

# Lebowitz, Lukács and Postone: Subjectivity in *Capital*

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## Abstract

The works of Michael Lebowitz and Moishe Postone express the potentials and difficulties of re-actualising in contemporary conditions the approach towards subjectivity in *Capital* pioneered by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lebowitz and Postone each develop ideas consonant with the 'antinomies' within Lukács's thought: his wager on the proletariat and his theory of reification respectively. However, both thinkers overlook the intimate relationship between ideological crisis and subjectivity in *HCC*, indicating that the conceptual productivity of Lukács's thought has not yet been exhausted.

This insight suggests manifold connections with recent efforts by radical philosophers, such as Negri, Badiou and Žižek, to articulate the possibility of an emancipatory project to overcome capitalism. The theoretical strong suits of a Lukácsian framework (locating the historical specificity of capitalist society, providing a philosophy of process, the re-politicisation of political economy) remain underexplored resources for mitigating the difficulties confronting these ruptural conceptions of subjectivity.

## Introduction

Recent works of radical philosophy by thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek have tended to focus on the question of subjectivity (for example, Badiou 2007, or Žižek 1999). The fidelity of these philosophers towards the figure of Marx, yet their ambivalent attitude towards his critique of political economy reminds us of David Harvey's diagnosis that "the duality of the worker as an 'object for capital' and a 'living creative subject' has never been adequately resolved in Marxist theory" (Harvey 1999, 114).<sup>1</sup>

I will evaluate two distinctive interpretations of the theme of subjectivity in Marx's *Capital*. In *Time, Labour and Social Domination (TLSD)*, Postone 1993), Moishe Postone takes up Marx's characterisation of capital as a "self-moving substance" (Marx 1990, 256) to posit capital as the subject of its own process, the primary subject of *Capital*. Whilst Postone's investigation clarifies our understanding of the aspect of capital as a non-personal social domination, his view has been challenged by a number of critics (e.g. Bonefeld 2004) suggesting that his reconstruction of Marx's categories is unable to account for the role of class struggle in the functioning of the laws of capitalist production.

Postone's re-interpretation of Marx marginalises the relation between class struggle and emancipation. Yet, Marx's profound investment in class struggle's emancipatory potential can be demonstrated through his elaboration of the concrete forms of working class self-activity found in the chapter of *Capital*, "The Working Day" (Marx 1990, 415). Here, Marx examines the interaction between the workers' movement and the factory inspectors, and the historic combination through which they were able to effect the legal limitation of factory working hours. Furthermore, Marx traces the nascent connections between this movement and emancipatory struggles against slavery and oppression, from which he saw the potential development of a revolutionary challenge

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Alex Callinicos for his supervision of my work on subjectivity in *Capital* during the completion of my PhD entitled "*The Problem of Subjectivity in Marxism: Karl Marx, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci*" at King's College London (Jackson 2013). Thanks are also due to the *Science & Society* reading collective for their very helpful written feedback, and to Frédéric Monferrand and Colin Barker and for their advice on draft versions of this article.

to the functioning of the capitalist system. By contrast, for Postone, working class struggle only serves to constitute the capital relation rather than to challenge it.

Michael Lebowitz has a very different take on class subjectivity to Postone. Nevertheless, for Lebowitz, Postone's argument is possible because of "a critical silence" in *Capital* that "permits the appearance that, for the scientist, the only subject (if there is one at all) is capital" (Lebowitz 2003, 25). Lebowitz's main contention is that, despite the occasional appearance of class struggle in *Capital*, Marx does not systematically explore the side of wage-labour, the subjectivity of workers, as he does for the capital-side of the capital/wage-labour relation. In *Beyond Capital*, and more recently *Following Marx*, Lebowitz advocates the development of a 'political economy of the working class' that might arise from the completion of Marx's initially planned, but never realised, "Book on Wage-labour". While Lebowitz advances a fruitful treatment of the variable nature of human needs, I am unconvinced that this provides the many-sided reading of *Capital* that he desires.

### **Criticisms of Postone and Lebowitz**

A number of substantive critiques have already been made of the work of Postone and Lebowitz. For example, there have been symposia on both thinkers in the journal *Historical Materialism*, in which different aspects of their thought have been critically examined from a variety of theoretical standpoints.<sup>2</sup> Thus Lebowitz has been taken to task for paying insufficient attention to the "levels of analysis" of *Capital* (Albritton 2003), for homogenising the divisions amongst the working class with the concept of "degree of separation" (Fine 2008, Panitch and Gindin 2006), and for underestimating the significance of competition for the constitution of capital and failing to lay out a revolutionary theory to match his demand for "revolutionary practice" (Barker 2006).

Postone's intervention is widely admired, but has also been criticised for marginalising the revolutionary capacities of the proletariat (Arthur 2004, and Hudis 2004), giving an 'affirmative' theory of capital-as-subject (Bonefeld 2004) or a "one-dimensional account of labour" (McNally 2004), confusing the relationship between the historical and the logical (Albritton 2004), and advancing an incoherent methodological rejection of transhistorical categories (Fracchia 2004). While a comprehensive appraisal of the effectivity of these criticisms is beyond the scope of this article, I am indebted to these interventions for many of my arguments.

The current approach is distinguished by its juxtaposition of Postone and Lebowitz. Their frameworks have never, to my knowledge, been treated in tandem.<sup>3</sup> There are good reasons for doing so, since each exposes certain questions that are beyond the horizon of the other's thought. They can be read as expressing the potentials and difficulties of re-actualising in contemporary conditions the approach towards subjectivity in *Capital* pioneered by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*.

Lukács's work is recognised as one of the most ambitious and yet problematic attempts to address the problem of subjectivity in *Capital*. Aspects of the book remain widely influential, but substantial re-assessment of his overall framework has only infrequently been deemed profitable in recent decades (with notable exceptions, such as Starosta 2003). This is perhaps understandable given the contrast between Lukács's unflinching confidence in the revolutionary capacities of the proletariat and the marked absence of evidence justifying these beliefs in the cycle of defeat and

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<sup>2</sup> The symposium on Postone's *Time, Labour and Social Domination* can be found in the volume of *Historical Materialism* 12.3 (2004), and that on Lebowitz in *Historical Materialism* 14.2 (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Although David McNally has referred to Lebowitz's work in his discussion of Postone (McNally 2004, 201).

retreat of workers' organisations in the same period. While a brace of new studies on Lukács's revolutionary thought can be seen as a counter-tendency to this,<sup>4</sup> David McNally has recently argued that the "flourishing of dialectical thought is invariably bound up with moments of mass insurgency" (McNally 2015, 131).

Nevertheless, I believe that Lebowitz and Postone's stimulating writings can lead us to the conclusion that there are more intellectual resources on offer in Lukács's work than currently assumed. I will evaluate their key texts through a Lukácsian lens, by arguing that the work of each thinker can be related to one of the twin antinomies within Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*: his theory of reification and his wager on the revolutionary capacities of the proletariat respectively. Thus, as Postone readily acknowledges, he is deeply influenced by Lukács's analysis of the commodity-form as the universal structuring principle of capitalist society in all its spheres (Postone 1993, 72-3). For his part, Lebowitz retains Lukács's commitment to the self-emancipation of the working class, albeit without interrogating Lukács's conception of the working-class in its philosophical guise as the "identical subject-object of history" (Lukács 1971, 197). Postone and Lebowitz deploy this Lukácsian lineage mediated through radically different sets of influences. Postone's important studies of abstract labour and abstract time represent an attempt to deepen the foundations of the Frankfurt school tradition in political economy, whilst Lebowitz's writings more often engage in a dialogue with classical Marxist, neo-Ricardian and analytical Marxist thinkers (e.g. Lebowitz 1988).

### **Making Capital**

With the publication of the various drafts of Marx's *Capital*, the resources for those studying Marx's critique of political economy continue to expand (see Dussel 2001). It is significant that the study of Marx's *Grundrisse*, the most famous of these drafts, has greatly influenced the interpretations of both Postone and Lebowitz. Not only does the *Grundrisse* highlight aspects of continuity with Marx's earlier writings, particularly with respect to the theme of alienation, but it also provides a vantage point from which the development of these themes can be readily grasped in the totality of Marx's overall project. Whilst we may not go so far as Antonio Negri in his contention that *Capital* is only a fragment of the larger project of the *Grundrisse*, in *Marx beyond Marx* Negri compellingly foregrounds the *Grundrisse* as "the summit of Marx's revolutionary thought" (Negri 1991, 18). Indeed, some of Negri's insights, e.g. concerning the relation between revolutionary subjectivity and the working class, "which, in the *Grundrisse*, is always a concept of crisis and of catastrophe for capital" (Negri 1991, 5), make for a very productive tension with the work of Postone and Lebowitz.

At the same time, the *Grundrisse* cannot be treated as either interchangeable with or superseding the published volumes of *Capital*. We can see from the problems encountered by Marx in the production of *Capital* that his analytical framework increases in coherence during the process of drafting (see Callinicos 2014). Nevertheless, one of the strengths of Lebowitz and Postone's analyses is their mobilisation of the *Grundrisse* in order to examine the 'essential core' of Marx's understanding of capitalist society. Their work is therefore very significant, even if I may advance criticisms of the results.

An examination of Postone and Lebowitz's writings in this context helps to determine certain Lukácsian resources that can be re-actualised in contemporary conditions. This is not to argue that a treatment of these two thinkers is exhaustive of Lukács's legacy. In fact, this comparative

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Burkett 2013, CCM 2014, Fracchia 2013, Grollios 2015 and Le Blanc 2013, among others.

procedure may also negatively reveal aspects of Lukács's work that have been obscured by the subsequent use of his ideas. Indications that the antinomies of his thought remain conceptually productive arise from the contention that both Lebowitz and Postone overlook the intimate relationship between ideological crisis and subjectivity central to Lukács's revolutionary writings. Indeed, I would suggest that Postone and Lebowitz's works tend to obscure the ruptural moment of *Augenblick*, as the art of seizing the correct moment for an act to intervene within a situation, which is central to rendering a plausible conception of subjectivity in Lukács's *HCC*.<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, it may also be helpful to contrast Postone and Lebowitz with other contemporary thinkers. To give one example, in a review article (Lebowitz 1998, 174), Lebowitz himself has noted the possibility of comparing his conception of 'revolutionary practice' with Negri's concept of 'self-valorization' (Negri 1991, 162).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, while Negri rails against any form of 'objectivism', the effect of Postone and Lebowitz's work is to re-articulate the processual aspect of Lukács's theory, its law-like basis in political economy. In the light of subsequent historical experiences, this could be a vital supplement to contemporary ruptural theories of revolutionary subjectivity that propose a radical break with the normal routines of existence, such as the political subjectivity that arises from Alain Badiou's theory of the event.<sup>7</sup>

## Subjectivity in *Capital*

Different conceptions of subjectivity in *Capital* are intimately bound up with the interpretation and articulation of the nature of Marx's overall project. Lebowitz defines Marx's project as the creation of a 'political economy of the working class', and he demonstrates Marx's commitment to the proletariat as the potential agent of radical social transformation in *Capital* in part by drawing on evidence from Marx's 'Inaugural Address' for the First International, a document drafted in 1864, during Marx's work on *Capital* (Lebowitz 2003, 80). By contrast, Postone's re-interpretation of Marx's critical theory and the ideological obstacles entailed by the theory of reification lead him to question the "political and social role traditionally accorded [to] the proletariat in the possible historical overcoming of capitalism" (Postone 1993, 7). Postone characterises *Capital* as an 'autocritique of capitalist society'. However, the process of realising this autocritique, and the alternative agencies capable of realising it – the "social determinations of emancipatory subjectivity" (Starosta 2004, 46) – are rather opaque in Postone's work. Nevertheless, the challenges posed by Postone are not easily dismissed, and greatly clarify our understanding of Marx's key categories.

Both thinkers conceive of Marx's project as a radical overcoming, even revolutionary transformation, of capitalist society. They seek to confront the historical failures of revolutionary movements and the legacy of 'actually-existing socialism' by returning to the 'silences' or mis-interpretations of Marx's texts. For Lebowitz, this is motivated by a desire to explain Michael Burawoy's 'two anomalies': "the durability of capitalism and the passivity of the working class" (Lebowitz 1997, 134). I argue that both thinkers, while ultimately falling short of this aim, make

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<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek discusses Lukács's concept of *Augenblick* in his *Postface to Tailism and the Dialectic* (Žižek 2000, 164). Felton Shortall has also engaged in debate with Lebowitz about the absence of a discussion of the relation between subjectivity and crisis within Lebowitz's thought at a more general level (see Shortall 2000, 123-4).

<sup>6</sup> Negri's 'self-valorization' requires the proletarian subject to sever the connection between wage-labour and the realization of its needs, "to present itself as the activity that regulates universality" (Negri 1991, 162). A further examination of this relationship would be a valuable study, but is beyond the remit of the current article.

<sup>7</sup> For Badiou, a radical break with the current order requires a subject (related to four truth procedures of politics, art, love, and science) that is faithful to the event. Truths are not the effect of a certain order, but require an event which is a "type of rupture that which opens up [the possibility of] truths" (Badiou 2007, xii).

substantial contributions to addressing this challenge. I will examine their significant differences on the question of working class subjectivity, understood, in simplified Sartrean terms, as what the working class are capable of making out of what is made of them.

It is difficult to contest that Marx attributes some agency to workers in their struggle over the length of the working day. The "voice of the worker" arises for the first time in "The Working Day", where the workers make an apparently spontaneous claim, within the terms of political economy, as a commodity demanding its proper value. Marx quotes historical evidence from a manifesto of striking London building workers (1859-60), and describes the working-class movement as having "grown instinctively out of the relations of production themselves" (Marx, 1990, 415). Does this mean however, as Postone would suggest, that class struggle is limited to its constitutive role in the capital relation, or does the struggle arising out of these relations also point beyond them, even if in a non-linear manner?

### **Circuit of Capital, Circuit of Wage-Labour**

For Lebowitz, the circuit of capital (M-C-M') is constantly challenged by a countervailing circuit of the reproduction of labour-power (C-M-C) that always partially evades the control of capital. As Albritton has argued, "since capital only achieves totality at the level of pure capitalism, its grasp on our history is always partial" (Albritton 2004, 81). If this circuit of capital is guided by the logic of capital, then the counter-circuit of the reproduction of labour-power can be said to have its own alternative logic (Lebowitz 2003, 81). Thus, Marx hailed the passing of the Factory Acts, the limitation of the working day, as also the "victory of a principle" of the political economy of the working class over the "blind rule of the supply and demand laws" (ibid). For Lebowitz, such a victory entails workers consciously reshaping their needs, and in turn altering the basis on which their needs are produced.

Classical political economy hypostatizes the needs of workers at any given moment and reduces them to a given *datum*, the socially-necessary minimum value required to reproduce the workers' labour-power. By contrast, Lebowitz argues that the 'political economy of the working class' would overcome the reduction of producers as human beings to their element as wage-earner, by exploring the potential for variable human needs arising from class struggle. Thus, Lebowitz suggests that "it is because workers are not merely wage-labourers but are human beings that there is a tendency to drive beyond wage-labour" (Lebowitz 2003, 207).

There is however a flipside to the coin. As Lebowitz himself notes, "[e]ach new need becomes a new link in the golden chain that secures workers to capital" (Lebowitz 2003, 39). But, Lebowitz does not drill to the theoretical core of this insight. His valorization of the self-transcendence of wage-labour tends to confirm the stereotype that Postone refers to as 'traditional' Marxism. For Postone, industrial production based on proletarian labour is itself responsible for the alienated social relations under capitalism. Lebowitz's silence with regard to Lukács's theory of reification suggests that Postone's theory of social mediation might be an important contribution towards delivering the many-sided theory of Marxism sought by Lebowitz. For Postone, this must include an adequate critical theory of the constitution of determinate socio-historical forms of subjectivity.

For Lebowitz, the division of the workers' day into free time and labour time is key: capitalism provides the basis for the universal expansion of free time. Thus, he says that "superfluous or disposable time is potentially the basis for free human activity, that activity which is 'not dominated by the pressure of an extraneous purpose which must be fulfilled, and the fulfilment of which is regarded as a natural necessity or a social duty'" (Lebowitz 2009, 26). Insofar as the expansion of workers' free-time is the goal of class struggle, Lebowitz's conception of 'revolutionary practice' is greatly divergent from the 'self-valorisation' of the working class endorsed by Negri. For Negri,

"capital has subjugated all of lived time, not only that of the working day, but all, all of it" (Negri 1991, xvi). Between Postone and Lebowitz, as inheritors of Lukács's thought, it is Postone who theorises the way in which not only the time of labour but also free time under capitalism takes on an alienated form.

Although Lebowitz explicitly rejects the notion of an eternal human nature (Lebowitz 2003, 33), he contends that "the foundation for real social labour and for the evolution of full human potential" is our capacity for "free activity – true human wealth", carried out "as an end in itself" (Lebowitz, 2009, 26). Albritton makes sharp criticisms of Lebowitz's "unquestioning embrace of humanist essentialism", suggesting that this blinds Lebowitz to the most creative and dynamic developments in recent thought that emphasise the social construction of subjectivity (Albritton 2003, 106). Thus, Lebowitz's conception of the realisation of the human quality of the "inner laws of wage-labour" could leave him vulnerable to Louis Althusser's critique of theoretical humanism.<sup>8</sup> Lebowitz might reject such criticisms, yet his framework certainly tends to overlook the element of silent conditioning of forms of consciousness that takes place under capitalist social relations.

Despite this, we should not be too hasty to jettison Lebowitz's endorsement of the emancipatory potential of the labour movement. In an early review article of Postone's *TLSD*, Andrew Feenberg questioned Postone's equation of "proletarian revolution" with "a return to itself of a transhistorical subject", "the human essence embodied as labour [...] alienated by capitalism" (Feenberg 1996, 610). As Feenberg points out, many variants of classical Marxism have evaded the theoretical trap that Postone ascribes to all 'traditional' Marxism. Along with Feenberg, and contrary to Postone's view, we might argue that the framework developed by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* is one such candidate.

My contention is that thinking through Postone and Lebowitz's theoretical contributions in tandem creates a problematic very similar to the dilemma at the heart of Lukács's thought. It is possible therefore to make a return to Lukácsian themes in contemporary conditions, initiating a more open re-reading, 'against the grain', of *History and Class Consciousness* than the commonly-accepted codification of its framework. However, this exercise also highlights the absence in Lebowitz and Postone's work of, what I will argue is, one of the central innovations in Lukács's thought: the central role of ideological crisis for the development of working class subjectivity.

### ***Capital and Class Struggle***

Marx is committed to a concrete analysis of the effects of working class struggle on the functioning of capitalism. However, does *Capital* allow an understanding of the means by which the proletariat – as victims of capital integrated into its monstrous machinery – might take control of this organism and overthrow it? Lebowitz frequently reminds us that Marx sought to advance a scientific study of capital in order that the working class would inscribe on their banners the slogan: "the abolition of the wages system".

Lukács's contemporary, the philosopher Karl Korsch argued that "the revolutionary will is latent, yet present, in every sentence of Marx's work" (Korsch 1970, 60). Yet, even when Marx's project reaches its highest level of determination in Volume III, the absence of the character of the working class revolutionary, or indeed, a theory of revolutionary politics and organisation, is obvious in the

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<sup>8</sup> Althusser rejects the role given to an essential human nature as the subject of history (see Althusser 2005, 229-31). Of interest here is Postone's contention that Lukács and Althusser constitute one-sided opposites, where the former identifies Hegel's *Geist* with the proletariat; the latter hypostatizes a historically specific set of social relations (Postone 1993, 77 fn.95).

text. The heroic figures of the class struggle depicted in *Capital* are more often the factory inspectors, who appear to enable social change through their "competent" and "unpartisan" exposure of the truth about the conditions of factory exploitation.

Lebowitz's position is therefore predicated on explaining the 'silences' in *Capital*, arising from the assumption by political economy of the fixed needs of the working class. For Lebowitz, identifying the relation between workers' agency within capitalism and its transcendence of the boundaries of the capital relation, requires a return to Marx's definition, in the *Communist Manifesto*, of 'revolutionary practice' as "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances" and self-change (Lebowitz 1997, 142). In these terms, Lebowitz's emphasis on human praxis reformulates needs in an expansive sense, seeking to transcend the counter-position of struggles against exploitation and oppression (Lebowitz 2003, 186).

Lebowitz has been praised for his attempts to overcome the schism between Marxism and wider struggles against oppression. He contends that the missing book on wage-labour accounts for the perceived deficit of Marxism with relation to feminism, although Albritton has questioned how effectively this will influence those not already convinced of Lebowitz's position (Albritton 2003, 106). Further, Lebowitz has been criticised for viewing these struggles solely through the "prism of wage-labour struggles" without theorising the broader "social constitution of capital" (Bonefeld 2006).<sup>9</sup> Here we might again argue that Postone provides a necessary corrective to Lebowitz, since the former's project to reconstruct Marx's categories is intended to create a critical theory of this wider social constitution.

At the same time, Lebowitz's efforts to re-focus attention on class struggle exposes a reciprocal difficulty for Postone. Throughout *Capital*, Marx is concerned to demonstrate the intimate relation between the capital relation and the class relation (e.g. Marx 1992a, 115). The intertwining of these relations conflicts with Postone's interpretation. The latter argues coherently that capitalism's fundamental contradictions "should not be identified immediately" with "concrete social relations [...] such as those of class struggle" (Postone 1993, 34). However, this does not imply that class struggle has no mediated relation whatsoever to this fundamental contradiction.

While Postone acknowledges the presence of class struggle in *Capital*, he delimits its character as "structurally intrinsic to capitalism", and in no way pointing to emancipatory possibilities beyond it. He clearly elaborates the aspect of workers' struggles as a "constitutive element of the dynamic of [the] system" (Postone 1993, 35-6), but is less convincing when suggesting that Marx had only this aspect in mind. For Postone, the effects of working class struggle on the functioning of capitalism described in "The Working Day" only serve to constitute the capital relation and in no way to challenge it.

It is true that, according to *Capital*, the Factory Acts, which seek to protect the conditions of workers' lives, tend to increase the speed at which the development of large-scale industry reduces workers to the level of objects within the labour process. However, the capital relation, which structurally tends to produce a 'collective worker' driven into increasingly socialised forms of organisation in the labour process, for Marx, also increasingly creates the potentiality for collective struggle (Marx 1990, 468, 544). It is for this reason that Marx envisages the passing of these laws

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<sup>9</sup> Barker is also critical of Lebowitz's account of sex, gender and class. He takes issue with Lebowitz's treatment of household relations as relations of slavery, questioning whether Lebowitz's account is capable of negotiating the complexities of the working class family and its various forms, and the manifold struggles arising from this (Barker 2006, 73).

as the first staging post in the intervention of the working class movement, and the "preliminary condition" of its further emancipation (Marx, 1990, 415).

### **Capital and Revolution**

We have the evidence of Marx's own explanation in his *Postface* to the Second Edition of *Capital*, that his critique of political economy aims to represent "the class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat" (Marx 1990, 98). Such a perspective helps to explain that Marx's concern for the "meagre concession rung from capital", in the form of the Factory Acts, is in fact a prelude to the "conquest of political power by the working class" (Marx 1990, 619). It is to the "revolt of the working class" that Marx looks for the death "knell of capitalist private property" and the potential expropriation of the expropriators (Marx 1990, 929).

It is more difficult to discover in what sense this rousing finale to Volume I of *Capital* is organically rooted in the categories that have emerged throughout Marx's analysis. As Colin Barker points out, "[t]he lesson Marx drew from the Ten Hours movement was that, since in economic terms capital is always stronger than labour, a *political class movement* is needed" (Barker 2006, 68). It is from this perspective that Lebowitz's conception of a clash between bourgeois political economy and a 'political economy of the working class' makes sense.

That Marx accorded fundamental importance to the emergence of the working class as a class subject is further evidenced by his *Letter to Bolte* of 23 November 1871 (ME 1968). Here, Marx distinguishes between an economic movement, such as the struggle within a particular factory for a shortening of the working day, and a political movement, the attempt to pass a general law limiting the working day. Marx argues that a political movement grows out of the separate economic movements of the proletariat as "a movement of the class, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion" (ME 1968).

While Postone is correct to draw our attention to the critique of labour in *Capital*, I would argue that his concern to immunise critical theory against the dangers of 'traditional' Marxism (and its degeneration into 'actually-existing socialism') tends to obscure a serious examination of the potential connection between an immanent critique of capitalist society, which he advocates, and its location in, what Chris Arthur calls, the "critically adopted standpoint of labour" (Arthur 2004, 101). Can a critical theory of social mediations, such as Postone's, be elaborated without foreclosing the possibility of a class-based analysis that points beyond the limits of capitalist society? Albritton suggests that capital-centred and class-centred approaches need not be irreconcilably opposed (Albritton 2004, 79). Yet, the scale of this task is indicated by numerous unresolved difficulties with elaborating such a conception. Is it possible to mediate between the terms of evasion and capture that characterise the relation of working class subjectivity to the logic of capital? Can adequate evaluative criterion be identified for distinguishing between a critique of bourgeois political economy and the "political economy of the working class" proposed and highlighted by Lebowitz? (Lebowitz, 2003, ix)

### **The Influence of Lukács on Lebowitz and Postone**

It is now possible to examine the nature of the influence exerted by Lukács on Lebowitz and Postone's interpretations of *Capital*. Lebowitz refers to Lukács primarily as a methodological guide, citing most frequently his claim that, "orthodoxy refers exclusively to method" (Lukács 1971, 1). This axiomatic scepticism towards the 'sacred' status of Marx's key works underpins Lebowitz's central claim that an authentic completion of *Capital* is possible, indeed necessary. By contrast,



Postone claims to have uncovered the true nature of Marx's critique, against 'traditional' Marxist interpretations, including that of Lukács — the virtues of his work notwithstanding. At the same time, Lebowitz proposes that his 'completion' of Marx's project is an "integral development" from within its "structures of thought", invoking Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "self-sufficiency of Marxism" rather than a grafting of alien elements to the body of Marx's thought (Lebowitz 2003, 26).

Lebowitz adopts the distinctively Lukácsian determination of the Marxist method that emphasises Marx's appropriation of the category of totality from Hegel (Lebowitz 2003, 53). The essence of Marx's method, according to Lukács, is the "all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts", and, consequently, the primacy of the category of totality is the "bearer of the principle of revolution in science" (Lukács 1971, 27). Lebowitz therefore follows Lukács in his tendency to reject the approach of moving from the parts to the whole as being inherently characteristic of "bourgeois thought" (Lebowitz 2003, 53).<sup>10</sup>

Lebowitz and Postone grapple in different ways with the difficulties arising from Lukács's distinctive emphasis on the centrality of the category of totality. For Postone, Marx's position "differs fundamentally" from Lukács's, since the latter "views totality affirmatively, as the standpoint of critique, and identifies Hegel's identical subject-object with the proletariat" (Postone 1993, 74). Whereas Marx, for Postone, gives a historical critique of Hegel rather than a materialist appropriation of him. This assimilation of Lukács's position to a simple substitution of the proletariat for the Hegelian absolute is a commonly held assumption. I will hold later that this is a point of contention, since the practical element of workers' consciousness re-shuffles the matrix of Hegelian thought.<sup>11</sup>

To my knowledge, Lebowitz has not clarified his own position concerning the philosophical difficulties of Lukács's conception of the proletariat as the absolute subject-object of history. This is curious given the issue's clear relevance to Lebowitz's antipathy towards the idea of an "Abstract Proletarian", "the mere negation of capital" (Lebowitz 2003, 138). Nevertheless, Bonefeld argues that Lebowitz has misinterpreted Marx's critique of capital in seeing the "negation of the negation" as arriving at "new levels of synthesis: the worker-for-self as a pseudo-absolute of the 'workers' state'" (Bonefeld 2006, 88).

The same cannot be said of Postone, who relentlessly pursues the problematic consequences of adopting a standpoint implicitly or explicitly founded on the generation of the social totality from a transhistorical conception of labour. For Postone, the social totality already exists and it is the object of Marx's critique. An emancipatory moment is available not through the realisation, but only through the abolition of this capitalist totality. Marx's critique therefore investigates "the unfolding of [the] dialectical logic [of capital] as a real expression of alienated social relations which are constituted by practice and, yet, exist quasi-independently" (Postone 1993, 76).

Despite ultimately rejecting Lukács's adherence to the standpoint of the proletariat, Postone characterises Lukács's contribution, and the subsequent contribution of the Frankfurt school, as having pointed beyond 'traditional' Marxism towards a 'sophisticated' understanding of Marx's critical theory as a critique of transhistorical categories (Postone 1993, 15). This is not merely a

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<sup>10</sup> Lebowitz bases his extensive critique of the 'methodological individualism' of analytical Marxism on this tenet (Lebowitz 2009, 47).

<sup>11</sup> Another objection is drawn to our attention by Jameson, who characterises the identical subject-object as a merely "local thematic climax" of Lukács's engagement with German Idealism in *History and Class Consciousness* (Jameson 2009, 217).

critique of material production or class structure, but a "theory of the historical constitution of determinate, reified forms of social objectivity and subjectivity" (Postone 1993, 15). Thus, as I have suggested above, Postone and Lebowitz develop the internal tensions of Lukács's thought along divergent trajectories: the wager on the proletariat as a 'political economy of the working class' by Lebowitz, and Postone's critical theory of social mediations as a theory of reification in 'post-liberal' capitalism.

This is not to say that there cannot be, what Gramsci would call, a "reciprocal translatability" between these two approaches (Gramsci 1971, 403). This is particularly true if critical theory is to locate a path towards emancipation that retains its anchorage in a class-centred critique of political economy. Or vice versa, if this critical standpoint of labour is not to vulgarise its relation to the ideologico-critical elements of its historical development, rendering it capable of a full political engagement with the cultural sphere. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish carefully the different objects of investigation for Lebowitz and Postone; Lebowitz aims to expose the "inner laws of capital" in their struggle with the "inner laws of wage-labour" (Lebowitz 2003, 81, 84), while Postone re-interprets Marx's categories as a historically specific theory of social mediation revealing the "essential core of capitalism" (Postone 1993, 21).

Despite their opposed positions on many issues, Postone and Lebowitz share a common focus on the unitary nature of the social totality. The origins of this tendency can be located in Lukács's emphasis on the proletariat's historic potential under capitalism of grasping the unity of the economic process. Postone and Lebowitz express this unity in radically different ways. Postone's account of capital without consciousness, as a system of abstract, impersonal domination, is for Callinicos, "quite close to Althusser's conception of a decentred totality and of history as a process without a subject" (Callinicos 2014, 219).<sup>12</sup> Whereas, Barker argues that Lebowitz's treatment of "capital as 'one'" leads him to understate the significance of competition in the constitution of capitalist society (Barker 2006, 78). This appears primarily in respect to Lebowitz's confidence that competition is merely the surface expression of the inner nature of capital, and his consequent reduction of the capital relation to its inner connections.

### **Cooperation and Competition**

For Lebowitz, the inner connections of the capital relation, "reduce the visible and merely apparent movement to the actual inner movement" (Lebowitz 2009, 85). Lebowitz's interpretation of *Capital* is dominated, Barker argues, by the "vertical" relations between wage-labour and capital, and consequently overlooks the "horizontal" relations between commodity producers and capitals (Barker 2006, 78). For Barker, the absence of a satisfactory treatment of competition means that capital's "dynamic impulses and its tendencies to crisis are all incomprehensible", as are its "self-mystifying characteristics", such as "those arising from the monetary system" (Barker 2006, 78). This makes it difficult for Lebowitz to understand the motivation of capital's drive for endless accumulation, and to provide a basis for explaining the "political capacities of the capitalist class" (Barker 2006, 78).

It could be said that Lebowitz's framework both understates and overstates competition. It is understated since Lebowitz classifies it as a mere appearance or epiphenomenon. At the same time, it is also overstated since Lebowitz argues that the negation of competition is the key to overcoming the capitalist mode of production. It is tempting to say that he cannot have it both ways. Albritton argues that, for Lebowitz, 'competition' is "the catch-all for all economic relations

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<sup>12</sup> While Postone's study of alienated forms of social mediation is in many respects quite antithetical to Althusser's framework, e.g. their intimate relation with the directionality of history, this homology merits further investigation.

that cannot be theorised at the level of capital's inner logic" (Albritton 2003, 97). This leads to a conflation of various different phenomena: those central to the existence of capital, those at the level of heterogeneous capitals (Vol.III), and those exceeding the inner laws of capital.

Whatever these limitations, we could say that Lebowitz's outstanding contribution lies in his dogged insistence that the tendencies of capital's self-development must always be considered in their antagonistic conflict with wage-labour. As a corollary, when theorizing class forces in struggle, it may not be possible to draw a clear and distinct separation between 'commodity-economic' and 'extra-economic' elements.<sup>13</sup> At the concrete historical level, Lebowitz draws our attention to Marx's enthusiasm for mass working class experiments with co-operative forms. Yet, as Marx also pointed out in his 'Inaugural Address' to the IWMA, these experiments are consistently subordinated to the logic of capital.

On his part, Postone would see Lebowitz's intention to negate competition as insufficient, and his aim to realise the inner laws of wage-labour as positively dangerous. For Postone, treating 'labour' as the "constituting substance of a Subject" leads to the re-creation of a "collective version of the bourgeois subject" (Postone 1993, 78). Thus, proletarian labour and the industrial process of production are simply expressions of domination and not means of human emancipation. The success of the strategy of 'traditional' Marxism can result only in the "full realization of capital as a quasi-concrete totality rather than to its abolition" (Postone 1993, 83). The standpoint of labour is therefore inherently problematic, and prone towards creating a bureaucratic state-capitalist regime of the type found under 'actually-existing socialism'.

## A Re-actualisation of Lukács?

Given the seemingly irreconcilable antagonism between the heterogeneous elements of Lukács's framework developed by Lebowitz and Postone, what is the possibility of re-actualising his thought in contemporary conditions? Postone argues that "Marx's historical critique of Hegel" is fatally undermined by Lukács's "materialist appropriation of Hegel" (Postone 1993, 74), but this seems to assimilate Lukács to an impoverished inversion of Hegelian idealism. More sympathetic readers of Lukács, such as Fredric Jameson, seek to displace any ascription to him of a mechanical synthesis of subject and object. Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic* aims to restore the unpredictability of Lukács's dialectic, and the "unsuspected dimensions of the problem — interrelationship and process" (Jameson 2009, 205). Certainly, this requires questioning the easy identification of Lukács's "aspiration towards totality" with a necessary slide into totalitarianism (Lukács 1971, 174, 198).

It is easy to see how Jameson's reading of Lukács, which draws on poststructuralist themes, might not appeal to Postone. According to Žižek, Postone is at his best when critiquing the formalism of "production", by demonstrating that "the standpoint of the capitalist concrete historical 'totality' is missed by theories which try to capture the determining feature of our world with notions like 'risk' or 'indeterminacy'" (Žižek 2010, 195-6). In Žižek's view, Postone demonstrates that "the experience of contingency or indeterminacy as a fundamental feature of our lives is the very form of capitalist domination, the social effect of the global rule of capital" (Žižek 2010, 196).

Postone reads the ontologising of historical indeterminacy by poststructuralist thought in its relation to 'traditional' Marxism (Postone 1993, 80). According to Postone, poststructuralism over-reacts to 'traditional' Marxism's affirmation of an emancipatory totality by transhistorically denying the very existence of a social totality. For Postone, an adequate critical theory of the present must move

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lukács's reflections on the changing relationship between economics and violence in *HCC* (Lukács 1971, 252-3).

beyond the one-sidedness of both 'traditional' Marxism and poststructuralism through an auto-critique of "the alienated structure of social mediation that constitutes the capitalist formation" (Postone 1993, 81).

Whilst we might agree with Postone that there is "no linear continuum" between the "demands and conceptions of the working class", and the "needs, demands, and conceptions that point beyond capitalism", this does not imply that there is no connection whatsoever (Postone 1993, 37). Lebowitz unfortunately plays into the hands of this critique by underestimating many of the mediating obstacles between the formation of trade unions, a workers' state and the creation of a socialist society (Lebowitz 2003, 196). The reverse of the medal is that Postone's marginalisation of the emancipatory potential of labour leaves a nebulous basis for the transcendence of capitalist society. Indeed, Postone tantalisingly declines to elaborate on the consequences of his re-interpretation of Marx's thought for the question of the possible forms of post-capitalist society (Postone 1993, 40 fn.55).

It is in this context that I would argue that Lukács's ambitious confrontation with the ideological problems of overcoming capitalism is still relevant today. Lebowitz and Postone each provide us with partial tools to reconstruct the relationship between the development of class subjectivity and the process of generating the social mediations necessary to penetrate the reified immediacy of capitalist society. Lukács demonstrates an awareness of the yawning chasm between the possibility of class-consciousness and the process by which that might become a reality, but his proposed solution may not be as simple as the romantically messianic act of a super-subject that is frequently ascribed to him.

### **Crisis and Subjectivity**

Lukács's essays in *History and Class Consciousness* are suffused with the concept of crisis. He distinguishes between the objective, economic 'world crisis' and the subjective, ideological crisis of the proletariat (Lukács 1971, 310-1). The relationship between these subjective and objective crises is of particular importance for the proletariat, since the latter's very existence is defined by crisis: "The proletariat is [...] at one and the same time the product of the permanent crisis in capitalism and the instrument of those tendencies which drive capitalism towards crisis" (Lukács 1971, 40). Moreover, he regards the failure to distinguish between ideological and objective forms of crisis as a hallmark of fatalistic and 'economistic' theory, since there "is simply no room for the idea of an ideological crisis of the proletariat in which proletarian ideology lags behind the economic crisis" (Lukács 1971, 305).

Lukács's examination of the intimate relationship between ideological crisis and subjectivity is conspicuously missing among the elements of his thought that have influenced contemporary thinkers such as Postone and Lebowitz. Postone's account of the transformation of forms of consciousness, despite its emphasis on non-linearity, does not address the ruptural "leaps" that Lukács made central to the coherence of his notion of class-consciousness. Lebowitz exhibits a similar relative theoretical disinterest in the concept of ideological crisis. Towards the end of *Beyond Capital*, he remarks that crises "merely offer an opportunity to identify the essence of capital" (Lebowitz 2003, 167). I would argue that much is at stake for Lebowitz's project in this 'mere opportunity'.

Lebowitz shares Lukács's hostility towards economic determinism, and cites Lukács to this effect: "History is at its least automatic when it is the consciousness of the proletariat that is at issue" (Lebowitz 2003, 171; and Lukács 1971, 208). Lebowitz seeks to redress one-sided Marxist theories of crisis, stressing that the "one important message" from *Beyond Capital* is "that

economic crises do not bring about an end to capitalism" (Lebowitz 2003, xi). According to Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, this is one of the book's main achievements: a "rich clarification of the limitations of Marxist crisis theory, based on a crucial distinction between the concepts of 'barriers' and 'limits'" (PG 2006, 120).

Lebowitz sees the proletariat as the true limit of capital. He defines workers' subjectivity as their capacity to become responsible for the development of their own needs. The difficulty is that Lebowitz rarely discusses the issue of consciousness outside of quotation marks, and consequently overlooks the significance of ideological crisis in the development of workers' subjectivity. Lebowitz proposes the necessity of theory, a "political economy of the working class", in order to resolve the economic crisis posed by capitalism. Yet, he maintains a theoretical silence on the role that ideological crises might play in the transformation of this theory into practical consciousness.

By contrast, Lukács's theory of class-consciousness seeks to account for the proletariat's capacity for making "leaps" in consciousness without severing its basis in political economy. By maintaining this basis, Lukács recognises the ability of capital continually to re-assert its dominion, and the possibility that the proletariat might be forced to "start over" at any point, to be subjected to the school of history's "terrible detours" (Lukács 1971, 76). For Lukács, the ideological crisis of the proletariat manifests itself on the one hand "in the fact that the objectively extremely precarious position of bourgeois society is endowed, in the minds of the workers, with all its erstwhile stability", and on the other hand through the institutionalisation of the "bourgeoisification of the proletariat" in reformist workers' parties and bureaucratised trade unions (Lukács 1971, 310). Despite these formidable obstacles, Lukács asserts that the "world crisis" opens up the "objective possibility" for the proletariat to grasp the "unity of the economic process" (Lukács 1971, 75).

Lukács's polarised conception of subjectivity is distinctive in that the crisis of capitalist society seems to be both permanent and exceptional. In other words, its exceptionality is an immanent feature. His theory of reification expresses the idea that the structure of a crisis is not qualitatively different to that of the "daily life of bourgeois society", but is rather the peak of its intensity (Lukács 1971, 101). Indeed, for Lukács, it is vital that force is not something extra-economic, asserted by class actors outside of the commodity-economic process, but is inherent to the everyday functioning of capitalist society. It seems that Lukács subverts normality into a constant state of instability, in order to account for the changing function of the 'economic' in a revolutionary process.<sup>14</sup> We can see how this aspect of Lukács's thought addresses the theme of exception/normality that has been taken up in rather a different fashion by Negri and the autonomist tradition. In contrast to Negri, Lukács does not seem to believe that this exceptional situation entails an absolute suspension of the law of value. For Lukács, the relative suspension of the law of value in an economic crisis requires a leap that is also a process: "And it is just as vital to keep in mind the fact that it is a leap as that it is a process" (Lukács 1971, 252).

### **Why should Lebowitz and Postone care about Lukács?**

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<sup>14</sup> The permanent instability of social existence under capitalism described by Lukács is reminiscent of Simon Clarke's rendering of Marx as an early theorist of the post-modern condition (Clarke 1994, 285). Callinicos is critical of this manoeuvre (Callinicos 2014, 236), although Clarke's argument might be more plausibly transposed onto Lukács. Lukács's normality/exception couple can be situated in Marx's identification of the formal possibility of crisis in *Capital* in the separation of purchase and sale, but perhaps not in the disruption of money's function as a means of payment (see Callinicos 2014, 246).

This exercise may appear to be of questionable validity, as a type of retrospective imposition of a Lukácsian framework onto Postone and Lebowitz. These two thinkers should be praised for their willingness to contravene the accepted conventions of interpreting Marx in favour of rendering his thought relevant to the challenges of the present conjuncture. There are indeed difficulties associated with re-introducing the intimate relation between ideological crisis and subjectivity to the thought of Lebowitz and Postone. Perhaps David McNally would warn of the dangers of offering an "external criticism" of Postone's project, given that Postone's direct engagement is more properly with the later Frankfurt school than with Lukács himself (McNally 2004, 206). There is much to recommend an immanent method of critique, however I would suggest that the juxtaposition of Postone and Lebowitz helps to place into perspective the radically heterogeneous influence exerted on them by Lukács's thought. Consequently, an internal critique of each thinker individually might not have sufficiently foregrounded the proposed absence of the problematic of crisis and subjectivity.

Lebowitz is not a Lukácsian in the sense of tracing the proletariat as a philosophical solution to the problems of classical German philosophy, but neither is this the whole story when it comes to Lukács himself, as Jameson has indicated (Jameson 2009, 217). For Lebowitz, moving beyond capitalism requires workers gaining the capacity to end "capital's mediation of the development of their needs" (PG 2006, 120).<sup>15</sup> According to Panitch and Gindin, Lebowitz's great strength is his refusal to rely on an 'Abstract Proletarian' to short-cut this complex process. Yet, Al Campbell and Mehmet Ufuk Tutan argue that Lebowitz does indeed sidestep a series of difficult issues relating to capital's systematic self-mystification, the problem of "false" needs and the realisation of socialist decision-making processes (CT 2006, 104).

For Postone, the issues above cannot be addressed without an adequate critical theory of the alienated social mediations that give rise to determinate forms of consciousness. Postone's marginalisation of the emancipatory potential of workers belies the fecundity of his work for re-conceptualising Lukács's wager on the proletariat in terms that have contemporary significance. One example of this is Postone's examination of the social constitution of two forms of time under capitalism. He defines the first, abstract time, as "homogeneous, 'empty' time", in a manner that echoes Walter Benjamin's theses in *On the Concept of History* (Postone 1993, 202). Against this, Postone counter-poses a notion of concrete historical time, which is understood as a "movement of time, as opposed to the movement *in time*" (Postone 1993, 294).

Unlike Benjamin's concept of "now-time", Postone's historical time is not a revolutionary irruption that blows open the continuum of abstract time.<sup>16</sup> For Postone, there is an intrinsic connection between the social domination of abstract time and an "ongoing, automatic historical flow" (Postone 1993, 295). In other words, both forms of time are expressions of alienated relations that "remain entirely within the framework of capitalist relations" (Postone 1993, 295). However, Postone does imply that grasping these two dialectical moments of social reality simultaneously, while difficult, would enable us to penetrate the veil masking "the possibility of a future qualitatively different from modern society" (Postone 1993, 301). This possibility, "that production based on historical time can be constituted separately from production based on abstract present time", could, if realized, overcome the alienated interaction between past and present under capitalism (Postone 1993, 301).

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<sup>15</sup> This is redolent of the path taken by Agnes Heller, one of Lukács's own students (see Heller 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, Heidegger's distinction between *kairos*, a qualitatively revolutionary time, and *chronos*, linear sequential time, could provide another conceptual lens through which to view this issue (Ó Murchadha 2013).

While Postone, Benjamin and Lukács all share a belief in emancipatory possibility, Postone does not consider the option that grasping these dialectical moments of social reality might involve a moment of rupture. This is a constitutive element of Lukács's notion of the proletariat's 'aspiration towards totality' (Lukács 1971, 175). By subsuming the act of emancipation into the process of auto-critique, Postone sidelines the crystallisation of the redemptive moment that Benjamin vividly articulates through the image: 'setting alight the sparks of hope from the past'.

Postone convincingly argues that the non-linearity of the needs and conceptions of labour and the needs and conceptions that point beyond capitalism could "shed new light on Marx's notion of the self-abolition of the proletariat" (Postone 1993, 37). I would argue that realising this potential requires a confrontation with the ruptural element central to both Lukács's and Benjamin's conceptions of history. At the same time, Postone's rich account of different temporalities and rigorous attention to the categories of political economy is a fruitful source for studying the relationship between ruptural conceptions of subjectivity and ideological crisis.<sup>17</sup>

It is uncertain whether Postone's self-reflexive social critique, which frames itself in terms of processual transformations of subjectivity, could organically incorporate the ruptural aspect of the leaps in consciousness associated with ideological crisis in Lukács's *HCC*. I would suggest that an adequate Marxist theory of the transformation of subjectivity must grasp the unity between two different registers, the processual and the ruptural. Nevertheless, Postone's conception of the 'shearing effect' of contradictions (which do not produce a strict teleology, but help to overcome the gap between the actual and the possible) could assist in a productive re-thinking of Lukács's proletariat, since "it is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become conscious" (Lukács 1971, 179). As Albritton indicates, "the contradictions produce a pressure towards, and a possibility for, emancipatory change but do not guarantee it" (Albritton 2004, 74).

Postone's emphasis on the possibility of an oppositional consciousness is in marked contrast to the fundamental cleavage between capitalist and worker found in the antagonistic constitution of Negri's framework. It is rather Lebowitz's notion of revolutionary practice that bears greater resemblance to Negri's principle of constitution, the constitution "of a new situation which must be resubmitted to the criterion of practice and to the principle of transformation" (Negri 1991, 56). Significantly, for Negri, it is this principle which "carries crisis to the very heart of Marxist analysis" (Negri 1991, 56-7).

### **Which Lukács?**

Postone and even the later Lukács himself, have been critical of *History and Class Consciousness* for appropriating the matrix of Hegel's dialectic, in Žižek's words, as "the mystified form of the revolutionary process of emancipatory liberation" (Žižek 2010, 219). For Postone, Lukács initiates a promising critical theory of reification, but undermines this by mechanically replacing the Hegelian Absolute Spirit with the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history. Without wanting to obviate the evident difficulties facing the role ascribed to the proletariat in Lukács's framework, I would argue that the wholesale rejection of this aspect of his thinking is pre-mature. The "eminently practical nature" of the consciousness of the proletariat should be regarded at minimum as having significantly re-shuffled this Hegelian matrix (Lukács 1971, 199), or, more strongly, as subjecting it to a radical qualitative transformation.

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<sup>17</sup> The non-linear and ruptural aspects of Lukács's thought indicated in this article could be further explored in the light of recent studies of the different temporalities of class struggle in Marx (Tomba 2013, Tombazos 2014).

While an emphasis on 'the practical' is not proof against the complex of problems formulated by German Idealism, as Lukács himself testifies (Lukács 1971, 123),<sup>18</sup> Lukács's persistent valorisation of figures other than Hegel suggests that we should re-examine the accepted narrative that his Marxism depicts a straightforward linear progression within philosophy culminating in Hegel, which is then subsequently 'materially appropriated'. We might rather conceive the primary figures of German Idealism in Lukács's *Reification* essay (Kant, Fichte, Schiller and Hegel) as being each indispensable, and quasi-autonomous, moments in determining his project to overcome the stultifying effects of the commodity-form in capitalist society.

Lukács's oft-dismissed notion of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history thus draws on the contribution of each of these four thinkers, relating respectively to the cognitive subject, practical activity, aesthetic totality, and history. The key moments of German Idealism are not simply superseded by Hegel in a linear fashion,<sup>19</sup> but are ongoing and critical modes of generating a mediated consciousness to de-stabilise, what Jameson calls, "the multiple systemic webs of reification" (Jameson 2009, 204), the projected unity of the ideological obstacles to overcoming capitalism. Furthermore, Lukács's engagement with German Idealism passes through an array of contemporary neo-Kantian and phenomenological influences (including Husserl, Lask, Kierkegaard's "leap", etc.) that have even yet to be fully explored.

Here, however, Postone rejects, and Lebowitz does not engage with, the full resources offered by the Lukácsian framework. Lukács's analysis of the notion of objective possibility, and the "leaps" of proletarian class consciousness during periods of crisis pre-figure certain characteristics of more recent approaches to the question of subjectivity, such as those of Badiou and Žižek. Lukács's conception of the *Augenblick* is a re-articulation in philosophical terms of the theory of an intervention in the political moment developed by Lenin. In this notion, we see an attempt dialectically to relate the ruptural and processual approaches to the emergence of a subject. As Žižek has noted, this appears to share some fundamental features with Badiou's notion of the *Event*, "an intervention that cannot be accounted for in the terms of its pre-existing 'objective conditions'" (Badiou 2007 and Žižek 2000, 164).

Žižek also feels that Postone has marginalised the category of class struggle too hastily, reducing it to a determinist-evolutionary reflection theory of class position. By contrast, Žižek encourages us to look again at the young Lukács's notion of class struggle as "precisely the transversal which undermines economic determinism", representing "the dimension of politics at the heart of the economic" (Žižek 2010, 198). Postone too quickly reduces the dimension of class struggle to "an ontic phenomenon which is secondary with regard to the commodity form" (Žižek 2010, 198). Yet, the insistence on the processual moment in Postone, and its roots in political economy, is a necessary corrective to the desire for an unproblematic release from the anchoring "law of value". Lukács's project can be seen as drawing this aspect into dialogue with Negri's "definition of the subjectivity of the passage to communism, as a process that develops concomitantly with the crisis of the law of value" (Negri 1991, xv).

Lukács's historical situation partially explains the revolutionary optimism inscribed in his conception of the ubiquitous possibility of revolutionary action. For Lukács, revolutionary rupture is immanent

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<sup>18</sup> Lukács criticises the philosopher J.G. Fichte for attempting to overcome the schism between subject and object by positing activity as an absolute unity in a manner that merely elevates the problems of German Idealism to a higher level without addressing the concrete nature of this identical subject-object (Lukács 1971, 123-4).

<sup>19</sup> Further analysis of these aspects can be found in Jackson 2013. It would be of interest to contrast these moments with Badiou's four truth-procedures: love, politics, art and science.



in the permanent crisis of the daily life of bourgeois society, whose antinomies are expressed in his theory of reification. By contrast, Badiou's fidelity to the events of May 1968 helps to situate the rarity of the *Event* in his thought. Yet, the radical political egalitarianism of Badiou's communist project seems at odds with the fundamental role of the exceptional in his thought. This tension may be a symptom of the relative absence of a critique of political economy and its philosophical implications, the consequent under-emphasis on a theory of process, in Badiou's framework. Could Lukács's theorisation of the exceptional, the permanent crisis that lurks within the normality of everyday bourgeois life, assist in evading the charge of elitism often levelled against exceptionalist theories?

## Conclusion:

Reframing the theoretical contributions of Lebowitz and Postone through the conceptual lens of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, I have suggested that there is a missing element in these contemporary works influenced by Lukács's thought, namely the intimate connection between ideological crisis and subjectivity. Reversing the approach, we might ask whether this insight can be assimilated by the thought of Lebowitz and Postone without doing violence to their intellectual frameworks, i.e. whether such an operation would require a qualitative transformation of their work beyond reasonable limits. I have indicated that one of the productive avenues of testing this potential broadening of the frameworks of Lebowitz and Postone is to open a dialogue between their respective works and contemporary theorists that emphasise the ruptural aspect of subjectivity in order to articulate an emancipatory project to overcome capitalism.

Indeed, no lesser source than Fredric Jameson contends that his own reading of *Capital*, highly attuned to the intimate connections between crisis and ideology, is "not incompatible" with Lebowitz's argument for the incompleteness of *Capital* (Jameson 2011, 2 fn.2). Denying the incompatibility of the aspects of rupture and process in an adequate contemporary Marxist theory of subjectivity is, however, a weaker condition than articulating a project that affirms their unity. My proposal is that Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* continues to provide unexploited resources for this project precisely because it is one of the most radical attempts to draw these processual and ruptural aspects within a unified framework. Perhaps due to the extreme conditions of its historical genesis, Jameson has proposed that re-reading *History and Class Consciousness* today requires us, like Benjamin, to brush against the grain of history, or even to see it as a work "yet to be written", which "lies ahead of us in historical time" (Jameson 2009, 222).

The dialectical unity of process and rupture in Lukács's thought is manifested primarily in his conception of a leap, which "can only genuinely preserve its character of a leap if it becomes fully identified with this process [of social change]" (Lukács 1971, 250). Even if, in the final analysis, one remains unconvinced that the notion of ideological crisis can shake off the messianic character of the "leaps" ascribed by Lukács to proletarian consciousness, there are underexplored connections with recent efforts by recent thinkers to investigate the philosophical structure of the exceptional. The well-rehearsed rejection of Lukács's identical subject-object of the proletariat overlooks the striking affinities of his notion of *Augenblick*, the moment at which it is possible to act within a situation, with Badiou's theory of the *Event*. Lukács has the advantage of drawing closer to providing a philosophy of process which is embedded in the critique of political economy. By extension, through their deep engagement with the categories of political economy, both Lebowitz and Postone bring important rigour to the processual aspects of what Žižek terms "a radical repoliticization of the economy" (Žižek 1999, 353).

The different obstacles encountered by the respective frameworks of Postone and Lebowitz highlight the difficulties involved with re-actualising Lukács's conception of subjectivity in the

contemporary conjuncture. I have sought to demonstrate the way in each thinker develops one arm of the dilemma found in Lukács's polarised conception of subjectivity: the theory of reification and the wager on the proletariat respectively. If, for Postone, capital is the subject of *Capital*, this might lead us to presume that the circuit of capital, the self-augmentation of its value, constitutes from itself the social totality. As David McNally has pointed out however, Postone is too careful a thinker to assume this. Postone recognises that the majority of people in capitalist society engage in a different circuit, that of wage-labour, whose end is consumption and self-development rather than the endless accumulation of value (McNally 2004, 201).

Nevertheless, it is Lebowitz, rather than Postone, who draws the most radical conclusions from this insight. Capital is not a self-reproducing totality, but is "dependent on the reproduction of labourers which takes place in and through a circuit it does not control" (McNally 2004, 201). Lebowitz dedicates himself to elaborating the 'political economy of labour' that is inscribed in this circuit of wage-labour. Their work, as McNally points out, helps us to conceive that class struggle must be understood as taking place not only at the level of material production (labour), but simultaneously at the level of the creation of meaning (praxis), in the antagonistic conflict of structures of meaning derived from Marx's study of the commodity-form (McNally 2004, 202).

Yet, I would argue that both Lebowitz and Postone overlook the significance of the leap, which, for Lukács, is "nothing more than the conscious meaning of every moment" (Lukács 1971, 250). It is therefore not a messianic act, but one that must be fully cognizant, after Postone, of the auto-critique of capitalism. In this sense, we should note that Lukács refers to crisis as "the objectification of a self-criticism of capitalism" (Lukács 1971, 253). At the same time, Lebowitz's wager on the proletariat reflects the positive element of this process, a concrete turn in the direction of something qualitatively new. Taking inspiration from the spirit of Negri's writings, I would suggest that this approach to Lukács via Postone and Lebowitz, should not simply be fixed and confined to the terms of Lukács's work, but used as a means to read 'Lukács beyond Lukács', such that a re-actualisation of his thought coincides with the activity of rendering it 'effectively present'. If this project is successfully developed, Lukács will continue to provide resources with the potential to mitigate many of the difficulties faced by contemporary ruptural conceptions of subjectivity.

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