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Moishe Postone (1942 -) and the Critique of Traditional Marxism: Helplessness and the Present Moment of the Great Acceleration¹

Alexander M. Stoner
Andony Melathopolous

This chapter engages a close reading of Moishe Postone's reinterpretation of Marx's mature theory of capital. In doing so, we direct focus toward "the logic of modern capitalist society in general, and its early twenty-first century incarnation in particular" (Stoner, 2014: 622), in order to explicate the ways in which Postone's theory elucidates the present moment of the Great Acceleration. Postone's theory is important because, as we demonstrate below, it allows one to more fully understand the intricate linkage between economic growth and ecological degradation, and how this linkage is necessarily connected to social domination under modern capitalist society. Accordingly, we articulate Postone's critique as a critical and reflexive account of socio-ecological domination throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

While both Lukács and Adorno engaged Marx's critique to develop their own systematic critiques of the effects of the capitalist mode of production on patterns of political, social, and cultural reproduction during the years following the First World War (Lukács' critique of reification) and the first two decades following the Second World War (Adorno's critique of identity thinking), Postone's critique of "traditional Marxism"² attempts to grasp the interrelationship between the "inner logic" of capitalism at a later stage of development and its effects in determining patterns of political, social, and cultural reproduction.³ In doing so, Postone advances a critical Marxian theory that grasps increasing productivity, technical development, and economic growth in relation to society as a whole and its ability to freely develop. Although economic growth and development have been routinely cited in explanations of the advent of both the Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration, they are often accorded an independent, causal existence; hence, the Great Acceleration is typically viewed as being driven exogenously to destruction. While Postone's theory is certainly better equipped to decipher the dynamics of capital at the beginning of the twenty-first century and, by extension, the present moment of the Great Acceleration, as we shall see, his theory also coincides with a world devoid of adequate political practice, in which revolutionary social theory exists without revolutionary practices.

¹ Author's unedited version of "Chapter 3: Moishe Postone (1942 -) and the Critique of Traditional Marxism: Helplessness and the Present Moment of the Great Acceleration." For final edited version see Stoner and Melathopolous (2015) *Freedom in the Anthropocene: Twentieth-Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 73-98.

² Postone uses the term "traditional Marxism" to cover an array of approaches and theorists working within the Marxist tradition. "Traditional Marxism" includes not only Ricardian Marxism, but also the Marxism of Lukács and members of the Frankfurt School, including Adorno. Discussing the critical theory of Lukács and the Frankfurt School, Postone (1993: 84-85) notes, "These attempts considerably broadened and deepened the scope of social critique and called into question the adequacy of traditional Marxism as a critique postliberal modern society. Yet, in seeking to formulate a more adequate critique, Critical Theory ran into serious theoretical difficulties and dilemmas. These became manifest in a theoretical turn taken in the 1930s, wherein postliberal capitalism came to be conceived as a completely administered, integrated, one-dimensional society, one that no longer gives rise to any immanent possibility of social emancipation."

³ This point is developed by Dahms (2011), who provides a critical analysis of the early Frankfurt School critique of capitalism and Postone's related contributions.

1. Critique of Traditional Marxism

Moishe Postone's reinterpretation of Marx's mature theory of capital, which he advances through a critique of traditional Marxism, must be viewed against the background of the historical failures of Marxism in order to adequately contextualize his work in relation to the present moment of the Great Acceleration within the Anthropocene. One effect of this failure has been an increased skepticism regarding the applicability of Marx's theory to the current historical moment, as expressed, for example, by theories of post-structuralism and deconstructionism which, as Murthy (2009: 9-10) explains, "seem to have the advantage of giving up totalizing narratives and grandiose projects of human emancipation." Indeed, the failure that attends the Great Acceleration appears to have rendered impossible the very idea that human beings might act as agents that can freely transform their history.⁴ Here, we are once again confronted with the paradoxical nature of the environment-society problematic. In the present moment of the Great Acceleration we are faced with a situation in which increasingly sophisticated knowledge of objective biophysical threats is met by the constant reminder that society will breach any move toward freedom from heteronomy. Much as Marx's historical moment enabled him to critically reflect upon the fundamental nature and meaning of social transformation, Postone's critique of traditional Marxism grasps the (supposed) irrelevance of Marx's theory as the projection of a reified understanding of twentieth century structural transformations (Postone, 2006). Without the ability to critically recognize the internal tensions of capital, and its current global neoliberal incarnation in particular, oppositional politics at the beginning of the twenty first century find themselves confined to reactionary forms of "resistance," giving way to a profound sense of helplessness (Postone, 2006).

Although Marx's work provides a systematic critical theory of modern society, Postone contends that Marx's ideas have been appropriated through a traditional theoretical lens. In contrast to traditional Marxism, which affirms the centrality of labor in capitalist society, Postone argues that Marx's focus on the central role played by labor in capitalist society is fundamental to his *critical* theory of modern society. Marx's critical theory, according to Postone (1993: 307), conceptualizes labor as "a determinate mode of social mediation" that also structures a form of abstract domination unable to be grasped adequately when approached in traditional terms. Significantly, Postone's nuanced reading of Marx allows for an understanding of larger processes of social domination in light of both "state-centric capitalism" and "socialism" during the second and third quarters of the twentieth century as well as the most recent incarnation of capital, expressed in and accelerated through the advent of neoliberalism during the 1970s. Whereas Adorno waged his critique of identity within "administered" society whose regressive form of consciousness coincides with the full scale development of the Great Acceleration; Postone's critique of traditional Marxism highlights the present moment of the Great Acceleration by specifying the current penetration of neoliberal global capitalism in and through the last gasp of its previous state-centric form, which not only accounts for the non-identity of subject and object of practice (or, the theory/practice divide) as Adorno did, but also makes clear recognition of this deeper dynamic will not lead to a change automatically, but rather would require working through the deeper social structure of value, something, as Postone (2006) notes, has all but evaporated. As with the shift from Lukács to Adorno discussed

⁴ Although post-humanism appears to diverge from the relative optimism of liberal environmentalism by emphasizing the ineffectual nature of political activity, both positions have common ground in the standpoint of the immediate present where they entertain, as opposed to critically reflect on, this moment.

previously, the shift from Adorno's critique of identity thinking (administered society and the emergence of consumerism in the culture industry) to Postone's critique of traditional Marxism (the rise of neoliberal global capitalism without the attendant growth of international Marxian politics) must be traced back into social structure so as to illuminate the historical meaning this shift registers.

Postone's reading of Marx's critical theory of modern society begins with the *Grundrisse rise der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, an unfinished manuscript written by Marx in 1857/58 though left unpublished until 1939 (and first published in English in 1973). The *Grundrisse*, according to Postone (1993: 21-22), indicates the categories of Marx's analysis are historically specific and that Marx's mature theory is not a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor but rather a critique of labor itself.

Postone advances this claim by focusing on one particular section of the *Grundrisse*, entitled "Contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development. Machines, etc." Marx (1973 [1857/58]: 704) begins this section with the following statement: "The exchange of living labour for objectified labour time – i.e. the positing of social labour in the form of the contradiction of capital and wage labour – is the ultimate development of the value-relation and of production resting on value." Postone (1993: 24) argues that the title and first sentence of this section indicate that "for Marx, the category of value expresses the basic relations of production of capitalism—those social relations that specifically characterize capitalism as a mode of social life—as well as that production in capitalism is based on value." In other words, value is not simply a market category, not simply a mechanism whereby equilibrium is achieved.⁵ Rather, value is both a *mediating* category and a category of *alienation*.⁶

That value is "both a determine form of social relations and a particular form of wealth" (Postone, 1993: 24) is the backbone of Postone's rereading of Marx. Postone (1993: 24) emphasizes that when Marx (1974 [1857/56]: 705-705) states, "the quantity of labour employed, as the determinant factor in the production of wealth," he indicates that what characterizes value as a determinate form of social relations and a particular form of wealth is that it is a social form that expresses and is based on the expenditure of direct labor time. As Marx (1974 [1856/67]: 704) continues, "But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose 'powerful effectiveness' is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production."

It is in this passage that the contradiction between *value* and material *wealth*, which we return to elaborate below, is most apparent. The difference between material wealth and value, as Postone (1993: 25) explains, is that value is a form of wealth that depends on labor time and the amount of labor employed whereas material wealth does not. This implies that value is a historically-specific form of wealth—it is not, in contrast to the traditional Marxist interpretation, a trans-historical form of wealth that could be distributed differently in different societies

⁵ The traditional Marxist interpretation of the theory of surplus value, codified in introductory texts to Marx's theory, interprets the theory of surplus value by emphasizing the source of profit-making in labor exploitation where the value produced by labor in excess of the value of labor power goes to the capitalist class as profit.

⁶ To reiterate a point made in the Introduction, alienation, as a form of social mediation, is a process of self-generated domination in which, through concrete forms of social practice, humans create structures that in turn dominate them (Postone, 1993). As such, alienation is a dynamic mediating process between the subject-object dimensions of the environment-society problematic (see, e.g., Stoner, 2014).

(Postone, 1993: 25). Similarly, the labor that constitutes value is not a property of labor in general but rather the historically specific temporal dimension of labor under capitalism that constitutes value as a form of wealth (Postone, 1993: 123). What is specific about capitalism—the social formation based on the commodity form—is, as Postone emphasizes, “*Personal independence* in the framework of a system of *objective [sachlicher] dependence*” (Marx, quoted in Postone, 1993: 125 [original emphases]). Citing Marx’s *Grundrisse* (see Marx, 1974 [1857/58]: 164), Postone (1993: 125) stresses that this “‘objective’ dependence is social; it is ‘nothing more than social relations which have become independent and now enter into opposition to the seemingly independent individuals; i.e., the reciprocal relations of production separated from and autonomous of individuals.’” As Marx (1974 [1857/58]: 164 [original emphasis]) notes, “individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another.” It is on this basis that value necessarily assumes a distinct, two-fold phenomenal form: “the value of any given commodity is manifested first, independent of that commodity’s use-value, and second, common to that commodity and all others” (Marx (1976 [1867]: 139). Commodity-producing labor is both particular (as concrete labor, a determinate activity that creates specific use-values) and socially general (as abstract labor, a means of acquiring the goods of others) (Postone, 1993: 151). It is this so-called “double-character” that, as a defining feature of labor under capitalism, expresses alienated social relations. As an expression of alienation (understood as a form of social mediation), commodity-determined labor consists of isolated individual labor while simultaneously assuming “the form of abstract generality” (Marx, quoted in Postone 1993: 47). What makes labor general, and thus makes abstract labor *the* social mediation in capitalist society, is its social function. Postone (1993: 27) argues that in Marx’s analysis of value “the basic social relations of capitalism, its form of wealth, and its material form of production” are interrelated.

Here Postone (1993: 27) stresses the significance Marx attaches to the increasingly anachronistic character of value as a measure of wealth vis-à-vis the immense wealth-producing potential of the industrial process of production:

Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself. (What holds for machinery holds likewise for the combination of human activities and the development of human intercourse.) No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing [*Naturgegenstand*] as the middle link between the object [*Objekt*] and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. The *theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based*, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself” (Marx, 1973 [1857/56]: 705 [original emphases]).

Gleaning insight from the passage above, Postone (1993: 24-25) argues that, for Marx, as capitalist industrial production develops value becomes an increasingly less adequate measure of material wealth. Marx (1974 [1857/58]: 705) does, of course, recognize that the persistence of value as a measure of material wealth produced, despite being increasingly anachronistic, remains a necessary structural precondition of capitalist society even though the potential embodied in the forces of production increasingly render production based on value obsolete

(Postone, 1993: 25). Interpreting Marx in this way, Postone (1993: 27) claims that because production remains tied to value, where labor time is the sole measure of wealth, the abolition of value would signify the end of heteronomous (capitalist) labor.

Plausibly remedying our current ecological predicament (in which ecological degradation is compounded in proportion to our awareness of these problems) is not a matter of increasing technology or more rigorous scientific understandings of global climate change. Although science and technology provide important tools through which solutions to environmental problems might be pursued, in modern capitalist society science and technology are constituted in alienated form. Capital, as opposed to conscious and free individuals, dictates science and technology production. The environment-society problematic is not, then, a matter of science and technology per se but rather a matter of deep social history and politics. The contradiction between wealth and value (i.e., the increasingly anachronistic character of value as a measure of wealth) points toward capital's historically-determinate socio-ecological domination as well as its possible supersession.

2. Nature of the Contradiction: Value and Material Wealth

In considering the contradiction between material wealth and value it is important to bear in mind (following Marx, 1976 [1867]: 126 as well as Postone, 1993: 194) that value and material wealth are two very different forms of wealth, which differ both qualitatively and quantitatively.⁷ Whereas value is a function of the exchange value dimension of the commodity form, material wealth is a function of its use value dimension. The two dimensions are related through the commodity form of labor as a function of time.⁸ More specifically, the magnitude of value is the objectification of what Marx refers to as *socially necessary labor time*.

Marx (1976 [1867]: 129) defines socially-necessary labor time as follows: “the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society.” But because this quantitative measure cannot be based on concrete labor alone, it must instead be based on abstract (i.e., socially-necessary) labor.⁹ However, if the magnitude of value depends

⁷ Material wealth, as Postone (1993: 194; see also Marx, 1976 [1867]: 134, 136-137) explains, “arises from the interactions of humans and nature, as mediated by useful labor (...) its measure is a function of the quantity and quality of what is objectified by concrete labor, rather than the temporal expenditure of direct human labor.” Value, however, is quite different. Unlike material wealth, “nature does not enter directly into value’s constitution” (Postone, 1993: 194). As Postone (1993: 195; see also Marx, 1976 [1867]: 137) notes, the magnitude of value is “not a direct expression of the quantity of products created or of the power of natural forces harnessed; it is, rather, a function only of abstract time.”

⁸ Postone (1993: 200-216) discusses the commodification of time—a category which he appropriates, following Marx, in terms of the double-sided nature of capital’s social forms. Thus, Postone distinguishes between: 1) concrete time (time as a dependent variable) and 2) abstract time (time as an independent variable). Whereas *concrete time*, which, as Postone (1993: 201) explains, dominated conceptions of time before the rise of modern capitalist society in Western Europe, functioned as a dependent variable, “Abstract time is an independent variable; it constitutes an independent framework within which motions, events, and action occur. Such time is divisible into equal, constant, nonqualitative units” (Postone, 1993: 202). Postone traces the historical development of abstract time, which, as he (Postone, 1993: 202) shows, coincides with the spread of the commodity form of social relations.

⁹ Following Marx (1976 [1867]), concrete labor, embodied in different use-values produced, refers to qualitative differences. As such, concrete labor and the use-value it produces do not provide an objective basis for the exchange of commodities. In order to be exchanged the incommensurability of commodities (as use-values) must be rendered commensurable. Commensurability requires an objective measure of comparison, and the property that allows commodities to be compared is what Marx calls value. Exchange-value therefore expresses value as that which transcends differences in commodities as use-values. Abstracted from the utilities (use-value) of

on socially-necessary labor time, then when average productivity is increased “the average number of commodities produced per unit time” is increased as well, which thereby decreases “the amount of socially necessary labor time required for the production of a single commodity and, hence, the value of each commodity” (Postone, 1993: 193).¹⁰ The magnitude of total value produced, then, is a function only of the objectification of abstract labor time expenditure (measured in terms of constant time units) (Postone, 1993: 189).

Examining the contradiction between value and wealth we can see that “the magnitude of value is a function of the expenditure of abstract labor time” whereas “material wealth is measured in terms of the quantity and quality of products produced” (Postone, 1993: 193). Following Postone, the nature of the contradiction between material wealth and value can be elucidated by taking into account Marx’s (1976 [1867]: 129) example of the introduction of power-loom weaving into the textile industry during the English Industrial Revolution:

Let us assume that, before the power loom was introduced, the average hand-loom weaver produced 20 yards of cloth in one hour, yielding a value of x . When the power loom, which doubled productivity, was first introduced, most weaving was still done by hand. Consequently, the standard of value—socially necessary labor time—continued to be determined by hand-loom weaving; the norm remained 20 yards of cloth per hour. Hence, the 40 yards of cloth produced in one hour with the power loom had a value of $2x$. However, once the new mode of weaving became generalized, it gave rise to a new form of socially necessary labor time: the normative labor time for the production of 40 yards of cloth was reduced to an hour. Because the magnitude of value yielded is a function of (socially average) time expended, rather than the mass of goods produced, the value of the 40 yards of cloth produced in one hour with the power loom fell from $2x$ to x . Those weavers who continued to use the older method, now anachronistic, still produced 20 yards of cloth per hour but received only $\frac{1}{2}x$ —the value of a socially normative half hour—for their individual hour of labor. (Postone, 1993: 288)

In fully developed capitalism (i.e., where relative surplus value¹¹ is the dominant form), increasing productivity (so as to yield a larger output per hour worked) is a primary means through which capitalists attempt to increase their profits. Yet, as indicated in the example above, this is only effective temporarily. Once a given level of productivity becomes generalized at the level of society as whole, this then becomes the basis against which a new socially necessary labor hour is measured.¹² Postone explains that Marx’s category of socially-necessary labor time is something other and more than labor time expenditure. According to Postone (1993: 191), Marx’s category of socially-necessary labor time “expresses a general temporal norm resulting from the actions of the producers, to which they must conform.” Socially-

commodities, the only common characteristic left, according to Marx, is labor. And although value is simply expended labor (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 135), in order to establish what is common to all commodity-producing labor, Marx argues that it is still necessary to abstract from the qualitative differences of the concrete labor embodied in the use-value dimension of the commodity. This dimension of commodity-producing labor is designated by Marx’s category “abstract labor.”

¹⁰ As Marx (1976 [1867], p. 131) notes, “The value of a commodity (...) varies directly as the quantity, and inversely as the productivity, of the labour which finds its realization within the commodity.”

¹¹ “I call that surplus-value which is produced by the lengthening of the working day, *absolute surplus-value*. In contrast to this, I call that surplus-value which arises from the curtailment of the necessary labour-time, and from the corresponding alteration in the respective lengths of the two components of the working day, *relative surplus-value*” (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 432 [original emphases]). The move toward relative surplus value is historically specific and refers to a context in which limits to the working day are given.

¹² The full elaboration of this dynamic, however, will only become apparent in the following section after we have incorporated Marx’s category of capital.

necessary labor time has an additional social necessity because, in a society driven by the endless pursuit of profit, the social whole “is structured by value as the form of wealth and surplus value as the goal of production” (Postone, 1993: 302). Postone emphasizes that the reference point for socially necessary labor time, as the determination of a commodity’s magnitude of value, is society as a whole: “Viewed from the perspective of society as a whole, the concrete labor of the individual is particular and is *part* of a qualitatively heterogeneous *whole*; as abstract labor, however, it is an individuated *moment* of a qualitatively homogenous, general social mediation constituting *a social totality*” (Postone, 1993: 152 [original emphases]). This is crucial in understanding the role time plays in the capitalist mode of production as an external necessity. That the reference point for socially necessary labor time is society as a whole implies “a tension and opposition between individual and society which points to a tendency toward the subsumption of the former by the latter” (Postone, 1993: 192). Socially necessary labor time therefore illustrates “a form of social life in which humans are dominated by their own labor and are compelled to maintain this domination” (Postone, 1993: 302). For Postone (1993: 287-288), Marx’s example of the power loom “indicates that when the commodity is the general form of the product, the actions of individuals constitute an alienated totality that constrains and subsumes them.”

Hence, our contention in chapter one that the Anthropocene presupposes a historical context constituted by alienated social relationships. In this context, “people do not really control their own productive activity or what they produce but ultimately are dominated by the results of that activity” (Postone, 1993: 30).¹³ Reworking Marx’s (1976 [1867]: 137) position, Postone (1993: 195) stresses that while the forces of production of labor are analogous to the use-value dimension, productivity, as an expression of “the acquired productive abilities of humanity,” is socially constituted in alienated form insofar as value is the dominant form of social wealth in capitalist society. Instead of being appropriated and controlled by people, the acquired productive abilities of humanity dominate and control people as an alienating force.¹⁴ But as Postone is keen to point out, that individuals are mere organs of the whole in Marx’s analysis should not be construed as a championing of the “organs” in opposition to the “whole”; Marx’s analysis is a critique of the whole itself. Marx’s critique is rooted in the contradiction between wealth and value: increases in productivity do *not* correspond to growing amounts of value per unit time; products function simply as material “bearers of objectified time” (Postone, 1993: 312). We will expand on what this means shortly.

3. Socio-Ecological Domination and the Production of Value

As Marx discusses in the first chapter of *Capital, Volume 1*, a product becomes a commodity when it is transferred to another person via the medium of exchange. The incommensurability of commodities (as use-values) must somehow be rendered commensurable in order for an exchange to happen and this commensurability requires an objective measure of comparison,

¹³ Similarly, Postone (1993: 31) recasts Marx’s (1988 [1844]) earlier writings on alienation: “The theory of alienation implied by Marx’s mature critical theory does not refer to the estrangement of what had previously existed as a property of the workers (and should, therefore, be reclaimed by them); rather, it refers to a process of the historical constitution of social powers and knowledge that cannot be understood with reference to the immediate powers and skills of the proletariat. With his category of capital, Marx analyzed how these social powers and knowledge are constituted in objectified forms that become quasi-independent of, and exert a form of abstract domination over, the individuals who constitute them.”

¹⁴ Following Postone (1993: 195), and as we elaborate below, these productive abilities also become attributes of capital.

which Marx reduces to value. A commodity therefore appears to be the exchange of external objects mediated by the market. That the commodity is something other and more than that indicated by market exchange only becomes apparent retrospectively, particularly in the latter half of *Capital, Volume 1*, where Marx (1976 [1876]: 207-210) outlines how the true nature of money in capitalism may be concealed (cf., Postone, 1993: 265).

According to Postone (1993: 265), it is here in the latter half of *Capital, Volume 1*, and the transition from the analysis of money to the category of capital, in particular, where “Marx unfolds a dialectical reversal in his treatment of money: it is a social means that becomes an end.” Far from rendering commodities commensurable, money is a necessary form of appearance of their commensurability. As Postone explains:

[B]ecause the circulation of commodities is effected by the externalization of [the] double character of [commodity-mediated labor]—in the form of money and commodities—they seem to be mere “thingly” objects, goods circulated by money rather than self-mediating objects, objectified social mediations. Thus, the peculiar nature of social mediation in capitalism gives rise to an antinomy—so characteristic of modern Western worldviews—between a “secularized,” “thingly” concrete dimension and a purely abstract dimension, whereby the socially constituted character of both dimensions, as well as their intrinsic relation, is veiled. (Postone, 1993: 264-265)

Postone’s gloss (1993: 265) on Marx’s discussion of money is in line with his critique of the way traditional Marxism misrecognizes labor: money, as the externalized expression of “abstract labor objectified as value” is “an externalized expression of the form of social mediation that constitutes capitalist society.” Consequently, money appears to be natural (i.e., non-social). However, it is important to bear in mind, as Postone (1993) indicates in the passage above, that the distinction between the use-value dimension and the value dimension of the commodity form of social relations is not evident at the level of immediate experience.¹⁵

The commodity both has a form and is a form. Whereas the content of commodity’s value dimension form is a social relation, the product (commodity) is brought into being through objectifying activity (labor). As a social form, the commodity has content—namely, abstract labor—and it is this latter, substantive dimension that underlies the formalism of the capitalist system which allows Marx to put forth his formalistic account of capital. Postone (1993: 268 [original emphases]) stresses that $M-C-M'$ ¹⁶ is not the formula for a process whereby “wealth in

¹⁵ The elusively dynamic nature of the commodity form of social relations is evident in the distinction between values and prices, an issue that has been a source of fundamental confusion among the majority of Marxist economists. Postone (1993: 196) suggests that in order to flesh this out, one would have to “elucidate how a categorial distinction—such as that between value and material wealth—is indeed operative socially, although the actors may be unaware of it. One would need to show how people, acting on the basis of forms of appearance that disguise the underlying essential structures of capitalism, reconstitute these underlying structures. Such an exposition would need to show how these structures, as mediated by their forms of appearance, not only constitute practices that are socially constituting, but do so in a way that imparts a determinate dynamic and particular constraints to the society as a whole.”

¹⁶ $M-C-M$ (Money-Commodity-Money) is Marx’s formula for “the transformation of money into commodities, and the re-conversion of commodities into money: buying in order to sell” (1976 [1867]: 248). Marx employs the formula $M-C-M'$ —where the difference between M and M' is necessarily only quantitative; i.e., “buying in order to sell dearer” (1976 [1867]: 256)—to capture “the general formula for capital, in the form in which it *appears* directly in the sphere of circulation” (1976 [1867]: 257 [emphasis added]). According to Marx (1976 [1867]: 188), “Money as a measure of value is the necessary form of appearance of the measure of value which is immanent in commodities, namely, labour-time.”

general is increased”; rather, it is the formula for a process whereby “*value* is increased”:¹⁷

With capital, the transformation of (the commodity) form becomes an end and (...) the transformation of matter becomes the means to this end. Production, as a social process of the transformation of matter which mediates humans and nature, becomes subsumed under the social form constituted by labor’s socially mediating function in capitalism. (Postone, 1993: 267)

According to Postone (1993: 267), the formula M-C-M’ implies an immanent dynamic wherein “a quasi-natural network of social connections develops” which, “although constituted by human agents, lies beyond their control” (Postone, 1993: 264). With the production of value concrete human-ecological transformation via labor is subsumed under the form of abstraction, which is why the difference between M and M’, which Marx calls *surplus value*, is “necessarily only quantitative” (Postone, 1993: 267).¹⁸ Marx’s concept of *capital as self-valorizing value* is an attempt to grasp this built-in dynamic to accumulate *ad infinitum*, which in fully developed capitalism, is marked not only by increasing productivity (so as to yield a larger output per hour worked) but as we shall see, a tendency for the rate at which productivity increases to accelerate over time.

Postone explains the development of relative surplus value, as a self-valorizing value, and its expansion (required by capital) as follows:

With the development of relative surplus value, then, the directional motion that characterizes capital as self-valorizing value becomes tied to ongoing changes in productivity. An immanent dynamic of capitalism emerges, a ceaseless expansion grounded in a determinate relationship between the growth of productivity and the growth of the value form of the surplus. (Postone, 1993: 283)

Advances in productivity, as exemplified by the “runaway” growth that characterizes the Great Acceleration, “do *not* increase the amount of value yielded per unit of time, but they *do* increase greatly the amount of material wealth produced” (Postone, 1993: 197 [original emphases]).¹⁹

This means that although in fully developed capitalism, relative surplus value is acquired by way of increasing levels of productivity, and although increases in productivity turn out greater quantities of material wealth and reduce socially necessary labor time, these developments do not change the total value produced per abstract time unit (i.e., labor expenditure as measured by the independent variable, abstract time) because the “constant” time

¹⁷ This appears to be a point where one might pursue an important comparison between the socio-ecological implications of Postone’s critical Marxian theory, on the one hand, and Allan Schnaiberg’s (1980) treadmill of production, on the other. Whereas Schnaiberg stresses the production of *wealth*, the treadmill dynamic Postone identifies emphasizes the production of *value*. Unfortunately, the detailed attention necessary for such an examination is well beyond the confines of the present book.

¹⁸ As we return to elaborate below, this implies that Marx’s category “capital” is the dynamic unfolding of the wealth-value contradiction: “Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth” (Marx, 1974 [1857/58]: 706).

¹⁹ It is important to be aware that the peculiarity of this dynamic, which can only be explained in relation to the temporal dimension of value, emerges only when relative surplus value becomes the dominant form of wealth (as it did during the nineteenth century). In other words, the tendency toward accelerating rates of increases in productivity (and therefore accelerating rates of increases in biophysical throughput) becomes apparent only when the working day has been limited.

unit itself is a dependent variable, whose determination is dictated by productivity as a function of the use-value dimension of commodity-determined labor. The magnitude of total value produced depends only on the amount of abstract human labor time expended.

According to Postone (1993: 287-288), because the magnitude of value is determined by socially-necessary labor time as the objectification of abstract labor expenditure at the level of society as a whole, once an increase in productivity becomes generalized the magnitude of value falls back to its previous level. The insidiousness of this dialectic of labor and time, according to Postone, is continuously enacted by way of a particular “treadmill effect.” As he explains,

The more closely the amount of surplus value yielded approaches the limit of the total value produced per unit time, the more difficult it becomes to further decrease necessary labor time by means of increased productivity and, thereby, to increase surplus value. This, however, means that the higher the general level of surplus labor time and, relatedly, of productivity, the more productivity must be further increased in order to achieve a determinate increase in the mass of surplus value per determinate portion of capital. (Postone, 1993: 310-311)

Recall that abstract time, by definition, is measured in terms of constant time units, whereas productivity corresponds to labor’s use-value dimension—value remains a form of social necessity despite the fact that its determination (abstract labor time expended) operates independent of changes in productivity. Hence, value becomes increasingly anachronistic as a form of social wealth in the face of the immense wealth-producing potential of modern industry.

Postone incorporates his analysis of the commodification of time (see footnote 68 above) in order to further elaborate this treadmill dynamic, whose initial determination “delineates the form growth *must* take in the context of labor-mediated social relations” (1993: 290 [original emphasis]). In doing so, Postone (1993) unfolds the category of time as a commodity whose abstract and concrete dimensions are synchronous with the intrinsic interaction between concrete and abstract labor. On the basis of this dialectic of labor and time, Postone is able to indicate how the duality of these social forms interact to transform and reconstitute capital’s social totality.

Before examining further the temporal dimension of the necessity of value, it behooves us at this point to outline some of the implications of the foregoing discussion. First and foremost, it should be noted that Postone’s reinterpretation of Marx allows for an explanation of the Great Acceleration in terms of the “treadmill dynamic” alluded to above—that is, in terms of a dialectic between quality/quantity and labor/time. The Great Acceleration could then be reconceptualized as the unfolding of the contradiction between wealth and value throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. This development indicates a historically specific pattern of “progress,” which, drawing on Postone’s reinterpretation of Marx, we specify below in terms of the growing necessity of accelerating the rate at which biophysical throughput increases. On the basis of Postone’s appropriation of Marx’s category of socially necessary labor time, we can understand how capital (as self-valorizing value) works *through* people, propelling forward a directional dynamic that can be circumscribed by the tendency to produce more and more in less and less time *ad infinitum*. Examining the Great Acceleration in this manner would allow for a critical, dynamic, and reflexive account of so-called “economic growth”²⁰—that is, the form growth must take via the production of value—in terms of the inextricable connection between

²⁰ As alluded to above, Steffen et al. (2011) accord causal significance to “economic growth” in explaining both the advent of the Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration, though they never define the term nor do they inquire into the context to which it refers.

the intensifying domination of people by time, on the one hand, and the necessity of increasing biophysical throughput exponentially, on the other. Such an account of historical transformation is significantly different from that of the Anthropocene, which tends to view the Great Acceleration as being driven exogenously to destruction. Significantly, Postone's theory does not rely on causes outside society nor does it look to an external impending catastrophe to generate freedom and agency. Rather, Postone attempts to understand these developments in relation to society as a whole and its ability to freely develop. Within this critical theoretical framework, both history and freedom are grasped in terms of the double-sided nature of capital's social forms. In the following section we turn to examine why, despite being rendered increasingly anachronistic, the value form remains necessary.

4. Value as the Continual Necessity of the Present

The concept of capital as self-valorizing value is significant for our purposes in examining the “runaway” character of the Great Acceleration because it specifies the form economic growth must take in this context. In fully developed capitalism, economic growth assumes a form in which both people and biophysical nature are increasingly rendered material “bearers of objectified time” (Postone, 1993: 312) at an accelerating rate.²¹ And while capital appears to serve human ends, it is actually humanity which serves capital.²² As Postone explains,

This pattern of growth is double-sided for Marx: it involves the constant expansion of human productive abilities, yet tied as it is to an alienated dynamic social structure, this expansion has an accelerating, boundless, runaway form over which people have no control (...) [O]ne particular consequence implied by this particular dynamic—which yields increases in material wealth greater than those in surplus value—is the accelerating destruction of the natural environment. (Postone, 1993: 311)

In addition to the material wealth dimension of so-called “economic growth” grasped in quantitative terms (i.e., the tendency of the ratio of products produced per unit of labor to increase over time, which also implies increases in biophysical throughput), Postone's critical Marxian theory captures a dynamic whereby the referent against which such changes are measured undergoes a qualitative social transformation. Below we follow Postone in explicating how, as self-valorizing value, capital drives the production of value forward in time, continuously enacting its necessity in the present.²³

Postone distinguishes between abstract and historical time and indicates a dialectic between the two. Historical time is analogous to the use-value dimension and may be considered a form of concrete time as constituted in capitalism. Historical time, according to Postone, “is the

²¹ “Capital produces material wealth as a means of creating value. Hence, it consumes material nature not only as the stuff of material wealth but also as a means of fueling its own self-expansion—that is, as a means of effecting the extraction and absorption of as much surplus labor time from the working population as possible” (Postone, 1993: 312).

²² “The objective content of (...) the valorization process is his [the capitalist's] subjective purpose, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force behind his operations that he functions as a capitalist; i.e., as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and will” (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 254).

²³ Although the process whereby a “new” labor hour becomes socially necessary entails a quantitative change, the nature of this dynamic cannot be grasped in purely analytic terms. The social necessity of socially necessary labor time is, in part, an external social necessity, insofar as it produces and is produced by alienated, heteronomous labor—that is, how our world is created in modern capitalist society.

movement *of time*, as opposed to the movement *in time*” (1993: 294 [original emphases]). As Postone (1993: 294) explains, “The social totality’s dynamic expressed by historical time is a constituted and constituting process of social development and transformation that is directional and whose flow, ultimately rooted in the duality of the social relations mediated by labor, is a function of social practice.” Abstract time, on the other hand, is a function of the measure of value. In contrast to historical time, Postone points out that “Although the measure of value is time, the totalizing mediation expressed by ‘socially necessary labor time’ is not a movement *of time* but a metamorphosis of substantial time into abstract time *in space*, as it were, from the particular to the general and back” (1993: 293 [original emphases]).

With regard to the temporal dimension of the production of value, Postone (1993: 293) indicates that although the abstract temporal measure of value remains constant, “both the social labor hour and the base level of productivity are moved ‘forward in time.’” This “substantive redetermination of the abstract temporal constant” necessitates accelerating the rate at which productivity increases (Postone, 1993: 292). As Postone (1993: 292) explains, in this sense the constant hour becomes “denser” as the amount of products produced increases. This “substantive redetermination” is not immediate, however, and is therefore not apparent at the level of appearances despite the fact that a substantive redetermination (as indicated in increases in productivity) has actually occurred (Postone, 1993: 292). The process through which the hour becomes “denser” cannot be expressed in abstract time because, as Postone (1993: 292) explains, the social labor hour (abstract time), although redetermined, is the “form against which change is measured.” According to Postone (1993: 292-293), “The entire abstract temporal axis, or frame of reference, is moved with each socially general increase in productivity.”

Because productivity is rooted in the use-value dimension of labor, it is possible to conceive of the “forward” movement of the abstract temporal frame of reference “as a mode of concrete time” (Postone, 1993: 293). That the interaction between capital’s use-value and value dimensions can be conceived in this way is itself indicative of capitalism. As Postone (1993: 293 [original emphases]) explicates, the interplay of abstract labor and concrete labor sheds light on the foundation of Marx’s analysis of capital, especially the fact that “*a feature of capitalism is a mode of (concrete) time that expresses the motion of (abstract) time.*” Historical time within capitalist society, then, is socially constituted (via praxis) insofar as it is mediated by value. Within the critical Marxian framework advanced by Postone, human agency is always constrained, which is to say that social structure is not the opposite of agency but is rather constitutive of agency (cf. Lukács, 1923).

As mentioned previously, Postone analyzes the dialectic interplay between capital’s dual forms as giving rise to an immanent dynamic—a dialectic of transformation and reconstitution between the abstract and concrete dimensions. This dialectic of transformation and reconstitution, according to Postone (1993: 294), is also operative between two forms of social necessity: 1) ongoing surface-level transformations and 2) the continuing reconstitution of the underlying conditions necessary for the production of value.²⁴ The dialectic of transformation and reconstitution implies that, as Postone (1993: 295) explains, “the Marxian analysis

²⁴ Postone (1993: 294) indicates some of the basic determinations of the historical process specific to capital’s dynamic totality (as analyzed by Marx). These include but are certainly not limited to: 1) the continual development of productivity, which entails 2) “massive transformations in the mode of social life of the majority of the population” and 3) “the constitution, spread, and ongoing transformation of historically determinate forms of subjectivity, interactions, and social values.”

elucidates and grounds socially the historically dynamic character of capitalist society in terms of a dialectic of abstract and historical time.”

While both forms of time are intrinsically related, the abstract temporal unit is distinct in that “it does not manifest its historical redetermination—it retains its constant form as *present time*” (Postone, 1993: 295 [original emphases]). Like the commodity form, the “social ‘content’ of the abstract temporal unit remains hidden” (Postone, 1993: 295). Moreover, value, as an expression of time as the present, represents an external social norm (Postone, 1993: 295).

Here we return again to Marx’s example of the power loom, where Postone (1993) applies this insight as follows:

The social labor hour in which the production of 20 yards of cloth yields a total value of x is the abstract temporal equivalent of the social labor hour in which the production of 40 yards of cloth yields a total value of x : they are equal units of abstract time and, as normative, determine a constant magnitude of value. Assuredly, there is a concrete difference between the two, which results from the historical development of productivity; such a historical development, however, redetermines the criteria of what constitutes a social labor hour, and is not reflected in the hour itself. In this sense, then, *value is an expression of time as the present*. It is a measure of, and compelling norm for, the expenditure of immediate labor time regardless of the historical level of productivity. (Postone, 1993: 296 [original emphases])

Insofar as substantive changes effected by the use-value dimension, including, for example, societally-induced environmental degradation, remain nonmanifest in terms of the abstract temporal frame of value, these changes cannot be recognized within the framework of the present.²⁵ Recall that the unfolding of capital’s historical dynamic implies that as productivity increases value as a form of social wealth becomes increasingly anachronistic. The dynamic of capital gives rise to an ever-increasing disparity between the accumulated historical potential of scientific knowledge and the production of value. As Postone (1993) explains,

The dynamic of capitalism, as grasped by Marx’s categories, is such that with this accumulation of historical time, a growing disparity separates the conditions for the production of material wealth from those for the generation of value. Considered in terms of the use value dimension of labor (that is, in terms of the creation of material wealth), production becomes ever less a process of materially objectifying the skills and knowledge of the individual producers or even the class immediately involved; instead, it becomes ever more an objectification of the accumulated collective knowledge of the species, of humanity—which, as a general category, is itself constituted with the accumulation of historical time. In terms of the use value dimension, then, as capitalism develops fully, production increasingly becomes a process of the objectification of historical time rather than of immediate labor time. According to Marx, though, value, necessarily remains an expression of the latter objectification. (Postone, 1993: 298)

²⁵ This raises the question of the possibility of critique. Here it is important to note that, as Postone (1993: 295) emphasizes, both abstract time and historical time are expressions of alienated social relations, which is why the opposition between these two moments is not an opposition between capitalist and noncapitalist moments. Similarly, the opposition between “growth” and “degrowth,” which typifies environmental critique, does not point beyond, but rather is intrinsic to capital (see Postone, 1993: 317). Moreover, as Postone (1993: 17-18) notes, Marx’s position “neither affirms the existence of a transhistorical logic of history nor denies the existence of any sort of historical logic. Instead, it treats such a logic as characteristic of capitalist society which can be, and has been, projected onto all of human history.” According to Postone (1993: 18), it is in this way that Marx’s theory “reflexively attempts to render plausible its own categories (...) Theory, then, is treated as part of the social reality in which it exists.”

The growing disparity between the accumulated historical potential of humanity and the production of value, however, does not automatically undermine the necessity represented by value; that is, the necessity of the present (Postone, 1993: 299), but rather changes the “concrete presuppositions of that present, thereby constituting its necessity anew” (Postone, 1993: 299). Value, as an expression of time, indicates that capitalism is simultaneously dynamic and static: “It entails ever-rising levels of productivity, yet the value frame of reference is perpetually reconstituted anew” (Postone, 1993: 299). Historical time, as constituted by capital’s dynamic totality, is invariably naturalized “into the framework of the present, thereby reinforcing that present” (Postone, 1993: 300).

The expansion of surplus value necessitated by capital thus illustrates a specific proneness toward the acceleration of increases in productivity, which in turn necessitates accelerating the rate at which quantities of biophysical throughput increase. Again, “throughput”—that is, the rate at which the capitalist system achieves its goal of expanding surplus value—must be understood in reference to Postone’s categorial appropriation of Marx’s category of socially necessary labor time. As Postone explains,

Capital produces material wealth as a means of creating value. Hence it consumes material nature not only as the stuff of material wealth but also as a means of fueling its own self-expansion—that is, as a means of effecting the extraction and absorption of as much surplus labor time from the working population as possible. Ever-increasing amounts of raw materials must be consumed even though the result is not a corresponding increase in the social form of surplus wealth (surplus value). The relation of human and nature mediated by labor becomes a one-way process of consumption, rather than a cyclical interaction. It acquires the form of an accelerating transformation of qualitatively particular raw materials into “matter,” into qualitatively homogenous bearers of objectified time. (Postone, 1993: 312)

On this basis, the expansion of surplus value is a process whereby both people and biophysical nature increasingly become material ‘bearers of objectified time’ at an accelerating rate. Examining the Great Acceleration in these terms allows one to more fully comprehend the linkage between economic growth and environmental degradation, and the ways in which this linkage is connected to social domination under modern capitalist society.

5. Helplessness

Postone’s critique of traditional Marxism is significant in light of the Great Acceleration because it provides an understanding of how one might plausibly move beyond this context while being a part of it—something that remains elusive if we conceptualize this history in terms of the Anthropocene. The potential to move beyond the present moment of the Great Acceleration is inherent in the contradictions of capital; specifically, “between the actuality of the form of production constituted by value, and its potential” (Postone, 1993: 28). Recognition of this dynamic does not, however, lead to a change automatically, but rather requires working through the deeper social structure of value, something, as Postone (2006: 95) notes, has all but evaporated: “Although indeterminate, a postcapitalist social form of life could arise only as a historically determinate possibility generated by the internal tensions of capital, not as a ‘tiger’s leap’ out of history.” While the necessity of value *ought* to be the manner in which one could develop the possibility for the overcoming of capitalism, the fact that it does not and only

generates ‘resistance’²⁶ instead is indicative of a profound sense of helplessness regarding the capacity of society to self-consciously transform itself in ways that are not predetermined from the outset (Postone, 2006). That the increasing penetration of the value form (and with it the potential for triggering a social political crisis) has given way to resistance is the measure of this helplessness.

Interestingly, it is in an earlier article that Postone (1978) recovers Marx through the social movements of the 1960s (cf. Cutrone, 2014). If Marx could use the critique of political economy to discern the potential of workers to attain consciousness of the contradictory totality, Postone suggests that some of the persisting features of the failure of environmentalism (e.g., the implicit questioning of labor and work in the late 1960s and early 1970s) are an indication of the potential of a properly constituted ecological politics to provoke a social crisis. Here Postone detects how something like contemporary ecological subjectivity might provoke a crisis, and he does so in a way reminiscent of Marx’s recognition that the crisis provoked by proletarian politics through Bonapartism evinced the possibility of overcoming the deeper structure of society. As mentioned, Postone’s approach is rooted in the Marxian theory of praxis as a form of social mediation, which he contends implies that Marx’s critical theory is rooted in a critique of labor as self-generated domination. In this sense, Postone (1978) suggests that the social movements of the 1960s, insofar as they express the desire to move beyond wage-labor, might be seen as an instantiation of what he refers to as “class transcending consciousness,” which calls into question immediate productive labor itself. By focusing on the “*contents* of needs and consciousness” (Postone, 1978: 783 [original emphasis])—for example, struggles over the working day versus struggles against the harmful effects of pesticides—Postone further distinguishes between the “historical *possibility*” of socialism and the “*probability* of revolution” and suggests that the distinction between the two can be conceptualized as occupying different axes of historical time (Postone, 1978: 783 [original emphases]). Within this framework, the problem of the possibility of socialism (and with it the possibility of freedom) is clarified horizontally, as it were, “as the historical changing content, independent of degree of militance” (Postone, 1978: 783). The problem of the probability of revolution, on the other hand, is clarified vertically, “moving from an abstract analysis of the metahistory of the social formation to a consideration of more immediate, concrete, and contingent factors” (Postone, 1978: 783).

As we have seen, Postone reconceptualizes the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production as a contradiction “between the actuality of the form of production constituted by value, and its potential” (Postone, 1993: 28). Applied to the relationship between objective social structure, contemporary ecological subjectivity as an instantiation of class-transcending consciousness might then be conceptualized as an attempt to mediate “social objectivity in which a certain structure of labor has become anachronistic (...) even when this experience is not politically articulated” (Postone, 1978: 784). Indeed, the relationship between contemporary ecological subjectivity and “historically emergent contradictions of the social totality” (Postone, 1978: 785) is far from linear or direct.

Gleaning insight from Postone, we can return to the failure of contemporary environmentalism discussed in the previous chapter. Although the early environmentalist criticism was articulated at a time when the material expansion of the post-WWII regime had

²⁶ As in, for example, the anti-imperialism following 2001: “At the heart of this neo-anti-imperialism is a fetishistic understanding of global development—that is, a concretist understanding of abstract historical processes in political and agentive terms” (Postone, 2006: 96).

developed to such an extent that it became possible to question the necessity of wage labor,²⁷ the rise of contemporary environmentalism did not correspond to a related shift how society was organized. In fact, the exact opposite occurred as the condition of full employment in the 1960s and early 1970s gave way to high unemployment as the 1970s wore on. Moreover, the growth of environmentalism throughout the 1970s and 1980s corresponded with the advent and continuation of neoliberalism, establishing a new round of capital accumulation. The problem of identifying capitalism with one dimension (e.g., employment, distribution, technology) is precisely the problem Postone is warning against. This is something the environmental movement was unable to understand as their political leverage, built up over the early 1970s in the U.S. (e.g., Nixon and Clean Air Act), was readily undermined and evaporated through a new set of social discontents and the onset of high unemployment. Consequently, environmental discontents never become adequately objectified and ended up, for example, being readily incorporated first into Nixon's environmental legislation and then into green entrepreneurship after environmental 'militancy' began to marginalize the movement from society. This is not to suggest a static opposition between 'militancy' and entrepreneurship, to be sure. Rather, we must regard both as integral moments in the disintegration of "state capitalism."

On this basis, we contend that contemporary ecological subjectivity as an instantiation of class-transcending consciousness is grounded in the socio-ecological tensions underlying the production of value, which became increasingly exacerbated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. As such, it is part and parcel of the very process of compounding human impact on the environment, which it nonetheless seeks to move beyond. Yet, recognition of this growing tension (between the necessity of value and the need and desire to move beyond the value form) has yet to occur on a level adequate to the scale of the problem at hand. Postone's critique of traditional Marxism, through which he explicates the production of value in relation to the tension between freedom and necessity, is significant in this regard because, as we have seen, it sheds light on the continual necessity of the Great Acceleration while specifying the possibility of a different form of social relations. At the same time, Postone's insight must be understood in relation to the unfolding of the latter half of the twentieth century—a period characterized by the growing inability to connect the theory (of totality) with the 'forms of appearance' (discontents) politically, which is something that Lukács, writing during the first quarter of the twentieth century, could take for granted. Moreover, the social crisis provoked by the discontents in the 1960s were not on a scale (i.e., were not sustained to render political and hence conscious) of those arising from the revolutionary tide of 1917-1919. Postone registers the potential crisis of "state capitalism" in the new forms of discontent in the 1960s and he identifies in these discontents the first instance of "class-transcending" consciousness. But this only shows the New Left's lack of understanding of what the crisis of "state capitalism" was (Cutrone, 2014). The New Left obscures the disintegration of "state capitalism" without being able to advance it politically (i.e., consciously).

Similarly, contemporary environmentalism is a form of discontent with "state capitalism." It registers the crisis, but in ways that readily gives expression to the transformation into neoliberalism. This is evident not only in "green" consumerism but also in the aggressive

²⁷ During the 1960s, levels of average unemployment fell below 3 percent in most OECD countries (Nickell et al., 2005), which increased the political leverage of the working class. Yet, we must admit that Adorno's (2003 [1969]: 118) warning against Keynesianism triumphalism represents a more accurate description of this state of affairs: "the triumph of technical productivity deludes us into believing that utopia, which is irreconcilable with the relations of production, has nevertheless been made real."

anti-technology stance (i.e., against the form technology took under “state capitalism”). Of course, because environmentalism is unable to understand itself as a product of “state capitalist” science (as discussed in the previous chapter), it is also unable to comprehend how new technologies (e.g., GMOs and next generation pesticides) are also a product of its discontents. The inability of environmentalism to recognize itself as the product of that which it seeks to move beyond is the point at which Postone’s critique of traditional Marxism registers the present moment of the Great Acceleration. Hence, the problem of being able to discern the absence of political forms adequate to addressing runaway development, but without any practical recourse. In this sense, the Anthropocene, which warns against an impending “outside” ecological threat, is true. But because the Anthropocene obscures the meaning of this history, it unintentionally projects the helplessness of the present back over the history of modern society. It is not possible to conceive of the Anthropocene independent of history and freedom, regardless of the current proposal to do so.