

# Subject, class and the Hegelian legacy in critical social theory

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*At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18-21, Platypus hosted a conversation on "Lukács's Marxism." Panelists Timothy Bewes (Brown University), Jeremy Cohan (Platypus), Timothy Hall (University of East London, U.K.), and Marco Torres (Platypus) were asked to address, "Who was Lukács? Critic of reification, founder of Hegelian Marxism, Critical Theory, Western Marxism? Or: philosopher of Bolshevism, apologist for Leninism, romantic socialist, voluntarist idealist, terrorist revolutionary? Lukács is usually read as an interpreter rather than a dedicated follower of Marxism, leaving Lukács's particular contribution obscure. Lukács was most original—and influential—when he accepted the presuppositions of Marxism, the political practice and theory of revolution, in earnest, from 1919-25, in *History and Class Consciousness* and associated works—however Lukács himself may have disavowed them subsequently. What can we make of Lukács's legacy today, his investigation and elaboration of the problematic of Marxism, and what are the essential issues potentially raised for our time?" The article that follows is a modified version of Timothy Hall's opening remarks.*

1. Is there a revolutionary subject today? Is there, in other words a subject capable of challenging the status quo; of challenging society as a whole characterized by universal commodity relations? If so, who is this subject and how does it stand towards the class subject of classical Marxist theory?

For a variety of reasons, both intellectual and political, such questions have begun to be asked with increasing

regularity today. Not the least of these is the seismic events in the Arab states beginning with the revolution in Tunisia last January and followed by the revolution in Egypt. These events have reignited debates about the possibility of revolutionary action and called into question the assumption that we are not living through revolutionary times. Prior to this, however, the resurgence of interest, since the mid-nineties, in modernity and modernism in the humanities and social sciences (and a corresponding waning of interest in post-modernist discourses) has created a more conducive intellectual environment for posing these questions.

There is a growing consensus on the Left that it is not enough to theorize "subjection/subjectivization" in ever greater detail while neglecting to theorize political practice or action. The notion that an individual politics of style could substitute for a substantive discussion of political practice, as was once advanced, is no longer compelling. My focus will be on the tradition I am most familiar with: the tradition deriving from Hegelian Marxism and the critical social theory developed by the Frankfurt School. What emerges from a consideration of this tradition are a range of debates on the character of the political subject; on the relations between idealism and materialism; and on the role of class in politics with a broader significance.

A number of responses to the question of the existence and identity of the subject can be discerned in this tradition. Each could be considered to be a response to the theory of proletarian praxis developed by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). In this work Lukács affirms the existence of such a subject and identifies it as the proletariat. The particular status of the proletariat in the capitalist productive process enables it to solve the riddle of the commodity and recreate the social world in its own (free) image. Defences of this view can be found in Horkheimer's work from the 1930s, in Castoriadis at various points in his career, and in the Hegel-fortified Marx outlined by Gillian Rose in *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1982).

The first response originating in the middle and late period of the Frankfurt School is that there is no such subject today; that historically there was such a subject—the proletariat—but that, for a variety of reasons, it has vanished from the political scene. According to this view, all that remains is the possibility of radical insights into the social whole but without the corresponding possibility of radical social transformation. This roughly approximates Adorno's position, specifically the critical status he accords artworks in modernity. It also includes those attempts to recover an ethics from Adorno's aesthetic theory such as that developed by Jay Bernstein in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2001).

Another view is that the whole problem of the subject

was misconstrued by the Marxist tradition. For this tradition the idea that capitalist society is antagonistic because of class conflict is fundamentally wrong-headed. This gives rise to the erroneous idea that the subject of modernity is the proletariat. This view has been defended by Moishe Postone in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993) but is also taken up by Marxists that follow Postone's lead in according centrality to the value-form in critical social theory.

While both the first and the second position concur in holding that there is no political subject today, they do so for contrasting reasons. For the second the very notion of a subject of history is mistaken. Insofar as we can speak of a subject in this sense, it is capital itself. Such a "subject", however, is anything but revolutionary and hardly qualifies as a subject at all on account of the fact that it is destined to remain unconscious and "blind."<sup>1</sup> For the first, by contrast, the disappearance of the macrological subject is historical. It marks the transition between liberal and late capitalism. This is to say: at a certain point such a subject was the bearer or revolutionary overcoming but is no longer. Which view is correct? Has the political subject become historically obsolete or was it a fateful misconception on the part of the Marxian tradition? In my view the former is closer to the truth. I will try to show this by way of a critique of the latter view specifically as this is articulated in Postone's seminal work from 1993. What I'm going to suggest is that:

i. The charge of 'productivism' levelled at the Hegelian Marxist tradition—that the category of labor is treated as a transhistorical category and that as a consequence such theories cannot account for their own self-possibility—is not borne out.

ii. While Postone shares the desire for an immanent theory with Hegelian Marxism, he is prevented from realizing this because he dispenses with the categories of subjectivity, class, and totality.

2. Postone's critique of Hegelian Marxism, is largely carried out in Part I of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. The basic thrust of his reading of Marx's theory of capitalism is to see it "less as a theory of forms of exploitation and domination within modern society, and more as a critical social theory of the nature of modernity itself"(4). However, before Marxism can aspire to become a critical theory, able to account for its own theoretical self-possibility, it has first to expunge its dogmatic assumptions. Principal amongst these is the idea that labor represents a transhistorical constitutive power lying at the base of all social formations. While, for Postone, the early Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* subscribed to this view, the late Marx of *Capital* (1867) comes to reject it. For the late Marx,

"the notion that labor constitutes the social world and is the source of all wealth does not refer to society in general but to capitalist, or modern society alone"(4). Whereas for the early Marx emancipation from capitalism involves the realization of the essential, laboring subject (species-being), for the late Marx it takes the form of an emancipation from the self-generating and self-valorizing system that is capitalism.

Hegelian Marxism is closer to the young Marx's view. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács attempts a materialist appropriation of Hegel's concept of *Geist*. According to Postone, Lukács rejected Hegel's concept of *Geist* as mystified, but held on to its identical form: the self-moving substance that is subject becomes the proletariat as identical subject-object of history. For Postone the problem with this approach is that it repeats the error of the young Marx in essentializing the productive subject. Rather than view this as a historically mediated reality particular to capitalist society, it becomes instead the constitutive source of all history. In this, Lukács doesn't simply repeat the error of the young Marx but compounds it by giving credence to the idea that history has a subject.

For this reason Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* throws a long shadow over the development of Marxist thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Postone's view. Not only is it responsible for the fiction of a meta-historical subject but also for the notion that totality represents a normative value for critical theory. In this regard the self-totalizing character of proletarian practice fatefully mimics the self-totalizing, auto-generating logic of capital itself. Consequently instead of casting resistance to social domination in terms antithetical to this—i.e. as interrupting forestalling or arresting the logic of totality—it unwittingly exacerbates it. As Postone writes, "an institutionally totalizing form of politics should be interpreted as an expression of the political coordination of capital as the totality, subject to its constraints and imperatives rather than the overcoming of capital. The abolition of totality would, then, allow for the possible constitution of very different, non-totalizing, forms of the political coordination and regulation of society"(79-80).

What form would such a politics take and what would its relation be to class? Postone begins to develop this in Part III of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. In Postone's view, the schema that has dominated Marxism (including Hegelian Marxism) is the forces of production/relations of production schema. Yet the development of the former does not lead in the direction that Marxists have traditionally thought:

As industrial production becomes fully developed [the] productive powers of the social whole become greater than the combined skills, labor and experience

of the collective worker. They are socially general, the accumulated knowledge and power of humanity constituting itself as such in alienated form; they cannot adequately be apprehended as the objectified powers of the proletariat. "Dead labor," to use Marx's term, is no longer the objectification of "living labor" alone; it has become the objectification of historical time. (356)

The suggestion here is that productive forces develop to a point beyond where it is possible to view the instituted world as the objectified power of the proletariat. Yet there is no missed moment here, for Postone, where a class politics was potentially adequate to the world but is no longer. Rather this development was intrinsic to the logic of capital. This implies that both the proletariat and capitalist class are bound to capital and that emancipation takes the form of the abolition of the proletariat and the labor it performs (357). There is then no reconfiguration of class politics in Postone's view. There is no sense in which a set of class-related oppositional strategies might be thought as challenging the status quo. Rather, the overcoming of capital should be conceived as the "people's reappropriation of socially general capacities that are not ultimately grounded in the working class" (357).

**3.** To summarize Postone's critique of Hegelian Marxism: the latter is "productivist" in holding that labor constitutes the social world and is the origin of all wealth. This is only the case in capitalist societies, not societies in general. From this rises the notion of the subject of history in Hegelian Marxism, that is, of a subject capable of recovering its agency from its alienated form and re-instituting society in its own image. But, for Postone, such an assessment plays into the hands of the totalizing logic of capital instead of opposing it. In contrast to the class subject of classical Marxism he proposes the anti-totalizing practice of the people.

Leaving to one side for the moment the alternative vision of political subjectivity that Postone proposes I will focus on the charge of productivism and dogmatism in Hegelian Marxism. The charge of "productivism" fails, in my view, to take account of the difference between the "total social process" and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in the Hegelian Marxist tradition. In the former, social practices serve to reproduce existing social relations. Yet there is nothing inherently reductive about this position. Cultural, political, and legal practices, no less than economic practices, serve to reproduce the status quo and do so primarily, not in a secondary and derivative way. For this reason the approach could be characterized as "productivist" but social practices in general do the

producing, not simply human labor.

Moreover, one could draw a line around these practices and describe them as bourgeois or class-related. This would be fine as long as class is not defined in a reductive way in relation to ownership of the means of production. Class for Lukács, for example, relates to an array of practices serving to produce and reproduce existing social relations, only some of which are economic. Thus for Lukács cultural practices like journalism or science serve to reproduce social relations irrespective of the specific intentions of any particular practitioner. They do this through their form not by conferring a specious universality on capitalist relations of production. What is reified, writes Lukács in relation to journalism, is subjectivity itself:

[it is] knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their owner and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand.<sup>2</sup>

Journalism as a practice is restricted in respect of its critical insight by the fact that as a reification of subjectivity it reproduces existing relations of production. Public opinion forms an objective system—"an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously." This system allows for a range of 'different' opinions—a Melanie Philips, a Toby Young, a Laurie Penny, and a Polly Toynbee. But since the very practice is predicated on a far-reaching reification, it is powerless to interrupt reified social reality.

Should we decide that there no is 'honor' to be had in journalism and turn our hand instead to the professions of law, public administration or even an academic career we would soon discover that there is no honor to be had here either. For Lukács, if we look at the practice of science we discover that

the more intricate a modern science becomes and the better it understands itself methodologically, the more resolutely it will turn its back on the ontological problems of its own sphere of influence and eliminate them from the realm where it has achieved some insight.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that science is implicated in specialization and social fragmentation means that it is unable to interrupt this reality. Science as cultural activity (and philosophy as second-order reflection on this) produces and reproduces the status quo by exploring and deepening the nomological structure of the social world.

To summarize: for Lukács and the Frankfurt School it is not labor that produces and reproduces existing relations

but social practices in general, that is, our economic, legal, political and cultural practices broadly understood. Whilst these do serve to produce and reproduce the status quo, notwithstanding the conscious intentions of those participating in them, to suggest as Postone does, that this ontologizes labor as the essential human activity is simply not correct. Neither is the Hegelian Marxist approach debarred from accounting for its self-possibility. Working practices like a host of other social practices are historically specific and have no application outside the social world they serve to reproduce.

4. However, Postone isn't simply wrong about the Hegelian Marxist tradition. His own conception of critical social theory is seriously skewed as a consequence. For in his rush to dispense with what he regards as discredited categories of subjectivity, class, and totality he ends up undermining any basis for interrupting the cycle of social relations.

Everything turns for Postone on a fateful misreading of Hegel that Marx himself would only address in his later writings; that is, on the interpretation and demystification of the Hegelian subject. For Hegel, the subject is transpersonal. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he demonstrates how even the most subjective awareness of the world presupposes a "shape of spirit" or concrete socio-historical world. Central to this demonstration was the concept of intersubjective recognition that makes its appearance in Chapter IV, the famous master/slave dialectic. Hegel's strategy is to show how conceptions of the subject (e.g. the individual as the bearer of abstract rights or the moral subject acting in accordance with the dictates of conscience) are not immediate subjective positions but the results or outcomes of historical struggles for recognition. According to Postone, Marx initially appropriated this model of subjectivity but gave it a materialist twist by replacing spirit with labor. For the early Marx it was the productivity of labor—not spirit—that one needed to turn to make sense of forms and institutions of the bourgeois world that appeared immediate and natural. For Postone, Marx changes his mind about Hegel as he comes to prepare for the writing of *Capital*. Instead of looking to Hegel, to provide a theory of subjectivity albeit in inverted, form he sees his work, particularly the *Science of Logic*, as a prescient attempt to work through the logic of capital. Famously, Hegel claims to have transcended the subjective standpoint in the *Science of Logic* and there is no reference to subjective experience in the work. However, this sea change in Marx's relation to Hegel went unnoticed for the most part by the Marxian tradition, particularly by Lukács who sought to supplement the critique of capital with a theory of revolutionary subjectivity, the resources for

which were to be found in Marx's early writings.

The ramifications of this were profound. To begin with, the entire project of supplementing Marx's critique of capital with a theory of subjectivity was misguided. It set Marxism on the pathway of identifying a meta-historical subject; it misconstrued the nature of social domination in capitalist societies (not the domination of one class over another but fundamentally impersonal); it wrongly defined the task of critical social theory as the attempt to distinguish itself from idealism. What Hegel anticipated—and Marx saw—was the distinctive ontology of capitalism, its existence as a "real abstraction." The obsession evidenced in Hegelian Marxism, in distinguishing between an idealist and an authentically materialist approach missed the point: the real world had become an abstraction. For Postone, Hegel's insight lay in grasping this. The unstinting attempt to expunge the idealism from Hegel's dialectic inevitably lost sight of this. For by insisting that capitalist domination was at bottom class domination, the fundamental character of the former was misrecognized.

5. These are complicated claims that require a book-length study to disentangle. The following remarks should suffice to show that Postone's reading of the Hegelian legacy in Marx is at the very least problematic.

To begin with, if, as I have suggested, Postone's interpretation of Hegelian Marxism is inadequate what are the implications of this for the position that he seeks to defend? Lukács in fact shares Postone's aim of developing a critical—e. wholly immanent—social theory. He also shares Postone's concern to develop a non-reductive Marxism. The seeming advantage of Lukács's approach, however, is that he does not have to throw the concepts of mediation, class, and totality overboard to do this.

To take the example of class: Lukács and the subsequent theorists of the Frankfurt School would surely have agreed with Postone's insistence on the impersonal form of modern social domination. It is doubtful, however, that they would have agreed that experience of class domination rests on a productivist fallacy. Surely the point of the approach Lukács innovated was that class-based forms of domination were always mediated by the illusion of the commodity form. It isn't that class domination does not exist. Nor is it the case that class politics does not exist. The point is that a class-based politics comes up short: that in failing to interrupt the total social process it fails also to throw off the yoke of class domination. In fairness to Postone, he would not deny the existence of class domination/politics. However, he is always struggling to account for this having asserted that the proletariat are as much a part of the logic of capital as the capitalist class is.

There is another possibility here however: we might

agree that the Hegelian Marxist approach is not reductive and yet still insist on its adherence to productivist models. We could, for example, accept that social practices (not human labor) reproduce the status quo and still insist that Lukács and others set too much store in the capacity of the subject to overcome its alienated objective form. Adorno's insistence, against Lukács, in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) that there was a part of the object that wasn't reducible to subject seems representative of this view.<sup>4</sup> Adorno's strategy, here and elsewhere, appears not to involve the wholesale junking of Hegelian Marxist categories. On the contrary, he appears rather to insist on a change of emphasis away from the subject and the category of mediation and towards the object and the "category" of immediacy. Thus concepts like mediation and totality are still deployed in negative dialectics but in the service of the immediate – of what will not allow (without falsification) of discursive elaboration.<sup>5</sup>

However, the same approach is not adopted by Postone in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. His own conception of the subject (the people) is abstractly opposed to the self-generating and self-valorizing totality in an undialectical fashion. At best this looks like a re-inscription of the Lukács's problematic of the subject as Neil Larsen has recently argued.<sup>6</sup> At worst, "the people" appears to respond to ethical imperatives every bit as unmediated as the postmodern counterparts that Postone is looking to distance himself from.

Finally, we should surely be wary of any attempt to relate Marxist-inspired critical theory to a work as odd as Hegel's *Science of Logic*. If we hesitate with many "left Hegelians" in moving to the realm of "science" in which the "merely" subjective standpoint is overcome, what are the implications of this for the concept of capital that Postone is attempting to defend? Postone would insist here that we need to radically review our understanding of Hegel's project. Rather than attempting to rewrite Kant's transcendental deduction, we should instead think of Hegel as engaging, in an approximate way, with the impersonal form of modern social domination. For me, however, it is unclear how Postone's position in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is significantly different from a range of neo-structuralist positions in which subjectivity is seen as dispersed across power structures in society. Rather than read the Hegelian legacy in this way I would favour a return to Gillian Rose's proposal to question the fundamental difference between the productivity of spirit and the productivity of labor.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, to question the fundamental importance that Marxists have traditionally given to this distinction. For if social institutions are viewed as the result of socio-historical work, rather than human labor, the charge of "productivism" begins to look less

urgent.

6. To return briefly to the question with which I started: what are the possibilities for a class politics today? In my view there certainly is class politics today but without revolutionary potential. Whilst this cannot be discounted, it is important not to underestimate the extent to which any such movement is already deformed, from the inside and the outside, by the universality of the commodity. **IPR**

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1. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 77. Hereafter cited within text.

2. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* trans. R. Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971[1923]), 100.

3. *Ibid.*, 104

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 192.

5. See Timothy Hall, "Reification, Materialism & Praxis: Adorno's critique of Lukács," *Telos* Vol. 145, Summer 2011.

6. Neil Larsen, "Lukács sans Proletariat, or Can *History and Class Consciousness* be Re-historicised?" in Bewes, T. & T.Hall (eds.) Georg Lukács: *The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, (New York: Continuum Press, 2011).

7. See chapter 6 of Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, (London: Athlone, 1981).