, however, it structurally reconstitutes its own basis: value remains the essential form of wealth and that therefore, value-creating labor remains at the heart of the system regardless of the level of productivity. The historical dynamic of capitalism ceaselessly generates what is “new,” while regenerating what is the “same.” As I will elaborate, it both generates the possibility of another organization of labor and of social life and, yet, at the same time, hinders that possibility from being realized.

The dynamic generated by the dialectic of abstract time and historical time is at the heart of the category of capital, which, for Marx, does *not* refer to means of production that are owned privately. Rather, it is a category of movement, what Marx calls “self-valorizing value;” it is value in motion. It has no fixed material embodiment, but unfolds as the dialectic of transformation and reconstitution briefly outlined above.

Within this framework, the “essential relations” of capitalism are the forms of social mediation expressed by the categories such as commodity, value, capital, and surplus value. These are not categories of wealth that are the objects of struggle between the social classes – whereby the latter are understood as the basic social relations of capitalism. Rather, they *are* the essential social relations of capitalism themselves – temporally dynamic, contradictory forms of social mediation that underlie a complex historical dynamic.

One should take seriously Marx’s description in *Capital* of the category of capital as the self-moving substance that is subject. By describing it with the same language Hegel used in the *Phenomenology* with reference to Geist, Marx suggests that Hegel’s notion of history as having a logic, as a dialectical unfolding, is indeed valid – but only for capitalist modernity. What Hegel treated as the Subject of history, Marx now identifies as capital, a dynamic structure of abstract domination that, although constituted by humans, becomes independent of their wills, and is generative of a historical dynamic.

As a side point, it should be noted that this implies that Marx’s mature critique of Hegel does not entail an anthropological inversion of the latter’s idealist dialectic. Rather, Marx now implicitly argues that the “rational core” of Hegel’s dialectic is precisely its idealist character. It expresses a mode of

domination constituted by relations that acquire a quasi-independent existence vis-à-vis the individuals, exert an abstract form of compulsion on them, and that, because of their dualistic character, are dialectical in character.

Within this framework, History – as presented by Hegel – is historically specific. It is not a universal feature of human social life, but is constituted by historically specific forms of practices that it, in turn, molds and constrains. This implies that human history as a whole cannot be characterized transhistorically – either in terms of an overarching logic, as in Hegel, or as transhistorically contingent, as in Nietzsche. Rather, an immanently driven, directional dynamic is one of the characterizing features of capitalism. Note that, here, the historical Subject, totality and the labor constituting it have now become the *objects* of critique in Marx’s mature theory, not its *standpoint*.

The understanding of capitalism’s complex dynamic I have outlined could help illuminate the looming contemporary dual crisis – that of environmental degradation and the demise of laboring society. Marx’s categories of surplus value and capital allow for a critical social (rather than technological) analysis of the trajectory of growth in modern society. The temporal dimension of value, especially in the form of what Marx calls relative surplus value, underlies a determinate pattern of “growth,” driven by pressures for ongoing, even accelerating increases in productivity. This generates increases in material wealth far greater than those in surplus value (which, in Marx’s analysis, remains the relevant form of the surplus in capitalism), and hence, an accelerating demand for raw materials and energy, which contributes centrally to the accelerating destruction of the natural environment. Within this framework, then, the problem with economic growth in capitalism is not only that it is crisis-ridden. Rather, the *form* of growth itself is problematic. This suggests that the trajectory of growth would be different if the ultimate goal of production were increased quantities of goods, rather than surplus value.

According to this theoretical approach, the root of this problem is that value is a temporal form of wealth. As a result, the valorization process transforms production into a peculiar process, whereby – beneath the surface of material production – matter is transformed into units of abstract time. Because it is a temporal form of wealth, capital strives toward boundlessness, ignoring, as it were, the necessary material boundedness of its natural environment, the planet.

This approach also provides the basis for a social analysis of the structure of social labor and production in capitalism with reference to its basic contradiction. Within the framework of Marx's analysis, the drive for ongoing increases in productivity leads to the increasing importance of science and technology in production. That is, the dynamic of capital is historically generative of a rapid accumulation of socially general knowledge. The long-term tendency of this historical development is to render production based on labor time – that is, on value and, hence, on proletarian labor – increasingly anachronistic. On the one hand, this opens the possibility of large-scale socially general reductions in labor time, and fundamental changes in the nature and social organization of labor, which suggests that, for Marx, the abolition of capitalism would not entail the *self-realization* of the proletariat, but its *self-abolition*.

And yet, on the other hand, because the dialectic of transformation and reconstitution not only drives productivity forward, but also reconstitutes value, it thereby also structurally reconstitutes the necessity of value-creating labor, that is, proletarian labor.

The historical dynamic of capitalism, then, increasingly points beyond the necessity of proletarian labor while reconstituting that very necessity. It both generates the possibility of another organization of social life and yet hinders that possibility from being realized.

This tension skews the form in which that historical possibility emerges. As a result, ultimately, of the ongoing reconstitution of capital's fundamental forms, the possibility of the abolition of proletarian labor emerges historically in an inverted form, in the form of increases in superfluous labor, in the superfluity of an increasingly large portion of working populations, in the growth of the underemployed, the permanently unemployed and the precariat. The possibility of the abolition of proletarian labor and hence the emergence of the *emancipatory* possibility of a society in which surplus production no longer must be based on the labor of a subaltern class, is at the same time, the emergence of a *disastrous* development in which the growing superfluity of labor is expressed as the growing superfluity of people, with the fraught political possibilities this entails.

The approach I've outlined, then, suggests considering the current configuration of capital as one in which value-creating labor becomes increasingly

anachronistic and, yet, remains structurally necessary for capital. This might also shed light on the current centrality of financialization. One could, perhaps, suggest that some dimensions of financialization also point beyond capitalism (as paradoxical as that might sound) – for example, in the development of truly global ways of coordinating production and distribution, of creating the nervous system and sinews, as it were, of what could be a nexus of global coordination that is supranational rather than international.

Nevertheless, most aspects of neoliberal financialization do not point beyond capitalism but, on the contrary, can be viewed as forms that seek to maintain capital even when it has run up against what, arguably, are its limits.

I would like to suggest – and this is no more than a suggestion – that it is possible to regard the crisis-ridden end of the enormously productive, postwar Keynesian-Fordist configuration of capitalism as the expression of a secular crisis of valorization. Responding to this development, capital sought not only to reverse labor’s previous gains under Fordism by weakening unions, shifting production to low wage areas, and substituting technology for labor, but also by developing new forms of generating wealth. One could see the expansion of the debt economy as an attempt to develop new sources of revenue. This in itself is not necessarily new. Marx’s analysis of the tendency for value to become anachronistic, however, could cast a different light on the current configuration of financial capital. Within this framework, financialization now would not be exactly the same as financialization in the past, for now the expansion of a debt economy would be occurring against the background of stagnating surplus value production.

Debt, speaking very broadly, entails an explicit or tacit promissory note. It implicitly presupposes that, at some point in the future, there will be enough wealth to cover the debt. If, however, the current economy of debt is considered against the background of stagnating surplus value production, financial capital could become seen as attempting, as it were, to constitute its own realm of wealth production. The wide variety of promissory notes and meta-promissory “instruments” developed are oriented toward the horizon of the future. That horizon, within the framework of value theory, however, recedes as surplus value production stagnates; there is not enough wealth production in the underlying form of value to eventually cover those debts.

A consequence is an increasingly frenzied attempt to transform every-

thing possible into sources of future wealth. What had been fairly simple and straightforward forms of debt – for example mortgages – become “financialized” – that is, are treated as the raw materials, as it were, of wealth that supposedly could be tapped in the future. More and more dimensions of life – from mortgages to infrastructure – become transformed into the content of new forms of purported wealth.

Within this interpretative framework, then, the crisis of value production is masked by the financially mediated attempt to transform more and more dimensions of life into the “raw materials” of price and profit – into forms of purported wealth that supposedly will guarantee ever more complex so-called financial instruments, as if such “wealth” were independent of value in capitalism. What David Harvey called “accumulation by dispossession” is one manifestation of this development. However, it does not, I suggest, entail the accumulation of *value*, but modes of the extraction of purported *wealth* to compensate for the *absence* of such accumulation. It can be understood as an unintentional effort to abolish value within a framework that remains structured by value. As the accumulation of value slows down, the search for wealth becomes perversely reflexive, like an autoimmune disease – it begins to feed on the substance of society and nature.

IV

What I have outlined is a fundamental systemic crisis that occurs as the underlying social forms of capitalism become anachronistic while remaining necessary. This gives rise to enormous shearing pressures with potentially disastrous consequences. It also suggests that categories such as class (or gender or race) are not stable historically, but are in flux, constituted and reconstituted by the dynamic flow of capital.

As an aside, it should be noted that within this framework, the idea of another possible form of social life, beyond capitalism, is immanent to capitalist modernity itself. It is not derived from cultural contact or the ethnographic study of fundamentally different forms of social life; nor is it based on the experience of a previous social order with its own moral economy that is being destroyed by capitalism – although that experience certainly has been genera-

tive of opposition. Opposition to capitalism, however, does not necessarily point beyond it. It can be – and often has been – subsumed by capital itself or swept aside as inadequate to the exigencies of the larger historical context. Marx’s analysis is directed less toward the emergence of “*resistance*,” (which is politically and historically indeterminate) than toward the possibility of *transformation*. It seeks to delineate the emergence of a form of life that, as a result of capitalism’s dynamic, is constituted as a historical possibility, and yet is constrained by that very dynamic from being realized. This gap between what is and what could be, allows for a future possibility that, increasingly, has become real historically. It is this gap that constitutes the basis for a historical critique of what is. It reveals the historically specific character of the fundamental social forms of capitalism – not only with reference to the past, or another society, but also with reference to a possible future.

It is capital, itself, as objectified human capacities, which generates the possibility of a future society. Yet it does so in a form that, at the same time, is increasingly destructive of the environment and the working population.

One result of this dual crisis – in the absence of non-traditional critiques of capital that treat these crises as interrelated – has been a bifurcation. Most discourses on climate change tend to ignore the crisis of work. This has opened the gates for various right-wing populist movements that deny the former in the same of the latter. Those populist movements make sense of the crisis of work in concrete terms (with reference to minorities, immigrants, women, and foreign countries) rather than in terms of the abstract constraints and imperatives that drive capital’s dynamic, and understand the latter, essentially temporal, processes, in spatial terms like “globalization” (for which banks or Jews are responsible). As essentially defensive movements, they oppose as a counter-weight to those purported problems a new Romantic vision that does not yearn for the Middle Ages this time, but for the nation- state – imagined as bounded and homogeneous, functioning on the basis of a national economy. (Unfortunately, too many traditional working-class movements and progressives have also reacted defensively, developing a Left nationalist response instead of attempting to rethink and rework the idea of progressive internationalism as a response to neoliberal internationalism.)

Right-wing populist movements, then, have an overarching framework for explaining a crisis-ridden world, however objectionable, wrong-headed,

and dangerous it might be. Earlier generation of progressive Left social critics and movements also had an overarching framework – international socialism, a more rational organization of society. Such a widespread overarching framework has been absent for the past five decades.

Within the framework of the approach outlined here, the growing anachronistic character of value in the absence of a widespread imaginary of a future beyond value – that is, a post-proletarian future – is having enormously destructive economic, social, political, and environmental consequences. It is capital itself, in its development, which is confronting us with the increasingly stark choice of socialism or barbarism.

Moishe Postone (1942-2018) was a Canadian historian, sociologist, political philosopher and social theorist. He proposed a fundamental reinterpretation of Karl Marx's critique of political economy, focusing on Marx's original concepts value, capital and labour. His most distinguished work, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, was published in 1993.

abe.net.br

The current crisis and the anachronism of value

Moishe Postone

2017

Continental Thought & Theory, Volume 1, Issue 4