

THE HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY OF CAPITALISM, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: REFLECTIONS ON POSTONE'S READING OF MARX AND MARXISM

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ABSTRACT. Whether we think history has a definite logic of its own, or is merely the emergent quality of an irreducible contingency – it is usually taken as granted that it the same way in all its course. This is the case with some philosophers who argue against a conception of history as having an inherent logic. In this paper I present Postone's critical reexamination of Marxian categories and argue that based on his project, we can criticize the presupposition of the "sameness" of history. For although there is no transhistorically valid "logic of history", something like it is constituted by the functioning of capitalism's elementary categories.

Keywords: history, historical time, logic of history, capitalism, traditional Marxism, Moishe Postone

Despite the readiness to accept that history is full of breaks and gaps, the readiness then to accept that people have lived very different lives in different epochs, there is an underlying continuity in our conception of this history. Although riddled with events and periods that come into stark contrast with one another, we understand these historically different worlds as taking place (or rather: time) in history. This intuitive conception of human history – that has been challenged at numerous junctions of contemporary philosophical thought – rests on the presupposition of the essential sameness of historical time. Whether history has a definite logic of its own, or is merely the emergent quality of an irreducible contingency – it is taken as granted that it the same way in all its course.

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Surely the first counterpoint to such a charge seems to arise from the general trend of denying the existence of a unique 'History.' The positing of capital 'H' History is considered one of the chief faults in our modernity. I turn to Odo Marquard for a preliminary definition: "Thus Schiller gave the classical definition of universal history, as the history that is universal because it turns all histories—all stories—into one, the single, unique story of mankind's progress and perfection."² This idea, or rather: program, is criticized by Marquard on the grounds that it is a "capitulation" in the face of an ever-accelerating world – making a virtue of the necessity of change. Furthermore, he localizes in the program of universal history a form of unfreedom, saying: "It is necessary for human beings to have not only one unique history or story, or a few of them, but many of them. For if they—each individual human being, and all of them together—had only one unique history or story, they would be utterly in the power and at the mercy of this sole history or story."³

Or one could point towards various conceptions of contingency, which, just like Marquard point outwards of History, and towards histories. Ernesto Laclau in fact considers "the impossibility of the a priori transcendental constitution of any *positive content*" as "the very ontological condition of historicity."⁴ Laclau considers this fundamental lack crucial for the autonomy of the political and thus for the freedom of human action. And he argues that notions of History with a definite logic negates this freedom, saying:

in the vision of History [...] the various stages in the succession are not conceived as *interruptions* of what preceded them but as *teleological fulfilments*. We are dealing with a pure combination in which each actor and task has an assigned place in a secular eschatology grounded in the 'necessary laws' of History.⁵

This is essentially "rigging the game", where various possibilities are subsumed under these 'necessary laws' of History. Just like Marquard then, Laclau scoffs at the idea of a history with a definite logic of its own, considering it a restriction on the free play of signifiers – and not unimportantly: philosophically untenable.⁶

² Odo Marquard, "Universal History and Multiversal History", in Odo Marquard, *In Defense of the Accidental*, transl. by Robert M. Wallace, Oxford University Press, 1991, 50–70. 52.

³ Ibid. 67.

⁴ Ernesto Laclau, "Structure, History and the Political", in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality – Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2000, 182–212. 186–187.

⁵ Ernesto Laclau, "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor", in Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, Verso, 2014, 53–78. 70.

⁶ See: Ernesto Laclau, "Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics", in Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, Verso, 2014, 139–180. 162–163.

Such conceptions could surely not be construed as based on the sameness of historical time. Yet even if we say that there are only histories, or that the one fundamental feature of our socio-historical reality is contingency – this radical openness that allows for multiple articulations – we are positing a sameness of historical time. If every randomly plucked period is contingent, hence all are contingent in the way they are, then I am positing contingency as the fundamental characteristic of historical time. If I posit that there is no History, only histories, I am saying that historical time is such that it cannot coagulate into a unitary time, that it is irreducibly plural – so I posit multiplicity or plurality as the *sine qua non* characteristic of historicity proper.

This sameness of historicity bodes ill for inquiring after the specific “nature” of different periods.⁷ In fact, periods seem to melt into air, as nothing more than ill-fitting straightjackets sewn together by eager, but – with regards to the ultimate contingency and irreducible multiplicity of human existence – ignorant theoreticians and/or revolutionaries. In this paper I wish to present Moishe Postone's reading of Marx, in which – through his insistence on the historicity of capitalism and his analysis of its historical dynamic – one can find a perspective that dislodges the sameness of historicity.⁸

The historical specificity of capitalist categories

Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (1993) is to this day a classic within Marxist theory. As a meticulous re-reading of Marx, the book sets out to rewire the way Marxian categories are used. Postone differentiates his approach

⁷ Of course, from Marquard's point of view this search for the historical specificity of an epoch could be seen as merely an atrophied version of the philosophy of history. See: Odo Marquard, *Dificultăți cu filosofia istoriei*, transl. by Maria-Magdalena Angheliescu, Tact, 2014. 15–19.

⁸ One has to consider Cornelius Castoriadis as well, since he argues that all societies construct their own mode of historical time: “The social-historical is this temporality, in each case specific, which is instituted as the global institution of society and not made explicit as such. The time that each society brings into being and which, in turn, makes society exist, is its own particular mode of historical temporality that it unfolds by existing and by which it unfolds itself as an historical society, without necessarily knowing this or representing this to itself in such a way.” (Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, The MIT Press, 1998. 206.) This seems to fulfill the requirements of historical specificity. After all, Castoriadis explicitly states and theorizes the difference between various kinds of societies in terms of a difference in historical time. While this is true, based on Postone's argumentation it becomes possible to take issue with conceiving of the historicity of precapitalist and capitalist societies on the same plane of abstraction.

from what he calls “traditional Marxism”⁹, the latter including almost every Marxist – this received some criticism. As Martin Jay writes: “Certainly, the intellectual historian will want to know why Marx was so easily and consistently misunderstood by the multifarious figures Postone lumps together under the rubric of ‘traditional Marxism’; this is not a trivial issue.”¹⁰

The chief reason Lenin, Bukharin, the Frankfurt School and British Marxist historians are subsumed under the term “traditional Marxism”, is that they provide a “critique from the standpoint of labor”, as opposed to making the category of labor the object of social critique.¹¹ Crucial to this opposition is a transhistorical notion of “labor”. “Traditional Marxism” regards labor, according to Postone, as “a normative standpoint for a social critique in the name of justice, reason, universality and nature.”¹² Postone, on the other hand, stresses that for Marx labor, along with all capitalist categories of social mediation are historically specific to capitalism. Consequently, they cannot serve as the standpoints of critique – rather, they have to become its object.

Let us consider the Marxian distinction between value and material wealth. Postone argues, that Marx regarded material wealth as wealth in general, the sum of goods etc. But in capitalism material wealth is produced in a very specific form: that of value. “Marx treats value as a category expressing both the determinate form of social relations and the particular form of wealth that characterize capitalism.”¹³ These two dimensions – that of value and material wealth – are present in the commodity form, famously the starting point of Marx’s analysis in *Capital*.

Each commodity has a use value and an exchange value. The former is made up of the various uses and qualities of the commodity – a shoe keeps my foot comfortable, has a certain shape, color, etc. The exchange value of the commodity, on the other hand, expresses the rate at which one commodity can be traded for another – a shoe may be the equivalent of ten socks. It is crucial that the exchange value of a commodity is quantitative – abstracted from all qualities, so that we can measure against one another laptops and gummy bears, for instance. We can see, that in the commodity – itself a historically determinate form of, say “products”, or “goods” – there is a “concrete” and an “abstract” dimension, which corresponds to the material wealth – value pair, but in a way in which the value-dimension is dominant.

⁹ See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1993. 1-120.

¹⁰ Martin Jay, “Marx After Marxism”, in *New German Critique*, No.60/1993, Duke University Press, 181–191. 186.

¹¹ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, Ibid. 64-71.

¹² Ibid. 65.

¹³ Ibid.: 44.

This is carried on to the category of labor, which, for Marx, also has a twofold character. We can thus talk of abstract and concrete labor, which are aspects of labor under capitalism. Abstract labor is the aspect of labor that yields value, and it is measured solely by abstract, homogenous "Newtonian" time – X commodity takes Y many minutes to be produced. Concrete labor is the aspect of labor that yields use values. Just as with the commodity form, here too, the abstract value-dimension is dominant.¹⁴ Note that value – both a form of social relations (meaning: the fact itself that commodities are values is a significant one with regards to social life) and the form of wealth in capitalism – "is a social form that expresses, and is based on, the expenditure of direct labor time."¹⁵ This means that the value dimension is at the center of social relations in capitalism.

All these categories are historically specific, because, according to Postone, they function here as categories of social mediation. That is to say: when labor becomes the means to acquire the product of the labor of others, and consequently these products take the form of the commodity, when money becomes a general equivalent expressing the value dimension of all these commodities – we are in capitalism. This is not the case in precapitalist epochs, where social mediation is taken up by explicitly social relations. As Postone writes: "*Labor itself constitutes a social mediation in lieu of overt social relations.*"¹⁶

These historically specific categories of social mediations are at once subjective and objective "determinations of existence" [*Egzistenzbestimmungen*], or "forms of being" [*Daseinsformen*].¹⁷ So, for instance, abstract "Newtonian" time itself becomes – from this perspective – a corollary of capitalist categories: this kind of time does *in fact* become a measure of human activity. Postone pays special attention to the appearance of abstract time as a measure, and concludes that it is not – contrary to popular belief – the technological innovation of the clock, that leads to a conception of an abstract time, which is made up of homogenous and interchangeable parts. Rather, it is the special relationship of time and labor in capitalism, that gives rise to the idea of this kind of abstract time. He points out, that while it would have been much easier to construct devices that measured constant hours, many precapitalist cultures designed clocks that showed variable hours, and the Japanese, when presented with western clocks, modified them to show variable hours. The difference that gave rise to the idea of "Newtonian" time,

¹⁴ Postone recapitulates these points fairly often in his opus. E.g. Ibid.: 127-128.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 25.

¹⁶ Ibid. 150.

¹⁷ See: Moishe Postone, „A Tőke újragondolása a *Grundrisse* fényében”, transl. by Szilágyi Botond in *Kellék*. No. 59. ProPhilosophia Foundation, 2018. 7-29. 20.

was a changing relationship between human activity and time – this relationship was codified by Marx as the labor theory of value: value is constituted by abstract labor-time expenditure. To have homogenous, quantitative value, incarnated in interchangeable commodities – we need to have a measure of labor, which is fitting these criteria.¹⁸

The twofold character of these categories is crucial to understanding the temporary dimension of capitalism. It is the tension between these two aspects in labor and commodities, that blossoms into a contradiction generative of what Postone calls “historical time”. But before I outline this particular mode of time, we have to consider the basic dynamic of capitalism: the accumulation of surplus value, or the extended reproduction of capital. Marx talks about two ways in which surplus value can be accumulated: one by the extension of the workday, one by the raising of the productivity of labor.¹⁹

The surplus itself comes from the fact that what is bought is the labor power of workers, not the actual labor they perform. According to Marx, labor power is a special commodity, because it can produce more value than is needed for its reproduction. To put it simply: workers work more than they would need to, if they produced only the amount of value that is necessary for them to take care of their needs. If a worker needs 10 value units’ worth of commodities (food, clothing, rent, etc.), then whatever she produces above that 10 value units’ is surplus value. The capitalists’ elementary interest is to keep the workers’ wages as close as possible to the costs of the reproduction of labor power, and to squeeze as much surplus labor out of the workers as possible.

Because value is produced by socially necessary labor-time expenditure, the easiest way to increase the value output of a productive unit, a lightbulb-factory for instance, is to increase the time the workers spend in production. If 100 workers work 8 hours to produce 800 lightbulbs, then the same 100 workers, were they to work 10 hours, could produce 1000 lightbulbs. In this scenario we suppose that wages remain the same, for the sake of clarity. The problem is that this increase in absolute surplus value has some physical barriers: not only does the day have only 24 hours, it is also easy to see that workers cannot be pushed over a certain limit, lest they stop “working”. (This latter realization is one of the reasons for the codification of the length of the working day.)

The other mode of increasing surplus value is the theoretically more interesting one: relative surplus value. This is achieved through raising the levels of productivity – which in turn can be achieved in many ways: technological

¹⁸ See: Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. Ibid.: 200-216.

¹⁹ See: Ibid.: 283.

innovation, more efficient organization of the labor process (think Fordism) and so on. So, for instance, if before an innovation in the 8 hours that the capitalist has at his disposal, the productive unit outputs 800 value units, then after introducing this innovation into the productive process it outputs, say, 1000 value units. The 200 units are the surplus achieved. But what makes this surplus relative? If we come back to what produces value, we find that it is socially necessary labor-time expenditure: this means that the value of a commodity is given by the amount of time it takes generally – in a given society – to produce it. The surplus above-mentioned is relative exactly to this kind of general level: through an innovation a firm can produce more commodities in a given unit of time than the socially general norm. What is crucial is that when the kind of innovation that leads to a relative surplus becomes socially general, then the level of productivity achieved in this way is reset as the socially necessary level. So, to take our example, after the innovation is generalized, the socially necessary labor-time expenditure is reset, and the productive unit is back at producing 800 value units: corresponding to the value of the standard labor hour. This leads to ever newer ways of organizing labor and novel technological methods to raise productivity. In relative surplus value lies the secret of capitalism's dynamic character. This is why "relative surplus value is the form of surplus value adequate to capital, as understood by Marx."²⁰

Before moving on to presenting the value of these insights as regards history, I will consider some criticism leveled against Postone that is relevant to this chapter. Namely that Postone "uses transhistorical categories to expose the historically specific nature of historical time while, simultaneously, he denies them any validity for understanding the movement of history."²¹ So while Postone's analysis requires the category of material wealth, which seems to be a transhistorical category, in that it is essential to conceiving a post-capitalist world, since it is the discrepancy between the immense productivity with regards to material wealth and the ever diminished productivity with regards to value that grounds the possibility of producing value-producing labor (not the production of material wealth!), he seemingly bans transhistorical concepts from theorizing historical processes. This leads, according to Karen Miller, that Postone is unable "to explain effectively how capitalism, and, specifically, how capitalism's historical time, arose."²²

²⁰ Ibid.: 284.

²¹ Karen Miller, "The Question of Time in Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination*", in *Historical Materialism*, 12/3, 2004, Brill, 209–237. 222.

²² Ibid.

This is partially correct. Postone in fact does concede at one point, that “the rise of capitalism in Western Europe may have been a contingent development”.²³ This contingent development however secured its reproduction as a system of social life, and the way it is categorial logic functions does ground and makes explainable how capitalism’s historical time arose. The overly cautious way Postone approaches transhistorical categories, and the reason why he uses them as merely a backdrop to the inquire into the historically specific categories is explained by him in his book:

The historical specificity of the categories of Marx’ s mature critique has more general implications for the question of a self-reflexive social epistemology. [...] Each social formation, then, requires its own epistemology. Put more generally: Even if social theory proceeds on the basis of certain very general and indeterminate principles (for example, social labor as a prerequisite of social reproduction), its categories must be adequate to the specificity of its object. There is no transhistorically valid, determinate social theory.²⁴

Postone’s cautiousness is then not about banishing transhistorical categories from historical speculation, although he does give this impression. Joseph Fracchia for instance writes that “Postone establishes an either/or situation: *either* categories are transhistorical and ontological, the consequence of which is a teleologically driven theory of inevitable historical evolution; *or* they are determinate and historically specific as, in Postone’s view, Marx constructed them.”²⁵ Fracchia goes on to propose that there is need of a third option – based on the *German Ideology* – “*transhistorically abstract* categories as a necessary prelude to the construction of historically specific categories.”²⁶ But as can be seen from the above cited passage from Postone’s book, he himself acknowledges this need. Importantly, however: transhistorically abstract categories must be a stage which theory crosses, and not a goal which hides the key to a post-capitalist world – as was the case with labor in Traditional Marxism.

²³ Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, Ibid. 258.

²⁴ Ibid.: 259.

²⁵ Joseph Fracchia, “Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory by Moishe Postone”, in *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 4/1995, Wiley for Wesleyan University, 355–371. 368.

²⁶ Ibid.

Historical time in capitalism

The motion outlined above is one of the temporal norm. What happens with innovation is that the temporal norm of value-production is superseded: a unit of time becomes more productive. Yet with the generalization of said innovation, the temporal norm is reconstituted. Postone terms this a “treadmill effect.”²⁷ Because it is socially necessary labor-time expenditure that constitutes value, any increase in productivity can only mean a short-term increase in value. Just as on a treadmill, value production, while constantly moving “forwards” – it stays in the same “place”. But – and this is crucial – the increase in productivity doesn't present itself the same way with regards to material wealth. Any increase in productivity means that more and more material wealth can be produced with a given unit of labor-time. So, whereas in terms of value, labor-time remains crucial – in terms of material wealth, labor-time becomes more and more anachronistic.

This is the reason Postone argues that Marx saw capitalism as producing the possibility of its own overcoming. Because labor-time remains crucial in generating value but becomes more and more superfluous with regards to producing material wealth, value itself as the historically specific form of wealth becomes anachronistic. This points to a post-capitalist society in which value is not the form of wealth, labor-time expenditure is not the predominant form of human productive activity, and consequently labor ceases to be a category of social mediation (the means through which one acquires the products one needs).²⁸

There is another consequence of this dynamic. As Postone writes: “In abstract temporal terms, the social labor hour remains constant as a measure of the total value produced; in concrete terms, it changes as productivity does.”²⁹ These concrete terms are those of the material wealth dimension: with the increases in productivity, the social labor hour – unchanging with regards to value production – becomes “denser” with regards to producing goods. Postone argues that this distinction cannot be solved through considerations based on abstract “Newtonian” time alone. This apparent paradox of the ever “denser” social labor hour, which produces more and more goods, points to a “superordinate frame of reference”. Postone argues that even though in terms of value production the new level of productivity is redetermined as the base level – the increase in productivity was achieved. “And while this substantive development cannot change the abstract temporal unit in terms of abstract time itself, it does change the ‘position’ of that unit.”³⁰ It does, so to say, change what counts as the social labor hour.

²⁷ See: Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, *Ibid.*: 289.

²⁸ See: *Ibid.*: 324.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 292.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Here we have then, as Postone sometimes puts it, a movement *of* time, rather than movement *in* time – even more precisely: “*a feature of capitalism is a mode of (concrete) time that expresses the motion of (abstract) time.*”³¹ This mode of concrete time Postone terms *historical time*. The concreteness of this historical time can be summarized by saying that “once such a movement [of an increase in productivity] happens, the whole rhythm of life changes and accelerates – one must move faster to stay in the same place, as if someone has increased the speed on the treadmill on which one is running.”³² This directional dynamic of capitalism then is crucial to understanding the speeding up of the day-to-day, and is the ultimate ground of the ever renewed need to adapt, to learn and relearn, to train and retrain on the part of working people.

Postone’s argumentation has far-reaching consequences with regards to conceptions of history and historicity. He in fact grounds history in the functioning of the categories of social mediation characteristic in capitalism, saying, that (according to Marx, in his reading) in capitalism “there is indeed a form of logic in history, of historical necessity, but that it is immanent only to the capitalist social formation, and not to human history as a whole.”³³ There is however an important caveat to this:

My effort to ground socially – on a very abstract logical level – the historically dynamic character of capitalism suggests that although capitalism is not necessarily marked by a unitary, synchronous, homogeneous historical process, it is, as a whole, historically dynamic in a way that distinguishes it from other forms of social life. The relations among various social levels and processes are organized differently than they would be in a non-capitalist society; they become embedded in a general, socially constituted, temporally directional, dialectical framework.³⁴

³¹ Ibid.: 293. Text italicized in original.

³² Viren Murthy, “Moishe Postone’s Historical Time: Capital, the Holocaust, and Jewish Marxism” in *Critical Historical Studies*, Spring/2020, The University of Chicago, 43–62. 52. Murthy’s article gives a critical summary of Postone’s theoretical insights on Nazi antisemitism, an important part of his work.

³³ Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. 305.

³⁴ Ibid.: 306. This shows why it is problematic to theorize the historicity of capitalism on the same plane of abstraction as that of precapitalist societies, as Castoriadis does. Capitalism is not just one instance of instituting a specific mode of historical time – this being a transhistorical constant (ie. each society institutes a specific mode of historical time) – because it institutes a time on a different/higher plane of abstraction than precapitalist societies. If we say that each society has a different mode of historical time, we must at the same time add, that the “nature” of historical time in capitalism is “differently different.” In this sense precapitalist societies can be named as such not because they chronologically precede capitalism, but because capitalism differs from their modes of historical time in the same way: it does institute a kind of logic of history.

This disavowal of History, even when applied to capitalism as such stems from the fact that this historical dynamic is contradictory. It is not necessarily linear, not necessarily homogenous – there is room for play, as it were, even if these forms and the temporal dynamic underlying capitalist society do impose harshly on this play. And the fundamental contradiction: the positing of labor time expenditure as the content of value, and at the same time reducing necessary labor time expenditure – points toward the possibility of a society, in which value-producing labor is not the necessary form of productive human activity.

The position Postone makes feasible allows him to critique notions of a universal logic of history – in fact, these presupposed transhistorical laws of history are considered projections of the specific historical nature of capitalism into the past or the future. This has important consequences for “traditional Marxist” narratives of history, which do presuppose transhistorical elements to explain the rise of capitalism and its place in human history.

For a very orthodox version of this see Tókei, who considers the different social forms in terms of specific combinations of relations between the individual, the community, and the means of production – the relationship [Zusammenhang] of these three moments is what makes up a mode of production. What is specific to each form is not the social categories at its base, which are invariant throughout history, but the way they are woven together. This is the case even if Tókei adds the caveat, that “the three basic moments, in the indeterminate form above signaled, do not exist. The determination of the form of their three-fold relationship will however give the basic determination of each specific mode of production (and social formation).”³⁵ This is a theory that presumes to be transhistorically valid – something that for Postone is evidently anathema, since each social formation would need its own epistemology.

Also problematic (if not equally) from his viewpoint is the very sophisticated approach of Ellen Meiksins Wood. She, in *The Origin of Capitalism* analyses the class struggle between the English lords and peasantry. Because their judicial-political means of appropriating the surplus product of peasants were squeezed by the monarchy, the landlords had to resort to a merely economic way to acquire this surplus. They used land ownership to their advantage, renting it out so that renters had to compete with one another to be able to pay leases. This kickstarted the process which resulted in the dependence on the market, in Wood's view the characteristic feature of capitalism.³⁶ (This exclusive focus on the market is critiqued by Postone, who regards the categories of production as of higher

³⁵ Ferenc Tókei, *A társadalmi formák elméletéhez*, Kossuth, 1971. 72.

³⁶ See: Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, Verso, 2017.

importance.) But this genesis is problematic, since it presupposes that class struggle is the universal driving force of history. Such universal presuppositions are ungrounded in Postone's view. It should be noted however, that Wood recognizes the problem of the historicity of the category of class, saying that "the division between appropriators and producers – a division implied by any form of state – can take different forms, forms to which the notion of 'class' can be applied only with great caution where there is no clearly differentiated 'economic' power."³⁷ In addition, such narratives of the birth of capitalism can – when proposed in terms of historical contingency (as Wood's argument tends to do so sometimes) – fill the gap left open by Postone when it comes to the question of how capitalism arose.

But it is not just Marxist "grand narratives" that come under critical scrutiny based on Postone's approach. Equally problematic are unilateral refusals to consider a universal human history. For Postone "a general human history does come into being historically (in an alienated form) but does not exist transhistorically."³⁸ Rather than considering it simply a misguided project, as Odo Marquard does, this general history is grounded in the functioning of social categories. It is notable that Marquard, when considering the social causes for this misguided project, talks about them on a very general level, as the increasing speed characteristic of modernity. Yet this increase is not grounded socially, not explained, but merely registered. From the vantagepoint of Postone's analysis, both the ideas about the progress of history and the apparent acceleration of changes can be explained and grounded in the functioning of capitalism's basic categories.

Finally, the critique of totalizing narratives of history, usually from a poststructuralist standpoint (see Laclau), can also be critically examined based on the analysis outlined here. To quote Postone at some length:

Consideration of such general historical patterns suggests, then, that positions, such as poststructuralism, that attempt to deal with history in terms of contingency are inadequate empirically to the history of capitalist society. Nevertheless, such considerations do not necessarily dispense with what might be regarded as the critical insight driving such attempts to deal with history contingently – namely, that history, grasped as the unfolding of an immanent necessity, should be understood as delineating a form of unfreedom.³⁹

³⁷ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism – Rethinking Historical Materialism*, Verso, 2016. 35.

³⁸ Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. Ibid.: 285.

³⁹ Moishe Postone, *History and Heteronomy. Selected Essays*. The University of Tokyo, Center for Philosophy, Tokyo, 2009. 32.

Poststructuralists are right, in other words, to criticize the conception of history as totality, with particular laws of motion – such a history, with an immanent dynamic constitutes a form of unfreedom. This is the position of Marquard as well. But both Marquard and poststructuralists in general seem to presuppose that history cannot be such: a totalizing process with an immanent dynamic. This is what I called the presupposition of the “sameness” of history. Capitalism is different, because it *does* give rise to a history of this kind – it is not just an unfortunate project by intellectuals or misguided revolutionaries. Because this dynamic is actually existing, it is in fact disempowering to deny the possibility of any logic of history. This denial is indicative of the theoretical presupposition of the “sameness” of history, the presupposition then, that advocates of grand narratives of human history as a whole and advocates of contingency have in common. Namely, that history, be it a *mélange* of contingent histories and events, or a transhistorical process with definite characteristics underlying eons – is the same way throughout. I think Postone's reading of Marx disproves this notion through highlighting the specificity of historicity in capitalism.

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