

## REVIEW ESSAY

### The Historical Limit of Workers' Protest: Moishe Postone, *Krisis* and the "Commodity Logic"

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Most labour historians have long tacitly shared assumptions that are only now becoming subjects of discussion. For over a century, the building of serious theories of the working class and the workers' movement – which became possible after the classical wage fund theory began to be discredited in the 1870s – proceeded along two competing paths. One was the liberal tradition, which reconstructed the development of labour movements as the history of the civil emancipation – and consequently the integration – of the working class within capitalism. The other was the socialist approach (embracing both moderates and radicals) that interpreted labour history as a history of attempts to transcend capitalism.

When in the course of this century it became apparent that the efforts to abolish capitalism had produced entirely different results than anticipated (e.g. the dictatorship in the Soviet Union), and that the working class in the highly developed countries was ceasing its pattern of rebellion, the first socialists spoke up who no longer expected that the proletariat would evolve into a revolutionary Subject.

This perspective was developed in some of Herbert Marcuse's writings.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to collapse when the workers in many places all over the world suddenly made a forceful comeback in the late 1960s. The fading of this wave of protest during the 1970s, the downfall of the movement of '68, and of course the definitive end of the so-called socialist countries, inspired new contemplation. In part, this reflection – along the lines of Marcuse – resulted in a quest for another Subject, another social force that might bring about the good society.

This article focuses on a second approach; this perspective is not the umpteenth proclamation of Marxism's 'death' but searches Marx's own

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, 1964); idem, "Socialism in the Developed Countries", *International Socialist Journal*, 2:8 (1965). Compare Paul Mattick, "The Limits of Integration", in Kurt H. Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr (eds), *The Critical Spirit. Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse* (Boston, 1967).

work for clues to a different historical location of the working class and the labour movement. Its point of departure is the distinction between concrete and abstract labour,<sup>2</sup> which Marx uses to show that labour in general (to be performed in all social formations) acquires a specific form in capitalism that is both particular (the production of a certain useful commodity) and socially general, an abstract activity to be performed as a means of obtaining other commodities.

The labour movements and their theoreticians (social democrats, communists and others) have rarely if ever understood this particularity of labour in capitalism and have consistently interpreted the movement's activities in terms of general, transhistoric labour. Even towards the late 1960s, Lucio Colletti had good reason to assert that "not only Marx's critics, but indeed his own disciples and followers – and not only those of the Second International but also more recent ones, to this very day – have all shown themselves incapable of understanding or fully realizing the significance of this concept [i.e. abstract labour]".<sup>3</sup> Given this background, the richly diverse cult of alienated labour repeatedly generated by the workers movement is hardly surprising.

Marx makes a rethinking of the workers' movements and their transhistoric conceptualizations of labour possible because his theory contains a remarkable antinomy that has become apparent only recently due to the pressure of changed social and political relationships. Stefan Breuer was probably the first to address this matter. In *Krise der Revolutionstheorie* (1977), a critique of Herbert Marcuse's work, he identified two argumentative patterns in Marx, which he designated as the "esoteric" and "exoteric" Marx:

While – to maintain a distinction from the older Hegel interpretation – the "esoteric" Marx revealed in a far more radical way than all other theoreticians the abstract-repressive nature of bourgeois socialization, which forcefully eliminated all non-corresponding modes of life, distribution and production [. . .], the "exoteric" Marx tended to revoke his insight that socialization of production within the capitalist mode of production necessarily means only abstract socialization.<sup>4</sup>

To designate the proletariat as the driving force behind an upcoming revolution, Marx abandons his own critique of political economy. Rather than "esoterically" regarding the working class as an expression, aspect,

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, in Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 992: "labour must be broken down into its twofold form – on the one hand, into concrete labour in the use-values of the commodity, and on the other hand, into socially necessary labour as calculated in exchange-value".

<sup>3</sup> Lucio Colletti, "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International" (1968), in idem, *From Rousseau to Lenin. Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White (New York, 1972), p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Breuer, *Krise der Revolutionstheorie. Negative Vergesellschaftung und Arbeitsmetaphysik bei Herbert Marcuse* (Frankfurt/Main, 1977), p. 45.

or element of capitalism, he views this class as an external and hostile social group that is alien to capitalism – as an “archimedean point [. . .] that forms the basis for critiquing the capitalist mode of production and of which the existence guaranteed the emergence of a new, truly human Subject”.<sup>5</sup>

The discovery of a “different Marx” – which in Breuer’s work coincided with the assertion that transcending capitalism had become impossible – also appears in Moishe Postone’s writings. This American philosopher with pronounced German influences (in the 1970s he belonged to a group of Marxists in Frankfurt/Main that focused on the critique of the commodity logic<sup>6</sup>) asserted that the “other Marx” was actually the “only Marx”, and that the Marxists had continually misunderstood Marx thus far. In 1974 and 1978, Postone published major programmatic contributions,<sup>7</sup> recently followed by the monumental book *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (hereafter *TLSD*).

Here, Postone abandons what he calls “traditional Marxism” (the line of the exoteric Marx) and elaborates on the esoteric Marx. Postone views traditional Marxism essentially as “a critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of labor*”, while “a critique of labor in capitalism” is the issue (*TLSD*, pp. 5, 29, 277). Traditional Marxism considers labour exclusively as a purposive social activity which is indispensable for the reproduction of human society – as “the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature”.<sup>8</sup> Such a transhistoric notion of “labour” renders only labour’s “external” characteristics (availability, duration, intensity, remuneration, etc.) as objects of political or economic contention.<sup>9</sup> By leaving the intrinsic labour processes aside, a transhistoric interpretation of technology is also implied: production techniques as such are neither good nor bad from a proletarian point of view, only their application may or may not serve the interests of the immediate

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Postone’s soulmates included Barbara Brick, Dan Diner, Helmut Reinicke and Peter Schmitt-Egner. See e.g. Reinicke, *Ware und Dialektik* (Darmstadt, 1974); Schmitt-Egner, *Kolonialismus und Faschismus* (Giessen/Lollar, 1975); and Diner, *Israel in Palestina. Über Tausch und Gewalt im vorderen Orient* (Königstein/Taunus, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Moishe Postone and Helmut Reinicke, “On Nicolaus ‘Introduction’ to the *Grundrisse*”, *Telos*, 22 (Winter 1974–1975); Moishe Postone, “Necessity, Labor, and Time”, *Social Research*, 45 (Winter 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 290.

<sup>9</sup> As early as 1976, Postone wrote: “The ideas of the traditional working class movements, whether Social Democratic or Communist, arose at a time when the non-identical moment emerging out of capitalist society could not, even in its most militantly anti-capitalist form, encompass the idea of the *Aufhebung* of capitalist labor. Questions of ownership of means of production, of the mode of organization of existing labor, and of the distribution of capital and goods, could be placed on the agenda; not however the question of proletarian labor itself.” Moishe Postone, review of Helmut Reinicke’s *Revolte im bürgerlichen Erbe: Gebrauchswert und Mikrologie* (Giessen/Lollar, 1975), in *Telos*, 29 (Fall 1976), p. 244.

producers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the traditional Marxist approach characterizes capitalism in terms of the mode of distribution alone and locates “the system’s fundamental contradiction between the modes of distribution and production” (*TLSD*, p. 123).

Postone believes this approach has had distinct merits:

The traditional position accords dignity to labor that is fragmented and alienated. It may very well be the case that such dignity, which is at the heart of classical working-class movements, has been important for workers’ self-esteem and a powerful factor in the democratization and humanization of industrialized capitalist societies (*TLSD*, p. 71).

Capitalism’s essence (alienated labour) exceeds the scope of this perspective, since “if labor is the standpoint of the critique, it is not and cannot be its object” (*TLSD*, p. 53). From the viewpoint of transhistoric labour, the critique of capitalism remains positive: a specific aspect of the social formation (here: labour) provides the basis for critiquing a different aspect of the same social formation. Positive critique leads not to “a *critique of political economy* but to a *critical political economy*” (*TLSD*, p. 69).

Conversely, Postone aims to formulate a negative critique (i.e. “an immanent social critique with emancipatory intent”, a critique “not undertaken on the basis of what is but of what could be, as a potential immanent to the existent society” (*TLSD*, p. 90)). This negative critique is based on three ideas. First, Postone assumes that labour – though a necessary “metabolic interaction between man and nature” in all societies – under capitalism differs fundamentally from labour in all other social formations. Capitalist labour (wage labour) not only gives rise to indispensable use values but also expresses abstract social interdependences. It is performed not to produce goods intended for personal consumption but to acquire an abstract medium (money) for appropriating other people’s labour products.

Viewed from the perspective of society as a whole, the concrete labor of the individual is particular and is *part* of a qualitatively heterogeneous *whole*; as abstract labor, however, it is an individuated *moment* of a qualitatively homogeneous, general social mediation constituting a *social totality*. This duality of the concrete and the abstract characterizes the capitalist social formation (*TLSD*, p. 152).

<sup>10</sup> Among the many examples is Trotsky’s ode to the conveyor belt, which is used in capitalism “for higher and more perfected exploitation of the worker”, but which may also serve very different purposes, as “this use of the conveyor is connected with capitalism, not with the conveyor itself. [. . .] A socialist organization of the economy must endeavor to bring about a reduction in the physiological load on each individual worker [. . .] while safeguarding at the same time the coordination of the efforts of different workers. This will be the significance of the socialist conveyor as distinct from the capitalist one”: Leon Trotsky, “Culture and Socialism” (1926), in idem, *Problems in Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York, 1973), pp. 241–242.

Second, Postone believes that capitalist labour's abstract character implies that intrinsic labour processes have changed (since their real subsumption). "Industrial production is the materialization of capital and, as such, is the materialization of both the forces and the relations of production in their dynamic interaction" (TLSD, p. 352). Production technology embodies alienation. The problem does not lie in the application of the technology but in the technology itself.

Third, this perspective suggests that "the overcoming of capitalism apparently involves a transformation not merely of the existing mode of distribution but also of the mode of production" (TLSD, p. 23). Postone quotes from the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx writes that the complete development of individuals requires "labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased".<sup>11</sup> And Postone adds: "Far from entailing the realization of the proletariat, overcoming capitalism involves the material abolition of proletarian labor. The emancipation of labor requires the emancipation from (alienated) labor" (TLSD, p. 33).

Postone uses these principles to conclude that the traditional labour movement is not an antipole of capitalism but rather an expression of this system. Marx describes the conflict between capitalist and worker as the conflict between the purchaser and the seller of a commodity, with an open outcome: "There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides."<sup>12</sup> Class conflict is a conflict between commodity owners, between buyers and sellers, and thus operates squarely within the capitalist framework. Although "a driving element" in the development of a commodity economy, it is also "embedded in the social forms of the commodity and capital" (TLSD, p. 319). "Class conflict [. . .] does not represent a disturbance in an otherwise harmonious system. On the contrary, it is inherent to a society constituted by the commodity as a totalizing and totalized form" (TLSD, p. 317).

The antagonism between worker and capitalist has no "intrinsic dynamic" pointing beyond capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

[Working-class social and political actions] and what is usually referred to as working-class consciousness, remain within the bounds of the capitalist social formation – and not necessarily because workers have been materially and spiritually corrupted, but because proletarian labor does not fundamentally contradict capital. [. . .] However militant the actions and the forms of subjectivity associated with the proletariat asserting itself have been, though, they did not and do not point to the overcoming of capitalism. They represent capital-constituting, rather than capital-transcending, forms of action and consciousness (TLSD, p. 371).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 325.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, 344.

<sup>13</sup> "Whereas an antagonistic social form can be static, the notion of contradiction necessarily implies an intrinsic dynamic" (TLSD, p. 103).

Transcendence of capitalism would require a new type of movement. If “a movement, concerned with workers, were to point beyond capitalism, it would both have to defend workers’ interests and have to participate in their transformation – for example, by calling into question the given structure of labor, not identifying people any longer in terms of that structure, and participating in rethinking those interests” (*TLSD*, pp. 371–372). Overcoming capitalism, then, must also be understood in terms of “the abolition of proletarian labor” and, hence, “the proletariat” (*TLSD*, p. 371).

Since the mid-1980s, a group of independent German (post) Marxists has developed an analysis that resembles Postone’s work in many respects, despite the virtual absence of references to his work. The group’s intellectual output was published in a periodical originally called *Marxistische Kritik* and renamed *Krisis* in 1990. The group became more widely known when the renowned man of letters Hans Magnus Enzensberger published a study by Robert Kurz, the collective’s most influential thinker, in the monograph series he edits (the so-called “Other Library”).<sup>14</sup>

Originally, the group defended the perspective of “labour movement Marxism”, although it tried to formulate a fundamental critique of the commodity economy from the outset.<sup>15</sup> Gradually, the group radicalized its analysis and adopted the view that workers in their capacity as commodity owners (i.e. as owners of labour power) constituted an integral part of that same commodity economy. In the course of 1989, the group accepted the consequences and concluded that the wage-earning class “was simply the opposite side of the capital relationship”.<sup>16</sup> This view was expressed in a text with the revealing title “The class struggle fetish”. In this essay, the authors, referring to Marx’s *Capital*, advocated theoretical relativization of the class struggle:

Marx’s major work is not entitled *Class*, nor does it open with this category. Rather, it begins with the category of the commodity: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.” Instead, *Capital* ends with the systematic derivation of classes [. . .]. This place already reveals: in Marx’s theory the classes are thus ultimately a secondary, derivative category. Traditional marxism in all its varieties has theoretically reversed this relationship. Here, class is the final basis of society rather than the commodity.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung. Vom Zusammenbruch des Kasernensozialismus zur Krise der Weltökonomie* (Frankfurt/Main, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> See the crucial text “Die Krise des Tauscherts”, *Marxistische Kritik*, 1 (1986).

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Lohoff, “Staatskonsum und Staatsbankrott: Profitrate und Profitmasse”, *Marxistische Kritik*, 6 (1989), p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kurz and Ernst Lohoff, “Der Klassenkampf-Fetisch. Thesen zur Entmythologisierung des Marxismus”, *Marxistische Kritik*, 7 (August 1989), p. 10.

Unlike Postone, who claims that the "mature" Marx unequivocally championed the esoteric perspective (*TLSD*, p. 138), the *Krisis* group postulates that Marx was repeatedly torn between esoterism and exoterism until his death. This ambivalence is visible in Marx's views on the end of the capitalist society. In his major contribution to the critique of political economy, he defended the position that the capitalist accumulation process set its own objective frontier, or as he wrote in Volume III of *Capital*: "The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself."<sup>18</sup> In the long run, the advance of production technology would increasingly render human labour superfluous: "As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, [. . .] the surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis."<sup>19</sup> Here, the tendential disappearance of the working class marks capitalism's limit. Simultaneously, Marx firmly believed that the "historical task" of the working class involved "the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes".<sup>20</sup>

The "double Marx" was an inevitable product of its day.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, he focused on the incipient and promising workers' movement. On the other hand, he performed an abstract analysis of the emerging commodity economy's objective boundaries. The trends that Marx optimistically identified as symptoms of early agony were in fact merely growing pains.<sup>22</sup> The essential error in judgement that led to the confusion of the exoteric and the esoteric perspectives was the idea that the labourers would never become more comfortable with the alienated relationships of the generalized commodity economy. Marx assumed that the owners of the commodity labour power would at no time become full-fledged members of the community of free and equal commodity owners.

Peter Klein is the member of the *Krisis* group who has studied this aspect intensively. In his book *Die Illusion von 1917* (1992), he follows Marx and Pashukanis by concentrating on the voluntary relationship established between two independent commodity owners when they decide to exchange their commodities. Marx considered such a voluntary

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 358.

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 705–706.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, "Postface to the Second Edition" (1873), *Capital*, I, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Kurz, "Der doppelte Marx", in Heinz Eidam and Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzick (eds), *Kritische Philosophie gesellschaftlicher Praxis* (Würzburg, 1995); "Fetisch Arbeit", in Helmut Fleischer (ed.), *Der Marxismus in seinem Zeitalter* (Leipzig, 1994); "Postmarxismus und Arbeitsfetisch", *Krisis*, 15 (1995).

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Lohoff, "Das Ende des Proletariats als Anfang der Revolution", *Krisis*, 10 (January 1991), p. 83.

relationship the core of all thought about freedom and equality: “the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis.”<sup>23</sup> Exchange is a great equalizer. If individuals A and B wish to do business because A supplies a commodity for which B is willing to pay, A and B will need to acknowledge one another as equal partners, as owners of private property, each with his or her own free will. Accordingly, freedom and equality are structural elements in exchange processes between commodity owners.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, an extended historical tradition of commodities exchange was necessary for the principles associated with the exchange to become valid in their own right – first in philosophy and theology, then in legal circles, and eventually in politics. “With the rise of capitalism over the past two centuries, freedom and equality have finally become generally accepted in a manner that all people, when speaking about themselves as human beings, consistently associate humanity with these principles and place them in the context of the normative and legal framework based on these principles.”<sup>25</sup>

Including the workers in the community of equals – of people – required redefining private ownership. As long as the workers were considered propertyless, they did not count as full-fledged citizens. The workers’ movements attempted such a redefinition. From their perspective, wage earners also owned property, namely their labour power.<sup>26</sup> Emancipating the workers into “full-fledged” citizens was thus a political generalization of the commodity logic. The same holds true for women’s emancipation, although *Krisis* has tended to overlook this aspect until lately.<sup>27</sup>

The gender issue was neglected into the 1990s. In 1992, however, the group published a major document by Roswitha Scholz, presenting the so-called separation theorem. According to this theorem, commodification is possible only because of the simultaneous existence of social spheres

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 245.

<sup>24</sup> Evgeny Pashukanis, “The General Theory of Law and Marxism” (1924), in Piers Beirne and Robert Sharlet (eds), *Pashukanis: Selected Writings on Marxism and Law* (London [etc.], 1980), esp. pp. 74–90.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Klein, *Die Illusion von 1917. Die alte Arbeiterbewegung als Entwicklungshelferin der modernen Demokratie* (Bad Honnef, 1992), p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. This line of thought might lead to a reconsideration of the “property in skill” often invoked in the past by artisans and skilled workers to legitimize their actions.

<sup>27</sup> Other areas to be considered in this context are racism and colonialism. Did historical links exist between the commodity logic and the tendency (on the part of the bourgeois elite and large segments of the metropolitan labour movements) to look down on people from the colonies? *Krisis* did not address this issue. Nevertheless, a preliminary analysis appears in Peter Schmitt-Egner, “Wertgesetz und Rassismus”, *Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie*, 8–9 (1976). The radical implications of the critique of the commodity logic have to some extent escaped the attention of Eli Zaretsky; see his “A Marx for Our Time? Moishe Postone’s Reading of *Capital*”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 22, 2 (1996).



that while excluded from the commodification process are inextricably linked with it. Individual private consumption is one such pivotal condition: it exceeds the scope of the commodity economy but is nevertheless indispensable. Production and distribution of commodities would lose their significance without consumption. Consumption is the necessary anti-pole – an essential Other – to the commodity. Such separated “spheres” (which include human care, consideration, or eroticism) are ordinarily perceived as “feminine”, whereas the calculating, “rational” world of commodities is viewed as “masculine”. All efforts to emancipate women by applying “masculine” standards (e.g. by demanding wages for housekeeping work) therefore generalize the commodity logic.<sup>28</sup>

According to *Krisis*, patriarchal capitalism is driven by one force alone, namely capital, the “automatic subject”. The generalized commodity economy is basically subjectless, i.e. “the bearers of authority are not self-conscious subjects but act according to an historical frame of sociality constituted without any consciousness”.<sup>29</sup> Capital’s objective tendency towards self-exhaustion can lead to a new society only if new subjects deliberately create themselves, “beyond the purely immanent ‘class struggle’, along the crisis-ridden fault lines of commodified socialization”.<sup>30</sup>

While Postone’s contributions and the *Krisis* group may emphasize different aspects, their areas of resemblance are remarkable. The critique of the commodity logic establishes an original link between previously divided theory fragments, such as Lukács’s analysis of the relation between commodification and class struggle, Adorno’s remarks about the “metaphysics of labour”, Panzieri’s insight into the capitalist nature of modern technology, and Debord’s critique of the spectacle.<sup>31</sup>

The new theory seems compatible with historical experience: the workers’ movement is the instrument for wage earners to acquire full-fledged citizenship within the commodity economy rather than a means towards abolishing that economy. Generally, workers’ protest radicalizes and becomes “anti-capitalist” under conditions where capitalist *distribution* is not or not yet operative, and the commodity economy does not “deliver the goods”. The so-called socialist societies emerging from such

<sup>28</sup> Roswitha Scholz, “Der Wert ist der Mann”, *Krisis*, 12 (1992). Also see Robert Kurz, “Geschlechtsfetischismus”, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Scholz, “Der Wert ist der Mann”, p. 22; compare Robert Kurz, “Subjektlose Herrschaft”, *Krisis*, 13 (1993).

<sup>30</sup> Udo Winkel, “Marx hat uns im voraus überholt”, *Krisis*, 15 (1995), p. 134.

<sup>31</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1971); Theodor W. Adorno, “Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie: Drei Studien zu Hegel” (1956), in *idem*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (1971); Raniero Panzieri, “Sull’uso capitalistico delle macchine nel neocapitalismo” (1961), in *idem*, *Spontaneità e organizzazione. Gli anni dei “Quaderni rossi” 1959–1964*, ed. Stefano Merli (Pisa, 1994); Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) (New York, 1995).

anti-capitalist reversals were unable to escape the global logic of accumulation; they did not rise above the commodity economy but merely became its replacement.<sup>32</sup> Little wonder, therefore, that the workers' councils – the most radical political expression of workers' protest – never arose in consolidated parliamentary democracies and always rapidly turned into substitute parliaments.<sup>33</sup> Even the most radical unions – the revolutionary syndicalist ones – focused on changes in the distribution sector and were no match for the lure of advanced capitalism.<sup>34</sup> According to Jean-Marie Vincent, the traditional workers' movement “neither understood nor analysed in depth the sequence and inescapable logic” in the relationships specific to capitalist society. “On the contrary”, people believed they “could separate the irrationality of the global methods of organization – in need of transformation – from a largely intangible daily and individual world”.<sup>35</sup> In this light, the critique of the commodity logic enables us to rethink the historical significance of workers' movements. The result is a critical synthesis of the old liberal and socialist views. On the one hand, the liberal and socialist interpretations are both clearly based on a transhistoric conception of labour; on the other hand, the “critique of the commodity logic” correlates with socialism in its fundamental criticism of capitalism (and even radicalizes this criticism by focusing on labour as such) and joins liberalism in viewing the workers' movement as an integral and necessary component of capitalist society.

Even if we accept this vision, objections and problems remain. Both Postone and *Krisis* make absolute the contrast between the standpoint of labour and the critique of labour. Chris Arthur has rightly postulated that this position might be misleading: “In so far as labour grasps itself as the ground of its own oppression it undertakes a *self-critique*”, and this could

<sup>32</sup> Both Postone and the *Krisis* group characterize the former Soviet-type societies as capitalist because of the dominance of abstract labour there. I consider this assumption all too easy. Earlier, I argued that competition for profit between capitals is essential for capitalism (see Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 650: “Free competition is the real development of capital”; also *Capital*, III, p. 127), and that such competition existed neither inside the Soviet Union between enterprises nor between the Soviet Union and Western capitalism. I favour regarding Soviet-type societies as non-capitalist (and, of course, non-socialist) modernization dictatorships and their competition with capitalism as state-centred. The labour processes remained mediated and abstract, given these relationships: Marcel van der Linden, *Von der Oktoberrevolution zur Perestroika: Der westliche Marxismus und die Sowjetunion* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992), pp. 212–213, 227–245.

<sup>33</sup> Compare Perry Anderson's observation that “all the examples of soviets or councils so far have emerged out of disintegrating autocracies (Russia, Hungary, Austria), defeated military regimes (Germany), ascendant or overturned fascist states (Spain, Portugal)”: *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), p. 196. On the parliamentarization of workers' councils, see Tim Wohlforth, “Transition to the Transition”, *New Left Review*, 130 (1981).

<sup>34</sup> Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (Aldershot, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Marie Vincent, *Critique du travail* (Paris, 1987), p. 63.

give rise to "a *self-transcending* movement".<sup>36</sup> While this possibility seems logical, it is equally conceivable that the "crisis-ridden fault lines of commodified socialization" appear not in the labour sector but, for example, in consumption. At any rate, the critique of the commodity logic suggests that social historians should double their efforts to investigate the appearance of such fault lines in the past and the role of workers in this process. One example of a topic that could be addressed is given in Eric Rothenbuhler's case study of the textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912. In the resulting "liminal situation", the commodity logic began to lose its grip on people:

As long as workers strike about wages, they accept the myth of the labor market which gives meaning to their behavior within the industrial social structure.

As soon as strikers behave as if not motivated by wages, their behavior cannot be made meaningful within the social structure and it becomes a threat to that structure.<sup>37</sup>

Such "liminal situations" are possible only because workers are *simultaneously* subjects and objects, commodities and commodity owners. Postone is somewhat aware of this fact (*TLSD*, pp. 275–277) but perceives no consequences for his analysis. In a sense, this outlook typifies the approaches of most authors discussed here. As soon as abstract analysis needs to be linked with the "surface" of concrete historical, social and political processes, Postone and the *Krisis* group tend to proclaim views not based on sound research but manifesting a sensitivity to the spirit of the times. In the early 1970s, when he first formulated the contours of the critique of the commodity logic, Postone described the working class as "*the not-yet-Subject* – that which constitutes the alienated Subject (Capital) and which becomes Subject by overthrowing capital and in the process abolishing that labor, essential to capital, which defines the proletariat itself".<sup>38</sup> Two decades later, however, Postone views the proletariat as "an integral element of capitalism rather than as the embodiment of its negation" (*TLSD*, p. 389).<sup>39</sup> This unsubstantiated shift in position lacks credibility. After all, even if the class struggle within capitalism is an antagonism rather than a contradiction, the continuing reconfirmation,

<sup>36</sup> Chris Arthur, review of Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, in *Capital and Class*, 54 (Autumn 1994), p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> Eric W. Rothenbuhler, "The Liminal Fight: Mass Strikes as Ritual and Interpretation", in Jeffrey C. Alexander (ed.), *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (Cambridge [etc.], 1988), p. 73.

<sup>38</sup> Postone and Reinicke, "On Nicolaus", p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Some members of the *Krisis* group go even further and assert that the old class struggle lacks any historical perspective, since proletarian emancipation is irreversible: Kurz and Lohoff, "Der Klassenkampf fetisch", p. 36. This view is dangerous not only because irreversible attainments do not exist but also because of its classic Eurocentric vision pretending that metropolitan attainments automatically apply all over the world.

maintenance, and, where possible, expansion of proletarian emancipation is a prerequisite for transforming labour as such. And in this respect, the “old-fashioned workers’ movement” – stripped of any illusion – still appears indispensable.