

## Moishe Postone: Anticapitalism without Shortcuts

*Joseph Grim Feinberg*

---

On March 19 of this year, Moishe Postone passed away at the age of 75. I don't think it will be controversial to call him one of our age's most important interpreters of the work of Karl Marx. He was also an important influence on the editorial board of this journal. He was also my teacher.

It would be an overstatement, though, if I said that I was his student. He was my teacher the way he taught all of us graduate students in the social sciences and humanities at the University of Chicago who had some sense that in our academic work we wanted not only to interpret the world as it currently is, but also to understand its processes of change and, possibly, to participate in those changes. We wanted to criticize the world contemporary world, but we weren't satisfied with immediate, purely activist resistance to whatever first appeared before us. That was why we had gone to grad school, after all – we wanted to look for, and perhaps strike a blow against, the deeper social and cultural structures that lay beneath superficial phenomena. Moishe Postone, with his critique of capitalism as a totalizing structure of the modern world, was for many of us a revelation.

A revelation and a warning. To those of us who held on to romantic visions of the moral purity and power of ordinary people and the working class, Postone observed that nothing about the critique of capital guarantees that oppressed people are made better by their oppression. From this point he arrived at a thoroughgoing reevaluation of the entire history of critical social theory. Critical theory, he said, should not be based on the critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor, but on the critique of labor within capitalism. What Postone called "traditional Marxism" looked on capital as if it were only one part of society, its bad part, which could be separated from a second part of society called "labor," which was noble and good. Capital appeared as a parasite, and all that was necessary was to eliminate the parasite, allowing labor to free itself and create a new society of good, hard workers. A workers' government would hand out medals to shock workers, and singing anthems to the "honor of labor" we would praise the value of our sweat.

Postone, instead, made labor itself into an object of criticism. He understood labor as a historically specific phenomenon that emerged together with capital as a part of capitalist society and would necessarily cease to exist if capital were ever overcome. Labor is not the worker's badge of pride, but the worker's great misfortune. And if we want to understand that society that created work, we should not look at it from the perspective of labor itself (as if labor were an autonomous actor that determined the course of history), but from a perspective that encompasses the fundamental structure of which labor is an expression: capital. If history has some subject, spirit, *Geist*, this is only so because capital is its motor. The dialectics of history were born with the birth of capital and would end with capital's end. We can be Hegelians now, only thanks to the fact that capital made a world that has a motor of history that attempts continually to overcome itself. In the dialectics of history, the working class cannot win. At best it can dissolve itself as a class.

Did Postone exaggerate when he implied that no one before him, with the exception of Marx himself, had really understood Marx's work? Certainly. But exaggeration can contain a moment of truth. There were many people before Postone who criticized various aspects of "traditional Marxism" and emphasized those aspects of critical theory that Postone considered a part of Marx's proper legacy. But I know no theorist who so clearly and powerfully characterized the problem and drew from it such broad consequences. Because if capital, through the medium of the commodity, is a central structuring element of modern society, then our understanding of capital affects more than purely economic phenomena. The fetishization of honorable work against parasitic capital can lead not only to the ideology of workerist socialism. It can also lead to a reactionary nationalism that blames all social problems on whatever can be seen as a parasite on the hard-working national core: not only the bourgeoisie, but especially the foreign bourgeoisie; not only bankers, but especially Jewish bankers; not only the leisure class, but also the effete intellectuals, the lazy bohemians, the unemployed, the welfare-dependent poor. It divides the world between an abstract part and a concrete part, and against the domination of abstraction it seeks salvation in the concrete, in work, in blood, in soil.

Not all of us in Chicago were Postonians. But Postone articulated problems to which we all reacted. I wasn't always convinced. When he warned against the conservative tendencies that could emerge with the left of the day, the critique struck me as unfair. I never doubted that the left was full of contradiction, like any political grouping. But that from fragments of the antiglobalization movement there might emerge xenophobic forces, which would invoke the traditions of socialism and the honor of hard-working citizens against immigrants and "global capital"?[17] A bit alarmist, surely.... Maybe prophets are always alarmist. But someone needs to sound the alarm.

Still, as I said, I didn't consider myself a Postonian. Now I say that I wasn't a Postonian the way Marx wasn't a Marxist. It was possible, on the basis of Postone's analyses, to devise a schematic framework that enabled one to identify reactionary politics according to a few superficial signs: anyone who expressed a romantic affection for pre-modern community, anyone who defended cultural particularity in the face of globalization, anyone who defended anti-imperialist resistance without ardently enough criticizing the anti-imperialists' own shortcomings – such people had embarked on a road that led to atavism, nationalism, and a fascistic cult of will and violence, regardless of whether their flag was red or brown. Maybe, I thought. But what was the progressive alternative? How should we conceptualize a politics that neither fetishizes the concrete (labor, community, land) nor turns up its nose at the concrete modes of existence that the dominating forces of the world seem poised to wipe out? That doesn't replace the longing for old community with a cult of modernity, speed, and domination (such fascisms have also been known to exist, I've heard)? How can we defend the principle of universal solidarity (the historic answer to particularist division) without falling for a universalism that is false and premature?

Postone formulated his observations more carefully than many of his followers did. He wrote about the danger of fetishizing the concrete, but he never called on us to fetishize the abstract over the concrete. Both fetishisms, after all, amount to incomplete critiques of capitalism, holding up one expression of capital as the answer to a problem posed by a second expression of capital, without questioning the whole. If the first fetishism can lead to romantic nationalism and anti-Semitism, the second can lead to enlightened imperialism. Progress can be imposed in the name of a universal idea, without the idea *practically* integrating into itself all particularity. Particularity, then, is not dialectically overcome but forcibly suppressed. Social problems are not solved by society as a whole, but by a part of society that is placed above the rest, without acknowledging its own particular position. This kind of false universalism propagates itself as a correct idea above society, without following the motion of ideas *in society*.

Postone's best-known essay is called "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism." It was there that he most clearly articulated his analysis of modern anti-Semitism as a "foreshortened anticapitalism" that identifies capitalism with abstract, parasitic capital and fights against it in the name of concrete, productive, locally rooted work. But I was most taken by this concluding passage, where Postone writes not about anti-Semites, but about the people whom the anti-Semites exterminated:

The Nazis lost the war against the Soviet Union, America and Britain. They won their war, their "revolution" against the European Jews. They not only succeeded in murdering six million Jewish children, women and men. They succeeded in destroying a culture – a very old culture – that of European Jewry. It was a culture characterized by a tradition incorporating a complicated tension of particularity and universality. This internal tension was duplicated as an external one, characterizing the relation of the Jews with their Christian surroundings. The Jews were never fully a part of the larger societies in which they lived; they were never fully apart from those societies. The results were frequently disastrous for the Jews. Sometimes they were very fruitful. That field of tension became sedimented in most individual Jews following the emancipation. The ultimate resolution of this tension between the particular and the universal is, in the Jewish tradition, a function of time, of history – the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps, however, in the face of secularization and assimilation, European Jewry would have given up that tension. Perhaps that culture would have gradually disappeared as a living tradition, before the resolution of the particular and the universal had been realized. This question will never be answered.[18]

The article does not end with an immediate call to the universal, but with a defense of the dialectic between the universal and the particular. Emancipation takes place *through* this dialectical process, not by stopping it short. There are no shortcuts.

*In April 2016, when Moishe was in Vienna on an academic stay at the Institute für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM), we at the Czech Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy (under whose auspices Contradictions is published) were able to bring him to give a talk in Prague. His work wasn't well known here at the time, and he was eager to connect with an intellectual sphere that had once given birth to the Prague Spring and perhaps had not entirely forgotten. The Czechoslovak attempt to create a democratic socialism had made an important impact on him, he confessed – and this meant something coming from a man usually hesitant to lend his endorsement to specific political tendencies and events. I should have asked him more about his views on 1968, but I left it for another day.*

*Since that visit, interest in Moishe's thought here has grown. Plans are in the works for a translation of his magnum opus Time, Labor, and Social Domination, and this July the cultural magazine A2 devoted a whole special issue to his legacy. In 2017, when Moishe was headed back to Vienna in for another stint at the IWM, he suggested that we might arrange another lecture for him in Prague. I enthusiastically agreed, but I wasn't quick enough in making it happen. When I got back in touch with him this January in order to bring the plan to fruition, he told me that his health had taken a turn for the worse, and that he would have to put off the visit until later in the year. That later never came. His ideas are making the trip without him. They've never been more urgently needed.*

Joseph Grim Feinberg is a research fellow at the Philosophy Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences and is editor of *Contradictions*.


---

[17] See, for example, Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism," *Public Culture* 18 (2006), no. 1, pp. 93–110.

[18] Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to 'Holocaust,'" *New German Critique*, no. 19 (1980), Special Issue 1, pp. 97–115, here 114–115.

← back to online content (</en/online-content>)

Filosofický ústav Akademie věd ČR, v. v. i.  
Jilská 1, Praha 1, 110 00  
IČ: 67985955, DIČ (VAT Number): CZ67985955  
číslo účtu: 11339990/5500  
IBAN: CZ22 5500 0000 0000 1133 9990  
SWIFT: RZBCCZPP  
[www.flu.cas.cz](http://www.flu.cas.cz) (<http://www.flu.cas.cz>)

 Akademie věd  
České republiky  
The Czech Academy  
of Sciences (<http://www.cas.cz>)

 (<http://www.flu.cas.cz>)

 (<https://www.facebook.com/kontradikce>)

správa (<https://kontradikce.flu.cas.cz/sprava/prihlaseni>)