

Review of Moishe Postone's
"Labour and Totality: Hegel and Marx"
in *Time, Labour, and Domination*

by Andy Blunden March 2024

Moishe Postone's idea about capital as the "identical subject-object" does not really belong to this study as Postone's proposition is not about the relation of *Capital* to the *Logic*, but to "Hegel," by which it seems he meant the *Phenomenology* (although subject-object only gets a mention in the *Logic*). The *Phenomenology*, however, was written at a time when Hegel was still unclear about his ideas, and in particular his concept of the Object. Nonetheless, his assertion of a positive relation between Hegel's philosophy and Marx's *Capital*, rather than empty assertions about "turning Hegel on his feet" and the industrial proletariat as the "Subject of History" was an important contribution to the present topic.

Further, at any stage in the development of Hegel's concept of Object, an *identical* subject-object is only a final, utopian endpoint. According to Hegel (1801), this concept belongs to Fichte who declared in his 1794 system: "The Absolute is Subject-Object, and the Ego is this identity of subject and object." In reference to Fichte's Ego as the identical subject-object, Hegel says: "True, the subjective is Subject-Object, but the objective is not. Hence subject is not equal to object."

The expression is used in the *Logic* where the Idea is defined as the *unity* (not necessarily identity) of Subject and Object. Hegel explains:

The third [moment of the Concept] is the doctrine of the Idea, the subject-object, the unity of concept and objectivity, the absolute truth. ... (Hegel, 1831, §162)

effectively a conceptual reconstruction of reality.

The Idea may be described in many ways. It may be called reason; (and this is the proper philosophical signification of reason); subject-object; the unity of the ideal and the real, ... (Hegel *op. cit.*)

I interpret this as saying that, yes, subject and object are identical, but only within the scope of the Subject's conception of reality. However, this identity is illusory, or at least culturally and historically bounded. The unity of Subject and Object never attains identity because the Subject can never exhaust "externality." The *unity* of Subject and Object is not Absolute, not identity. The Subject, e.g., capital, shapes the world according to its own ends, and conforming to its own conception of reality, but it never exhausts "externality," which is forever disclosing new contradictions.

That said, Postone does make some points about how the Subject is to be conceived which are pertinent.

Geist and the subject matter of the *Logic*

Hegel attempts to overcome the classic theoretical dichotomy of subject and object with his theory that all reality, natural as well as social, subjective as well as objective, is constituted by *practice* –

more specifically, by the objectifying practice of *Geist*, the world-historical Subject. (p. 72)

In this claim Postone could be accused of “putting words into Hegel’s mouth,” in as much as Hegel never talks about “practice” and only rarely (though very significantly) talks about “action.” However, along with many others, I agree that the real subject of Hegel’s *Logic* is practice.

The key breakthrough that Hegel made in transcending traditional epistemology and ontology was to eliminate the traditional dualist ontology which left philosophers facing the impossible task of grasping how an isolated philosopher could understand an alien natural object or process. This he did by replacing this ontology with a form of life (*Gestalt des Bewußtseins*) in which both subject and object were moments. “Externality” (or “objectivity”) was the term Hegel used for the material world outside and beyond the consciousness of a given community or institution. The subject is unable to impute *anything* to externality, conceiving of every event only within its own terms.

Being part of the same formation of consciousness, the object is already “known” to the subject. Thus Hegel created a *monist ontology* which does away with the problems of epistemology altogether. If there is only *one* substance, then it makes no matter what you call it according to the spirit of your own times, Hegel called it “thought”; Marx called it “practice.” The change in terminology was not, of course, without consequence for how the philosophers approached the real social problems of their times. However, the monist ontology of Hegel, who thought of that one substance as *Geist*, translated as “mind” or “Spirit,” still provided a monist ontology which allowed the thinker to avoid getting trapped in the aporias of dualism.

I don’t think one can make any progress in interpreting Hegel’s philosophy for our times without interpreting Hegel in this way, in terms of “practice” or its near synonyms. This is insufficient, however, because in the *Logic* we find more than 400 categories of “thought.” It is not enough to substitute “practice” for “thought” until we have a concept of practice which allows us to grasp the meaning of Hegel’s logical concepts. This Postone never even attempts.

The Subject is not a social class (or person)

After citing Marx in *Capital Vol. 1*:

[Value] is constantly changing from one form into the other without becoming lost in this movement, it thus transforms itself into an *automatic subject* ... (Marx, 1867)

Postone comments:

Marx then explicitly characterises capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject. In doing so, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism, yet he does not identify it with any social grouping, such as the proletariat, or with humanity. Rather Marx, analyses it in terms of the structure of social relations constituted by forms of objectifying practice and grasped by the category of capital (and, hence, value). His analysis suggests that the social relations that characterise capitalism are of a very peculiar sort – they possess

the attributes that Hegel accorded to *Geist*. It is still this sense, then, that a historical Subject as conceived by Hegel exists in capitalism. (p. 75)

Here Postone again follows Hegel's monist ontology as he must; according to Hegel, *Geist* is both subject and substance.

the Idea is *in the first place* only the one universal *substance*: but its developed and genuine actuality is to be as a *subject* and in that way as mind. (Hegel, 1807, Preface)

"Substance" is Hegel's meaning is not the same as "object," but rather refers to the conception of matter as that which is merely an infinite chain of cause and effect, as, for example, in Spinoza's conception of God or the natural scientist's conception of Nature. The "Subject" Postone refers to here is the God-like totality of human activity who appears to act as a knowing transhistorical *causa sui*.

In this view, the idea of the proletariat as the "Subject of History" – a term well-established in Soviet-era Marxism – is excluded, replaced by an impersonal but worldly "value." It is highly questionable by the time of Postone's writing that the industrial proletarians were led, organised and educated by capitalism to the condition of being able to act as conscious historical agents against the conditions of their own existence as a class. Yes, the proletarians can fight for better conditions for wage labourers, but there is no reason to suppose that that extends to a truly historical consciousness including the abolition of wage labour.

It is the self-changing social relations which constitute *Geist*, the *activity* of people *determined* by these relations, not the people as such, which is the Subject. There is nothing mysterious about a social formation having subjectivity. We see this everywhere with companies, nations, governments, movements, and so on, acting purposively through their agents in pursuit of their own ideals. What is peculiar about designating capital as a subject is that this subject is a kind of "automatic subject" which seems to act independently of the will of *any* person – as an "*automatic subject*," as Marx emphasised.

Abstract labour, or Value, is the Subject

In the quote from Marx cited above, Marx ascribes to *value* this characterization of being an "automatic subject." "Value" is understood by Marx as abstract labour "for which the commodity and money are both mere *forms*" (Marx, 1867, pp. 255-256). However, the *content* of value is the quantity of wage-labour insofar as it is employed in the expansion of capital. Now, labour is always purposive, not "automatic," but the method and motive of an employee's labour is determined by the agents of capital. Correspondingly, the product of the workers' labour is alienated from them by being the property of the capitalist. The subjective side of practice is given by the motive and concept which shapes every action, and these exclusively originate in the political economy of capital. Even the capitalist who goes broke and loses ownership or destroys his or her capital, is motivated by concepts and goals determined by the political economy of capital and its own motive of self-expansion.

That is, the proletarians themselves, as persons or as a group, are not the subjects of value even though it is they who provide the content of value, because the means and motives are the product of objective properties of capital. And thus an “automatic subject.” Meanwhile the proletarians themselves are “alienated” from the process of this subject.

The dualism of structure and agency is implicated here: the economic structure of capitalism is not *designed* by any agent, but evolves in a pseudo-natural process. In the approach suggested by Postone’s analysis, structure is absolutely dominant over “agency.” Any subversive plan, regulation or philanthropic impulse by a capitalist, etc., sooner or later only proves the resilience of capital which merely changes its form in the face of any attempt to subvert its demands. I don’t adhere to this Structuralist ideology, but it is a powerful argument and has to be confronted.

Hegel was the originator of the philosophical principle that “As for the individual, every one is a son of his time; so philosophy also is its time apprehended in thoughts” (Hegel, 1821, Preface). Nonetheless, Postone argues that the conception of Logic as a transhistorical principle independent of its times, reflects Hegel’s Idealism, itself a product of his times. Consequently, in order to demonstrate that contrary to this Idealism, Logic is in fact a reification of *earthly* relations, specifically bourgeois relations, and the conception of Logic as being timeless and transhistorical is a product of Hegel’s Idealism. Thus, part of the work of *Capital* must be a critique of Hegel’s Idealism, demonstrating in specifics that the seemingly eternal categories of capitalism are in reality transitory. That is, rather than demonstrating that Hegel’s *Logic* is mistaken, Marx must show how the *Logic reflects* the laws of capitalist political economy. This means *validating* the *Logic*, but negating its transhistorical validity.

The implication of Hegel’s mistaking a logic peculiar to capitalism for a transhistorical logic is that despite Hegel’s Idealism, his *Logic* will provide an instrument for the analysis of capital according to its own Logic, an *immanent* critique. Such a critique can identify the contradictions masked by the totality.

Further, Postone (p. 368) argues for the application of this interpretation of Hegel in terms of practices beyond the bounds of bourgeois political economy, such as in relation to social movements. I agree with this claim, and in fact it is a central motivation for this author.

Capitalism totalises due to “abstract labour”

Postone claims that this Subject, which indeed can be identified in capitalism, differs from Hegel’s concept of the *Geist* because Hegel conceived of *Geist* as transhistorical, whereas the Subject Marx identified as implicit in the political economy of capitalism and was unique to capitalism, and its all-consuming totality

[O]bjectivity and subjectivity ... are moments of a general whole that is substantially homogeneous – a totality. (p. 72)

In a world dominated by capital and a world market, all human labour is converted into the *same substance*, as value, and as such, is *homogeneous* and pure quantity. It is these properties that transform that world into a *totality*, with capital flowing from industry to industry, firm to firm, always recovering

itself in new forms. Granted that there *is* activity outside of that totality, but that activity is mere “externality” or “objectivity” and impacts on the consciousness of people caught up in capitalism only as conceptualised within the ideology of capital, and cannot be conceived of outside of the “closed circle” of bourgeois ideology.

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