

## Moishe Postone (with Timothy Brennan)

### Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview

Since its publication in 1993, Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* has inspired a host of praising assessments from various corners of the critical social sciences. He argues that the "social domination" referred to in the title is generated by labor itself, not only market mechanisms and private property. With some similarities to the *Krisis* school in Germany (and the work of Robert Kurz and Norbert Trenkle), it is industrial labor that is seen as the barrier to human emancipation rather than as the key to its overcoming. While finding, to this degree, a convergence between the goals of capitalism and the older state socialisms, Postone is not content with rejecting earlier systems. One of the more bracing aspects of his book is the attempt to found a new critical social theory. It is in that spirit that the following interview was conducted on May 16, 2008.

TIMOTHY BRENNAN: *A number of us think of your Time, Labor, and Social Domination as one of the most original re-readings of Marx's mature theory for several decades. How did you come to write it?*

MOISHE POSTONE: Thank you. It was actually a very long process that began when I was in graduate school in the 1960s. Early on, Marxism had a sort of a romantic appeal for me—the figure of Trotsky, for example, and other revolutionaries. But, theoretically, it seemed old-fashioned, crude, and positivistic. I was much more attracted by critics of modernity, like Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, who really spoke to me, although they tended to be conservative. So, I was trying to combine left-wing politics with these sorts of critiques that I found more fundamental than Marxism. I regarded *Kapital* as basically a book of Victorian positivism.

*Ah, yes. The dialogue between Nietzsche and Marx is still going on, isn't it? You say this was already a feature of your informal study circles in the 1960s when you were at college . . .*

Yes, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago.

*So how did it come about that you revised your thinking about the supposedly Victorian late Marx?*

After sit-ins at the university in the late 1960s, we formed a study group called “Hegel and Marx.” We read, among other things, parts of *History and Class Consciousness* that were available only in photocopied form. (The book wasn't out yet in English.) And reading Lukács was a revelation. He took themes critical of modernity that had been articulated by Nietzsche, Simmel, and Weber and transformed them by incorporating them into a critique of capitalism. This, for me, opened the possibility of a critique of capitalism much more powerful than either the conservative critics of modernity or the working-class reductionism with which I was familiar. Shortly thereafter, I discovered the other key text for me—the *Grundrisse*—by way of Martin Nicolaus's “The Unknown Marx” in *New Left Review*.

*But you ended up, in fact, getting your PhD in Germany. Was that a matter of perfecting your German or of putting yourself in a milieu where discussion took place at a higher intellectual level?*

Absolutely the latter. One of my advisors, Gerhard Meyer, suggested I go to Germany in order to be in an intellectual and political atmosphere more conducive to serious work on Marx.

*The Grundrisse was hugely popular in the 1970s, of course. A number of thinkers seized on the book as a way of confounding earlier interpretations of Marx. Even today one notices that this strategy is making a comeback in the new Italian political philosophy of Negri and Virno, for instance, who lean very heavily on*

a reading of a single passage on machines toward the end of the *Grundrisse* to make a case for what they call “the General Intellect” (a term that is used in passing by Marx in this section). Is there any merit to the suspicion that the *Grundrisse*—which is basically a set of notes in the name of providing a foundation for a critique of the categories of political economy—is so popular because it is so infinitely malleable?

I actually don’t think that the *Grundrisse* is infinitely malleable. I think a case can be made that in that manuscript Marx shows his hand. In the course of writing the *Grundrisse*, Marx comes to the conclusion that an adequate critical theory has to be completely immanent to its object. The critique cannot be undertaken from a standpoint external to the object but must emerge out of the immanent mode of presentation itself. *Kapital* is then structured in this immanent manner. However, precisely because of the tightly structured, immanent nature of Marx’s mode of presentation there, the *object* of Marx’s critique (for example, value, as well as the labor that constitutes it, analyzed as historically specific forms) has frequently been taken as the *standpoint* of that critique.

The methodological sections of the *Grundrisse* not only clarify this mode of presentation, but other sections—such as the passages on machines you referred to—make explicit that the categories of *Kapital* such as value are historically specific, that the so-called labor theory of value is not a labor theory of (transhistorical) wealth. Precisely because it is not structured as immanently, the *Grundrisse* provides a key for reading *Kapital*. At the same time, there are differences between the *Grundrisse* and *Kapital*. The Marxologists who emphasize those differences are both right and, yet, wrong. They’re right that, for example, the full ramifications of the category of surplus value are not fully worked out in the *Grundrisse*. Nevertheless, focusing on such differences can frequently blur an essential point—that Marx makes clear the general nature of his critique of capitalism in the *Grundrisse*. The general thrust of his critique, which is different from that of traditional Marxism, remains the same in *Kapital*.

Second of all, my main concern is not with what Marx may or may not have intended. I also don’t focus on working through the inner tensions that may or may not exist in *Kapital*. My *Erkenntnisinteresse* [intellectual interests], my interest, is to help reformulate a powerful critical theory of capitalism. To that end, I’m trying to make the critique of political economy as internally coherent as possible—for theoretical reasons, certainly not for hagiographic reasons.

*The theoretical climate these days, as we all know, is still dominated by this or that French post-structuralism, which even now (hanging on as a Deleuzian critique of modalities, the appearance of Foucault's unpublished Collège de France lectures, the resurgence of a kind of Hegelian Lacan in the work of Žižek, or the Heideggerian turn in subaltern studies, and so on) is still the starting point for much of the cultural Left. I imagine some readers will take our discussion here as a backward glance at the 1970s, whereas I am trying to remind people that the theoretical fashions of the moment come out of precisely the same constellation as you did, formed by many of the same works and events. Can you say a few words about how and why you continue to orient yourself to the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory—beginning, in fact, before Critical Theory with Lukács and working your way to its latter-day redactors like Jürgen Habermas? It's a rather bracing emphasis in the present context and certainly against the grain.*

I could give theoretical as well as contingent reasons. One contingent reason—and this goes back to what you suggested about the importance of immediate context—is that I was in Frankfurt for almost the entire 1970s and the early 1980s. On the one hand, the major reception of post-structuralism in the U.S. occurred while I was in Germany. On the other hand, there was a much weaker reception of post-structuralism in Germany, and that had a great deal to do with the widespread familiarity with the Frankfurt School and Lukács. Moreover, if I understand correctly, to the extent to which the American academy was open to theory reception in the 1970s and 1980s, it was mainly in the humanities and not in the social sciences.

*Yes, primarily in the literature departments.*

Which is, I think, a double-edged development. On the one hand, I think it's good and important that there was a theory reception. On the other hand, I think that a theory reception in literature departments is skewed in terms of its understanding of society. I hate to say that, but that actually is my opinion.

*Was it easier to immerse yourself in the Frankfurt School because you studied in a country that never took post-structuralism as seriously as was done in the United States? And are you saying that some of what people thought novel in the critiques of post-structuralism were, in fact, already accomplished much earlier in another way and in another language by the Frankfurt School?*

I think more effectively, much more effectively. I was attracted to the Frankfurt School and Lukács before I went to Germany and moved in circles that

shared my critical attitudes toward both class-reductionist analyses and structuralism (e.g., Althusser). Post-structuralism really is a *post-* of structuralism as well as, more implicitly, of class reductionism. Not having been attracted to that against which post-structuralism was reacting, I was not drawn to it. One feature of that entire theoretical direction—structuralism and its *post-*—is that it is innocent of any serious political-economic considerations. I always thought that an adequate critical social theory had in some ways to take cognizance of the political-economic dimension (if you want to call it *dimension*) of life. When I discovered Lukács and the *Grundrisse*, what I found so powerful—more powerful than the conservatives who had excited me with their critiques of modernity—was that they opened a path to a sort of fundamental critical social theory that was much more historical and, at the same time, both cultural and political-economic.

*In the explanation you've just given, though, for your attractions to the Frankfurt School, you don't address the fact that for all practical purposes your alma mater (JWG Uni in Frankfurt [Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität]) has pretty much relegated the first-generation Frankfurt thinkers to the dusty bookshelves of a venerable past. Why is that? And how do you explain Habermas's role in this theoretical panorama (beyond the explanation of his ambition to be seen as the philosopher of the Federal Republic of Germany)?*

In the first place, that was not entirely the case. There were several less internationally well-known scholars—like Jürgen Ritsert, for example—who continued to work within the theoretical framework established by the “first-generation Critical Theorists.” It is the case, nevertheless, that Habermas became dominant. I would suggest this was not only because he was very successful in terms of academic politics, but also because the framework of earlier Critical Theory had indeed run up against its limits historically. While I agree with Habermas in this regard, I strongly disagree with both his analysis of the nature of that limit as well as the path he chose in order to try to reinvigorate Critical Theory.

*I would like now to square your recuperation of the late Marx (and his emphasis on production, trade statistics, rates of profit, and so on) with your theoretical investment in what can only be called metaphysics—that is, speculative philosophy—say, of the genre (although obviously not the scope) of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind and his Philosophy of Right, which both centrally concern economic issues of labor, inequality, civil society, and bourgeois property relations*

*while never leaving the terrain of the necessary abstractions of speculative thought as such?*

Philosophers would probably be appalled by that suggestion, but I would like to change the terms of the problematic. One of the things I value about Lukács, in spite of any disagreements I might have with him, is that he appropriated and analyzed philosophic questions with reference to a theory of capitalist social forms that made them plausible, historically and culturally. This opened the possibility of viewing philosophy neither idealistically—as the result of some mysterious act by which great minds catapult themselves out of the ephemera of their own time and space—nor, however, in reductionist material terms. Lukács took philosophy seriously and, yet, changed its terms. He historicized it, and did so in an analytically rigorous manner. He shifted the terrain of speculative thought, removing the semblance of its independence from context. The more I read Marx, the more I think this is what he actually accomplished. I'm not sure I could have read Marx that way without Lukács, yet I don't think Lukács's analysis is the same as Marx's. I prefer the latter.

The other point I'd like to make has to do with the notion that the critique of capitalism is economic. Just as Lukács reformulated philosophical questions as displacements, as forms of thought that grapple with a reality they don't fully grasp, Marx also reformulated postulates of political economy as expressing the surface forms of a reality they don't fully grasp. It would be a mistake to view this approach as arguing the primacy of the economic, any more than as an affirmation of speculative philosophy. Rather, what is involved is a theory of historically specific social mediation (which I can only mention but not elaborate here) that then allows for an analysis of both economic and philosophical thought as expressions of an historical/material reality they don't fully apprehend.

*One of the aspects of your project that stands out is the respect you show for Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. You show, among other things, how indebted Adorno, Horkheimer, and the rest of the Frankfurt School were to Lukács and how much Heidegger's *Being and Time* was an attempt to respond to it.*

When I first read *History and Class Consciousness*, I was disquieted by what appeared to me to be a kind of a break between the first two sections of the reification essay and the third. In the first section, Lukács embeds, within the commodity form, Weber's critique of modernity in terms of processes

of rationalization. He thereby grounds rationalization historically. Long before Foucault had developed the idea of disciplinary society, Lukács had essentially done it but also had grounded the development of those forms historically. In the second part of the essay, Lukács undertakes a brilliant analysis of the trajectory of Western philosophic thought from Descartes to Hegel, embedding it within the framework of a theory of the forms of capital. I think those two sections are superb. It seemed to me, however, that Lukács's focus on the proletariat in the last part of the essay went against the grain of the much more expansive understanding of capitalism that he outlined in the first two parts. It didn't seem clear to me how, within the framework Lukács developed in the third part, proletarian revolution was going to change the processes of rationalization he had outlined earlier.

A lot of people who criticized Lukács's "myth of the proletariat" ended up throwing out the baby with the bath water. They threw out the entire analysis of the commodity form, as rediscovered by Lukács, because of what they regarded as the myth of the proletariat. I've tried—and it has taken me time to come to my own insights—to separate out what I regard as the general thrust of Lukács's analysis of Marxian categories, as forms that are simultaneously cultural and social, from the very specific ways in which he understood those categories. That took me quite a while to work through. The longer I worked on Lukács's critique, the more I realized (sometimes you can read the same thing many times, and it's only after a certain point that you have what the Germans call that "aha" experience; even if it's something that has been familiar, you kind of defamiliarize the familiar) that, whereas I had always taken the categories of Marx's critique to be categories of praxis, for Lukács praxis is almost like a subterranean reality that is covered over by a veneer, which is constituted by the categories. They are not categories of praxis for Lukács but categories that veil and inhibit praxis. Revolution for him, just like crisis, is the eruption of this "deeper level" of praxis through the veneer of abstraction covering it. The eruption is that of an ontological level of life, constituted by labor. I don't think that's a good way to read Marx.

*I've always taken this calculated intrusion of the "proletariat" into the essay differently. Lukács is not wrestling with the received idea of the proletariat as praxis—the motor and agent of history (as we first might think)—so much as he is saying that revolutions in the global periphery of the 1920s and slightly before (in the Soviet Union, China, Mexico) altered the nature of philosophical inquiry. They brought into the equation of philosophy a kind of actor whose existence*

*made it possible for the intellectual to overcome an earlier mental impasse. To put this another way, only the theorist who identifies with those who were rejecting the industrial system and corporate values could find his or her way out of the tired antinomies of bourgeois thought inherited from Kant.*

Yes, one could argue that this is Lukács's position. One important insight I got from the *Grundrisse*, however, is that Marx's critique of capitalism truly points to the abolition of the proletariat—not in the legalistic, Soviet sense that if you don't have a bourgeoisie, eo ipso you don't have a proletariat—but, rather, in the sense of the material abolition of the labor that the proletariat does. And it seems to me there is nothing in the third part of Lukács's essay that moves in that direction. The movement there is from the proletariat as object to the proletariat as subject. It ultimately implies the affirmation of the proletariat; it doesn't point toward the abolition of the proletariat and the labor it does.

The condition for the abolition of class society—which I mean in the very general sense of a society in which the many create an ongoing surplus that is appropriated by the few (and which, in this general sense, has characterized most human societies since the so-called neolithic revolution)—is the abolition of the necessity of the direct labor of the many as a condition of surplus production. This possibility, according to Marx in the *Grundrisse*, is generated by capital itself.

You mentioned Critical Theory's debt to Lukács. I would argue that the trajectory of the former illuminates retrospectively some of his limitations. Critical Theorists adopted Lukács's critique of rationalization and bureaucratization based on an understanding of capitalism as both social/economic and cultural. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, they became critical of Lukács's affirmations of labor and totality. Nevertheless, Critical Theory did not recover the double-sidedness of the categorial framework but, instead, ended up reversing Lukács's affirmative position in an equally one-sided manner.

Pollock and Horkheimer, for example, came to the conclusion that a new statist form of capitalism had emerged, in which capitalism's older contradiction between labor and the market/private property had been overcome. For them, this meant that the totality and labor had been realized historically. The result, however, had not been emancipatory. Instead a new, technocratic form of domination, associated with instrumental reason, had emerged. They now associated labor with instrumental action.

Horkheimer's pessimistic turn was paralleled by Adorno's understand-

ing of Marx's categories. Following Lukács and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Adorno appropriated those categories as categories of subjectivity as well as objectivity. In Marx's analysis, those categories have a dual character. Adorno's reading of the categories underpinned his very acute, often brilliant, analyses. Yet his reading emphasized the value dimension in a one-sided manner. The result, in spite of its power, was an analysis that was ill equipped to deal with the reemergence of radical political opposition, and on another level, no longer was adequately reflexive.

My emphasis on the double-character of Marx's analysis is an attempt to get beyond the impasses of Critical Theory, while avoiding what I consider to be the weaknesses of Habermas's theoretical response. At the same time, I emphasize the works of Lukács and the Frankfurt School because I regard the direction they opened—a reflexive critical theory that grasps society and culture with the same categories—to be much more powerful and promising than that of structuralism and post-structuralism.

*Your method seems very much to move, as Lukács's own had (and as Alfred Sohn-Rethel's crucial book on intellectual labor does), from an analysis of the commodity form to the pervasive structures that emanate at the macrological level from the commodity form. Therefore, the dual character of the commodity, which is at once a use-value (a quality) and an exchange value (a quantity), gives to social existence itself a dual character—in fact, a contradictory one. My question is how, though, do we actually demonstrate that the unique character of the commodity under capitalism has this permeating power? How do we avoid slipping into a kind of metaphoric?*

I'm glad you asked. Let me try to respond by, at least temporarily, going back to Lukács. One of my criticisms of the third part of Lukács's reification essay is that the dialectic of the consciousness of the proletariat has little to do with the ongoing historical dialectic of capital. Rather, the process is one of the growing self-awareness by the proletariat of its condition. Lukács presents it as a process by which the proletariat becomes cognizant of itself as object, and insofar as it does so, is on the way to becoming subject. The condition of the proletariat, however, is a static background condition; the development of capital itself from formal to real subsumption and the development of the latter have little to do with the process Lukács outlines. The way I read *Kapital*, starting with its strong emphasis on the commodity as capital's general form, is that it elucidates a development that can't simply be called economic, but rather is really the development of the commodity form as it moves. This dynamic of the commodity form

is what Marx calls capital. The double-character of the commodity grounds that movement. The significance of Marx's analysis of the commodity form as having a double-character becomes clearer, then, once it is understood as providing the basis for an account of the historically unique dynamic that characterizes capitalism. This is very different from an understanding that remains limited to the opposition in the first chapter of *Kapital* between value and use-value.

Marx grounds the form of production in capitalism as well as its trajectory of growth with reference to his analysis of the dynamic nature of capital. I tried to work out the general character of the dynamic as a treadmill dialectic. It's this treadmill dialectic that generates the historical possibility for the abolition of proletariat labor. It renders such labor anachronistic while, at the same time, reaffirming its necessity. This historical dialectic entails processes of ongoing transformation, as well as the ongoing reproduction of the underlying conditions of the whole. As capital develops, however, the necessity imposed by the forms that underlie this dialectic increasingly remains a necessity for capital alone; it becomes less and less a necessity for human life. In other words, capital and human life become historically separated. I don't think this historical dimension is there in Lukács. The reason why I'm mentioning this as a response to your question is that it seems to me that it is precisely with regard to the question of the dynamic development of contemporary society that the analysis of capitalism based on the categories of commodity and capital shows its power. It's this analytic dimension that carries the theory beyond metaphors, as far as I'm concerned. If one does not concern oneself with the issue of the historical dynamic of capital—which ultimately underlies the changing configurations of state and civil society in the modern world—one misses what I consider to be central to Marx's analysis and is then more vulnerable to the charge of having only shown some interesting homologies.

*This is very much the rub. There's one thing that you said in your explanation that leapt out at me. You remarked that when Marx uses the word capital in his book Kapital, he's referring to "the movement of the commodity form through society." This seems to me a very large claim, and it fits very well the abstraction you seem to strive for in your argument—the generalization of form. So let me simply ask: would it be incorrect, then, from your point of view to define the word capital to mean more conventionally "accumulated value as money used for purposes of investment rather than use"?*

Yes, that doesn't go far enough. I argue that Marx's conception of capital goes further. Although one can regard capital as money invested and reinvested in an ongoing manner, this does not sufficiently grasp the work that category does in the critique of political economy. First, it is important to note that when Marx deals with money and accumulation, he does so within the framework of a theory of value. After all, capital first appears in *Das Kapital* as self-valorizing value. The distinction Marx draws in *Kapital* (and the *Grundrisse*) between value and material wealth—between a form of wealth determined by temporal expenditure and one based on the nature and quantity of goods produced—becomes particularly important in explaining the peculiar treadmill dynamic underlying the nature and trajectory of ongoing “growth” in capitalism, where more and more must be produced in order to effect smaller and smaller increments of surplus value.

Second, the category of capital is developed dialectically in the course of Marx's analytic presentation. It is initially determined as self-valorizing value. Increasingly, however, the use-value dimension becomes part and parcel of capital. Unlike what could appear to be the case in chapter 1 of *Kapital*, use-value is not outside of the forms; it's not an ontological substratum beneath the forms. It is only later in the text, when the category of capital is introduced, that aspects of the analysis of the commodity in the first chapter retrospectively make sense. The idea of the double-character of the commodity as value and use-value is clearly revealed as part of a critical analysis that goes beyond a romantic rejection of the abstract (value) in the name of the concrete (use-value). Rather, that analysis is of a “substance” that flows without being identical with the various forms of appearance it acquires in the course of its flow. Capital, of course, goes from being money to goods to money to goods to money to goods. It's flowing through all of them, without being identical with them.

Capital here is a form of mediation that flows. It is socially constituted, but what is involved in this analysis is a very different notion of social construction than the widespread notion of overt social constructionism, that simply opposes what is constructed to that which is presumed to be “natural” or “ontological”—a position whose critique remains abstract and indeterminate. Capital here is a peculiar form of social mediation, a kind of covert and dynamic social construction whose efficacy doesn't depend upon people believing in it (hence, “quasi-objective”). This form of social mediation constitutes socially and historically that which is the object of metaphysical speculation.

That capital has both value and use-value dimensions is generative of its historically unique dynamic, a dynamic that points toward a future beyond itself, while constraining the realization of that future. This signifies that history, in the sense of an immanently generated, ongoing dynamic, is historically specific. It also signifies that critical consciousness should be grasped as generated within the context structured by capital and not first and foremost with reference to some putative “outside” or ontological dimension. This position is completely congruent with Marx’s mode of presentation as an immanent critique. It allows the critique of capitalism to avoid the pitfalls of theories that treat themselves as exceptions to what they analyze.

*Your thesis is rich and complicated, but certainly one aspect of it is the claim that traditional Marxism has been too focused on class conflict and exploitation in its reading of Marx. Your emphasis is rather on the mature Marx of Kapital, who you say is actually trying to describe something very different: a governing logic that envelops everyone and leaves no one strictly speaking in control. You put this very succinctly when you write, “The historical Subject, according to Marx, is the alienated structure of social mediation that is constitutive of the capitalist formation.” So what, then, is your concept of agency? And in regard to the matter of exploitation, does value in your thesis ultimately derive from labor or not?*

Those are small questions you’ve posed! Let me see if I can even begin to nibble on them. When I talk about a governing logic of the forms of social mediation at the heart of capitalism, I regard that “logic” (and I would put it in quotation marks) as the working out of what Marx was trying to get at as a young man with the notion of alienation, that is, with the notion that people create structures that dominate them. The form of domination underlying capitalism is reflexive, according to this analysis. Domination in capitalism, then, is not ultimately rooted in institutions of property and/or the state—as important as they are. Rather, it is rooted in quasi-objective structures of compulsion constituted by determinate modes of practice, expressed by the categories of commodity and capital. This form of domination is expressed most clearly by the dynamic of capital, by the existence of a dynamic that has properties of a historical logic. That is, when we talk about history in capitalism, we are actually talking about a very different process than if we are talking about historical developments in the ancient Mediterranean world, ancient South Asia, China, or anywhere else.

Increasingly, this logic has become tighter and more global. It is, of course, very, very different from any notion of historical progress (although

it provides the basis for the idea of historical progress), because to the degree to which a dynamic exists, to that degree agency is circumscribed and constrained. The greater the degree of human agency, the less one can speak of a historical logic. It seems to me that Marx analyzes capitalism as a society in which there is a great deal of individual agency and a great deal of historical structural constraint. The dynamic of capitalism, however, opens up the possibility of historical agency, even as it constrains its realization. I would argue that understanding this can help avoid some unexpected consequences of political action, that the consequences of political action are not completely random, and that not having an understanding of the constraints of capital dooms a lot of political projects to an unforeseen kind of failure or to becoming part of that which they themselves wanted to overcome.

*A rather trivial example of agency in regard to capitalism would be those charismatic and determined leaders of military fractions or popular movements who, once in power, decided to put distance between their national economies and the market. Mosaddeq and Nasser in limited ways, Lumumba, Jyoti Basu, more recently Chavez, Mugabe, and Evo Morales. Wouldn't one have to say that in this fairly straightforward way, the governing logic of capital can, through force of will and a favorable relationship of force, be overcome?*

I think that, considered retrospectively, I would view things slightly differently, that the equation of state action with agency, and the market with constraints, now appears questionable. If we look at the trajectory of the last one hundred years, speaking very generally, what we see is the rise and fall of state-directed economic activity. State-directed economic activity took on a whole variety of forms, ranging from Keynesianism in the West to the Soviet Union. These forms, which were dominant in the decades following the Second World War and seemed to be the wave of the future, ran up against their limits in the 1970s. This indicates that the degree of agency they expressed was more circumscribed than appeared to be the case at the time.

There have been many competing accounts of the general crisis of the early 1970s. Rather than attempting a complete explanation, I would say that retrospectively it seems that what the Soviet Union called *socialism*, leaving aside for now its negative dimensions with which we are only too familiar, was actually a means—perhaps the only possible means at that time—to create national capital, which meant to create a national economy. To create a national economy also meant, at least on paper, that you could

distribute resources in a way different than if those resources were being distributed from the outside. It was a strategy to counteract uneven development and establish effective state sovereignty. This, however, definitely did *not* entail the overcoming of capitalism.

*I see—so it really was the logic that was the agent, rather than the individuals.*

I'm afraid I think so. I also don't think it is accidental that once the state-centric mode went into crisis in the 1970s, the CP leadership that won out in China seemed to recognize that the earlier era was ending, while that in the Soviet Union didn't. The Chinese road was not simply the result of Deng's agency but meshed with the turn to markets—especially capital markets—as a response to the limits of state action. The sort of statist development that once had been very successful no longer was very effective. This general development calls into question the identification of state action with agency. On the other hand, market-centered approaches that didn't work very well during the previous epoch of statist development now seemed to work. (I'm speaking in terms of capital valorization, of course.) They may not work in twenty years. Obviously South Africa is a very different place than it would have been had the fight against apartheid succeeded a generation earlier, which probably would have resulted in a more classic developmental state. That just doesn't seem to be a viable option for them right now. We should avoid the tendency to take one historical configuration of capitalism and reify it. Most of the debates about planning and markets are static; they decontextualize and reify the terms.

*What would be the determining feature of a society that was not capitalist?*

I think there are several. Certainly, on the basis of retrospective knowledge, it seems that the abolition of private property and the market are not sufficient conditions for the abolition of capitalism. If one returns to Marx's distinction between value and material wealth, it seems that a basic condition for the abolition of capitalism would be the abolition of value. One result—given the productive potential developed under capitalism—would be that the wealth of society would not depend upon a mass of people doing work that we today regard as being empty, fragmented, oppressed, exploited. Socialism would entail the actual abolition of a lot of that labor without creating an enormous surplus population, which is one of the problems in many parts of the world. On the other hand, political economic decisions would be far less constrained by the quasi-objective constraints of value and capital, so that various projects, such as those the French government

tried in the early 1980s, might have a better chance of success. Although I am not certain what the conditions on the ground for such a change would be, I think it is very important to emphasize both dimensions, one being the condition of work of most people and the second being the kinds of constraints on political decision making.

*Even the most detailed grasp of Marx's critique of capital need not include as its finale a precise picture of a future socialism. To understand capitalism, in other words, it is not required that we describe postcapitalism. By the same token, it is difficult to decouple the two completely. Certain sectors of the Left will settle for nothing less than a world without laws, governments, or authority. The elimination of alienated labor is too puny for them to get excited. Whatever the actually existing socialisms did achieve, this sort of Left writes the entire project off. But wouldn't even the partial containment of the market by a ruling authority be measurably better than what we have now?*

Oh, absolutely. If I talk about what I think socialism is, and note that it's very different from a traditional Marxist conception, that does not mean that I am an ultra. I do think such an analysis could also help guide reform. I agree completely with you, that we are very far from even a pre-revolutionary situation. The only way that we could reach such a situation would be on a practical level, that is, through a series of reforms, some of which are more pressing than others. The issue of "surplus population" (in the sense of the large numbers of people rendered "surplus" by capitalism's development) is a tremendously pressing problem, as are, of course, environmental issues. I am a little pessimistic because, in addition to the growing necessity for some sort of global reformism, we are also confronting a situation pointing toward the reemergence of great power conflict.

I don't think that America's military adventures in the Persian Gulf can really be separated from a long-term assessment of future possible great power conflicts. Although American oil companies might benefit greatly, I don't think the U.S. invaded only to benefit those companies. Of course, oil plays an extremely important role, but it does so in part because of future possible great power conflicts. The dialectic of great power conflict and globalization makes me want to go back and look again at the two decades before the First World War, when we had a similar dialectic. Putting that aside for a moment, I do think that a whole variety of initiatives have been undertaken that move us closer to a global perspective. One of the reasons I was heartened in the 1990s by the anti-sweatshop movements on campus was that they no longer reified third world governments as somehow

imbued with magical progressive sovereignty and actually went and looked at what was going on on the ground, regardless of whether the factories were in Indonesia or in Vietnam.

*Let's return to the issue of labor. You emphasize the Marx who is a theorist of social forms rather than a prophet of revolution, if I can put it that way. One of your points is that economic value under capitalism is not reducible to the blood and sinew expended in the making of material objects for exchange. Value, and the labor that produces it, is abstracted under capitalism and circulates in this highly mediated way, distant from its origins in human physical effort. In a way, this feature of capitalism, as you point out, is what Weber was talking about as "rationalization"—that is, the quantitative rationalization of modern institutions—and what Lukács was alluding to with his idea of the reification of human relations. Words like abstraction and rationalization—these are terms that point in the direction of thought, management, planning, projections, theory. My question is, are you describing a process of movement from physical to intellectual labor, or would that be taking it too far?*

I think yes and no. The thing that struck me, thinking about value theory in *Capital*, is that Marx, on the one hand, tries to indicate that, as capital develops, it gives rise to a productive apparatus that no longer simply expresses the force of the workers; it goes far beyond that. On the other hand, value for Marx remains bound to labor-time expenditure by workers. The shearing pressure between these two moments is constitutive of capitalism's form of production. It also grounds the fundamental contradiction of the social formation. This position is different from that of theorists like Daniel Bell and Jürgen Habermas, who maintain that the labor theory of value had been valid in the past, but that today, value is based on science and technology. It is also different from orthodox Marxist approaches that try to reduce everything, including the computing power of a supercomputer to the amount of labor-time, including engineering time, that went into it. These diametrically opposed positions share a common understanding of value. In neither case is it understood as a historically specific form of wealth. Marx outlines something that I find much more interesting, which is that, although capital generates these enormous productive capacities and, if you will, the increasing centrality of intellectual labor, it remains bound, structurally, to direct labor in the process of production. This is the chief contradiction of capital. I think that's what Marx tries to analyze with his value theory. It's very different than the concerns of Ricardo and Smith.

So, in spite of the distance, the abstraction and so on, the mediation . . .

. . . remains based on labor-time.

And by that you mean the physical labor involved in making things.

Yes, measured temporally.

So, along those lines, what do you make of the far-flung predictions for at least two or three decades that we have entered a postindustrial era?

Well, I actually wrote a little piece on Daniel Bell quite a while ago, comparing him to Ernst Mandel, who wrote on late capitalism.

*They couldn't be more different politically.*

No, but at one point Bell was an assistant to the Frankfurt School in Morningside Heights, when they first came to New York. I think he "appropriated" a lot from them and then transformed it in his own inimitable way.

*Yes, just as he "adapted" Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man when writing The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, which follows Marcuse point by point without acknowledgment, only to subvert his thesis while praising the modernity Marcuse memorably rejected.*

Well, he's certainly familiar with the general concerns of the Frankfurt School. Be that as it may, Daniel Bell argues that the only thing stopping us from really achieving a postindustrial society is a mind-set, which he called economistic, as opposed to sociologicistic, thinking. Perhaps writing in the late 1960s or early 1970s, such a view was still plausible. But I don't think the theory of postindustrial society, which, at its heart, is linear, can explain the nature of the changes since the late 1960s. It can't explain how what appeared to be a historical movement beyond economism, entailing fulfilling labor and increased leisure time, was halted and reversed. What I think postindustrial society does accomplish is that it reminds us that there is a tremendous potential that has been generated under capitalism that could truly improve the lives of the many, and not just in terms of consumption. By abstracting from the constraints of capital, however, postindustrial theory comes up with linear models whose failures it can't explain.

*But you do think, then, that "postindustrial capitalism" refers to something real rather than to a metropolitan illusion that points to nothing more than the outsourcing of basic production to the third world?*

Yes. Someone like André Gorz pointed out years ago that the amount of proletarian labor lost to technological rationalization is greater than that

exported. It is a mistake to think of proletarian labor as a fixed amount of work that simply is being exported, first to Mexico, then China, and then Vietnam. The displacement of jobs, of course, is also happening. Both are taking place. I try to get at this by talking about—at a very abstract level, admittedly—how capital points beyond proletarian labor while always reconstituting it.

*Agreed. On the other hand, the notion that basic production by brute physical labor is not still the basis of international wealth seems extreme and one-sided to me, particularly witnessing the spectacle of the nineteenth-century-style primitive accumulation occurring in China today or the capitalization of previously uncapitalized industries in India—to take only two examples. Why shouldn't we suspect that the image of "postindustrialist society" derives from the perspective of intellectuals living in metropolitan countries who—because of outsourcing, the rise of service industries, and the complete financialization of the economy—are simply divorced from the industrial motor behind all they see? Isn't this, in other words, a matter of self-interest?*

I don't know if it's always a matter of self-interest. It could be a half illusion. I agree with you that it's a very selective perception, but I don't think it is only an illusion. To say that brute physical force will always be the basis of international wealth draws attention to the brutal exploitation that exists. However, it does so in a way that brackets the historical dimension of capitalism and, therefore, any consideration of the conditions of the possibility of socialism. It substitutes spatial for temporal considerations. Incidentally, in the case of China it's not just a matter of recapitulating nineteenth-century primitive accumulation. If anything, that was more the case with "communist accumulation." My understanding is that the centrality of labor power in China can be explained in Marxian value terms (rather than developmentally). I once read that German factories that are bought and then sent to China are reconfigured in China, where they tend to take out the robotics and insert people in the assembly line because people are so much cheaper. It involves weighting the mix of absolute and relative surplus value toward the former. In a way it's what the Americans would call a cost-cutting program (although that formulation obscures the distinction I just drew).

*So it's like reversing the process described in Kapital.*

In a sense, yes. But Marx also writes about how capital revives older forms in a newer context. There is nothing linear about capital's development.

Part of your critique of what you call “traditional Marxism” is that its view of labor is “transhistorical.” You argue that it fails to account for the qualitative transformation of labor under capitalism, which is nothing less than the “domination of humans by time.” But isn’t it the case that all political economy prior to the neoclassical revolution—this would include Rousseau, Smith, and the Marx of the 1844 manuscripts—gives us what we might call an anthropological rendering of labor? Labor is, from that point of view, the same in every period, regardless of the economic relations. There is always the necessity of physical activity to refashion nature under cultural arrangements in order to create a social surplus. In short, don’t we have to distinguish between “anthropological” and “transhistorical”? The unavoidable fact of human labor as the constant and the basis of human life is precisely what allows the different “forms” of labor—including those specific ones thrown up by capitalism—to achieve their historical character.

Let me both accept and perhaps modify the idea of “transhistorical” and “anthropological.” I think it is unquestionable that some sort of interaction of humans with nature is a condition of human life. I do think, however, that one can question today whether that necessarily entails the physical labor of the many. There is a passage—I believe it is in the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*—where Marx refers to history until now, including capitalism, as “prehistory.” My reading of this passage is that, beginning with the so-called neolithic revolution, there has been an enormous expansion of human productive capacity. This expansion, however, has always been at the cost of the many. All so-called historical forms of society are based upon the existence of an ongoing surplus, and that surplus has always been created by the many.

*Even before “the fall,” as it were, described in Genesis? That is, even before the creation of agricultural communities and cities?*

No, I said after the “neolithic revolution.” This is not the case, to the best of my knowledge, with hunters and gatherers. Generally, *historical* refers only to post-neolithic societies. This development may have been a giant step for humanity as a whole, but it certainly was a negative step for a lot of people. The problem with historical societies is not only that an upper class oppresses and lives off those who produce the surplus, but also that the good of the whole and the good of each (or, at least, of most) are opposed. The growth and development of social productivity may benefit or be ripped off by an upper class, but the real problem is that the toil of the many is the condition for the wealth and culture of the whole. I think that, for Marx,

capitalism could be the last form of prehistory, because it creates the conditions whereby an ongoing surplus could exist that wouldn't depend on the labor of the many. This ties in to what you were saying about both theories of intellectual labor and postindustrial society. The problem with both kinds of approaches, which are related, is that they then abstract from capitalism. They see it simply in terms of technological development and then can't understand the actual overarching trajectory of development. What is powerful about Marx's approach is that he sees both continued oppression and its growing non-necessity for society as a whole. He analyzes the real oppression of people in a condition where it is no longer necessary. That, in a way, makes it worse.

*This maybe clarifies even more why you do not find very much of sustenance in the "actually existing socialisms," so-called. One could draw all kinds of distinctions between them and capitalism if one were looking at market relations, but not so much when one is talking about the labor of the many and their suffering.*

Right.

*If the critic cannot get beyond capitalist categories of thought, because, as we've said, the governing logic subsumes them, if the critic cannot get beyond an alienated and reified relationship to the world except by discovering the contradictions within the system itself, its negative reality, so to speak, then can we at least suggest what that contradiction is?*

Let me go back a step. It depends on how one understands capitalist categories of thought. If capitalism is seen only as something negative—an oppressive, exploitative system that converts quality into quantity (which, I agree, does describe important aspects of capitalism)—then one necessarily has to have recourse to an "outside" as the basis of critique. In my view, however, capitalism should be understood as the social and cultural order within which we live—an order that can't be sufficiently grasped in negative terms, but that is characterized by a complex interplay of what we might regard as positive and negative moments, all of which are historically constituted. That is, one should understand "capitalism" as a conceptually more rigorous way of analyzing "modernity," a social/cultural form of life that also has been generative of a whole range of ideas and values (such as equality) that have been emancipatory in different ways.

I don't think it makes sense conceptually to think of critics as being outside of their social and historical contexts. Critique—of whatever sort—has to be grounded immanently. Marx was aware of this already in *The Ger-*

*man Ideology* when he criticizes the idealism of the Young Hegelians. He doesn't simply decry them as wrongheaded but argues that an adequate theory should be able to explain why their idealism is plausible to them. By the same token, a good theory should be able to explain the conditions of its own possibility. Theory cannot claim that people are socially/historically/culturally formed and then implicitly regard itself as an exception to its own presuppositions.

You're right to suggest that the idea of contradiction is what allows this sort of critical theory to avoid a kind of Durkheimian functionalism. "Contradiction" is not simply an objectivistic notion that has to do with either Maoist notions of the relation of the third and first worlds or with the idea of a final economic crash. Rather, it seems to me to be rooted in an analysis of a growing gap between what is and what could be. As I've already indicated, however, this gap is not adequately conceptualized with reference to that between industrial production, on the one hand, and the market and private property, on the other. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a gap between social labor as it is presently structured and social labor as it could be structured. This possibility, however, can never be realized under capitalism. Earlier in our conversation, we spoke of theories of intellectual labor and of postmodernism as, on one level, anticipating a possible future on the basis of present developments in an implicitly linear fashion, without understanding what's constraining that future from being realized. I think one can explore some social movements also as expressing a sense that what exists need not be. In other words, the notion of contradiction is not only crucial for self-reflexivity but also for the critical analysis of emergent movements, and allows one to evaluate those movements. I think the idea of the non-necessity of things as they are, for example, was extremely powerful in the so-called new social movements of a generation ago. I also think that one can view fundamentalism as the opposite reaction—to a sense of decline once the earlier world configuration had reached its limits a generation ago. This is still very crude, but I do think that one can begin to look at oppositional consciousness on the basis of a contradiction between what is and what could be, and certain kinds of reactionary formations as expressing a sense of threat, as reactions that hold onto what is (or is taken to be what is), in ways that are very different than is the case if you just take what is for granted. It lacks the doxic ease of what we could call traditionalism.

While I have not written extensively on the varieties of religious funda-

mentalisms that have emerged and become powerful in recent decades—in the United States, the Middle East, and India, for example—I have written on a reactionary formation that, in my view, poses problems for the Left, namely anti-Semitism. (My work on anti-Semitism is much better known in Germany than in the U.S.) Addressing this issue is particularly important today, against the background of globalization and antiglobalization politics. This, admittedly, can be difficult because of the degree to which the charge of anti-Semitism has been used by Israeli regimes and their supporters to try to discredit all serious criticisms of Israeli actions and policies. On the other hand, criticism of Israel should not be used to obscure (much less legitimate) the spread of real anti-Semitism today.

Anti-Semitism differs from most other essentializing forms of discourse, such as racism, by virtue of its apparently antihegemonic, antiglobal character. At its heart is the notion of the Jews as constituting a powerful, secret, international conspiracy. I regard it as a fetishized form of anticapitalism. Anti-Semitism misrecognizes the abstract domination of capital—which subjects people to abstract mysterious forces they cannot perceive, much less control—as the domination of international Jewry. The problem this poses for the Left today, I would argue, is that, although this ideology is profoundly reactionary, it can appear to be antihegemonic. It is for this reason that Bebel, the German Social Democratic leader, found it necessary to denounce anti-Semitism as the socialism of fools. Today one could extend this characterization—it has become the anti-imperialism of fools. It is a revolt against history as constituted by capital—misrecognized as a Jewish conspiracy. It can be taken as a significant marker distinguishing progressive and reactionary forms of anticapitalism.

*You said that you thought that the shortcomings of Lukács's work on reification had created openings for Heidegger, whose Being and Time, you remarked, had been haunted by Lukács and eager to find a way out of Lukács's problematic. That intrigued me. What openings are you talking about?*

I haven't fully worked this through, but I was referring to the ontological dimension of Lukács's thought. It took me a while to fully realize the importance of this dimension of his approach. I had been reading him as taking Marx's categories to be categories of the constitution of human beings. When I returned to the text and reread it several times, I came to the conclusion that this is not necessarily the case and that, actually, Lukács views the commodity form almost entirely in terms of its value

dimension and seems to ontologize the use-value dimension. This idea that there is an ontological level beneath the level of society, it seems to me, opened the door for Heidegger. I used to think of the opposition of Lukács and Heidegger to be one between a socially and historically specific theory and an attempt to negate it through ontology. I now increasingly think that Lukács's understanding had both historically specific and ontological dimensions and that the ontological dimension of Lukács's thought opened the door for Heidegger with his reactionary ontology.

*That is interesting because one would suppose after reading Lukács that he was primarily interested in epistemology and that Heidegger's return to ontology was a way of changing the dynamic emphasis on the subject encountering the object, to fix it, to arrest it and make it paralytic, as it were, which is one of the things that comes as a consequence of the move to ontology. For the contemplation of being, in his hands, produces a conundrum, and the telos of his inquiry is the conundrum itself.*

I agree with that, and I certainly am not suggesting that Lukács is the same as Heidegger. However, retrospectively, I think that, by not being as completely social and historical as I had originally read him as being, Lukács in a sense allowed Heidegger to slip in his own ontology.

*When you're talking about the ontological element in Lukács, you say that his account of the value form of capital is ontological.*

No, I think that value for him is historically specific, but it sits as a veneer, as it were, on top of use-value. Use-value, as Lukács understands it, is ontological—or so it seems to me.

*And the word ontological here, if we might just translate it, would mean what Heideggerians might call ontic—a brute existence like a stone, nonrelational?*

I mean something else. It seems to me that Lukács has a notion of use-value as a qualitative dimension of life that is inherent to life, and that the quantitative dimension of capitalism has distorted and obscured this qualitative dimension of life. Abolishing the abstract forms of capitalism would allow the qualitative dimension of life to be recovered. I think, however, that capitalism entails a much more complicated dialectic of quality and quantity. Both value and use-value have quantitative and qualitative aspects and both have emancipatory and nonemancipatory moments. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, the two are intertwined in capitalism—the dynamic that characterizes capitalism is rooted in their dialectic. It is the case that

the abolition of capitalism entails the abolition of value—not, however, on the basis of an underlying qualitative dimension, but on the basis of a possibility generated historically by the interaction of the two dimensions of capitalism’s social forms.

*You say that the categories of capital in Lukács (exchange value, surplus value, reification, fetishism, etc.) form a kind of veneer, whereas your argument is that these categories are themselves a praxis. In the contemporary moment, that sounds a lot like the claims of people like Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri, who speak of revolution as autopoietic. Perhaps the distinction would be in that your standards for what constitutes a truly postcapitalist order are, if anything, more stringent than others, where they believe that the revolution has already taken place: that true internationalism already exists and that the downtrodden have already imposed their will on the leaders from below.*

Well, that’s convenient.

*Precisely. At any rate, how would you distinguish this notion that you are talking about from their notion of the autopoietic?*

It seems to me that the neo-operaist notion actually overlaps in unexpected ways with Lukács’s understanding. In both cases, praxis seems to refer to a more immediately social level than that which is grasped by the categories. The categories then don’t really grasp forms of social life but merely forms of appearance of a life that is molded by praxis. Praxis here seems to be outside of the categories, whereas—as you noted—I argue that the categories themselves grasp forms of practice.

Now, with regard to the notion of the autopoietic, I would argue that what can be grasped as “auto” in capitalism is capital. In its dialectical unfolding, whereby history and logic become intertwined in a historically specific configuration, capital acquires the attributes of what Marx calls an “automatic Subject.” Nietzsche, I’d suggest, expresses this in fetishized form with his conception of the *demiourgos* as generative of ongoing processes of creation and destruction. It is capital—this peculiar, self-perpetuating, and undermining structure—that legitimately can be called autopoietic in my view.

What does this imply for the idea of agency? In the first place, agency doesn’t simply arise *ex nihilo*. Such a conception remains bound to a classic (bourgeois) dualism of freedom and necessity (more frequently expressed today as that of agency and structure). The very notion of agency is deeply embedded in the structure of capitalist society that undermined earlier, more embedded forms of human interconnectedness along with their

related value systems. The irony is that, to the degree individual agency emerges historically, it does so within a framework that severely constrains historical agency. Second, we have to deal with the imaginaries and values of social actors as socially/historically constituted. A broad array of subjective forms are associated with various dimensions and moments of capital. Among them, I've suggested, are subjective forms pointing beyond capitalism. These forms are neither completely contingent nor are they preprogrammed, as it were. Capital neither moves beyond itself quasi-automatically, nor is subjectivity that points beyond capital spontaneously generated. That is to say, capital can generate the conditions of possibility of a society beyond capital, but the dialectic of capital is not a transhistorical dialectic of history. Capital will not change itself into something else. The logic of capital can be considered autopoietic, but revolution is precisely not that. The ongoing, even accelerating motion, so beloved by Futurists, is that of capital, but revolution involves controlling that motion. It abolishes the constraints on action that render capital autopoietic and thereby allows for a society based on historical agency. Benjamin expressed a similar idea with his metaphor of revolution as pulling the emergency cord on a runaway train. I agree with the image of capitalism as a runaway train, although I think revolution entails more than just pulling the cord.

*I'm wondering if we can conclude by talking one last time more directly about intellectual labor. Given the way that we have brought up the issue of agency and the impersonal and impervious logics of capital, is there a way we could elicit from you some notion of the role and function of the intellectual? What is it that the intellectual is capable of doing in moving from capitalism to a more equitable system?*

Let me try this in a roundabout way, because the term *intellectual labor* can really encompass things that are very different from one another. A great deal of intellectual labor is becoming proletarianized and is no more satisfying, by virtue of the fact that you're using your brain instead of your bicep, than Fordist factory labor had been. I think that most people engaged in what we call intellectual labor are actually engaged in work that is very one-sided, very one-dimensional, very constrained, and very nonsatisfying. Having said that, it seems to me that the role of *critical* intellectuals must be to try to get a handle on what has been going on. Despite whatever differences I may have with David Harvey or Giovanni Arrighi or Robert Brenner, I respect their attempts to understand the present as history. It is only

by understanding the present as history that we can begin to get a sense of which sorts of political projects and initiatives contribute to the creation of a movement that ultimately points beyond capitalism and which are mistakes. At the very least, the work of critical analysis should be a negative guide, a guide that can say, “this is going to go nowhere,” or “this is the danger of that,” or “these are some of the unintended consequences” of, let’s say, a very narrowly defined identity politics, consequences very different from what the people who are pushing identity politics had in mind. On the other hand, critical intellectuals who are concerned with the category of capitalism have to take seriously the rise of new ways of viewing the world, not in order to jump on the bandwagon or to accept them as somehow right because they are new, but rather, at the very least, to take them as a sign that something is changing or as expressing a felt dissatisfaction with older modes of social critique and social movements. (For example, classic working-class movements were not only weakened by capitalists in the transition to post-Fordism but were also found lacking on an everyday level by large numbers of people.)

Does this mean that the labor of critical intellectuals is like that of Sisyphus? Maybe, but I don’t think so. I know this is not a very optimistic way to end our conversation, which I’ve enjoyed, but I’m not sure that the times are very optimistic.

*Yes, but how can we be sure they are not?*

#### **Note**

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