



David Black

The Philosophical Roots of Anti-Capitalism: Essays on History, Culture, and Dialectical Thought

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About the reviewer

Philip Walden

Philip Walden holds a doctorate in philosophy from Southampton University. The PhD includes material on Joseph Dietzgen, a Marxist who in some ways was more sympathetic to Hegel than was Marx. Philip has been a Marxist activist for 25 years. (philwalden7@yahoo.co.uk)

Review

This book contains a collection of essays exploring the relationship between philosophical themes and the study of capitalism. The first chapter evaluates the innovative work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel who studied the development of money in ancient societies and showed the importance of Marx's approach for understanding the character of early economic activity. One conclusion by Black from his analysis is the following: 'The general value form reduces all actual labor to the expenditure of *labor-power* – in a bad infinity of unlimited “growth” and accumulation of capital. Under the thumb of capital, labor is substance, not subject. Labor is not actualized as subject in a conflict between “good” use-value and “bad” exchange-value. “Labor”, as the proletariat, only becomes a “subject” in its self-abolition and uprooting of value-production.' (33-4)

This comment is controversial as it does not account for labour's struggle to overcome its subordinated status within capitalism. Michael Lebowitz explains how labour not only changes itself in a form of self-development, via its role within the production process, but is also transformed by participation in collective struggle: 'Self-development, however, always involves more than just the process of material production. For Marx, it meant in particular the development of socialist human beings through collective struggle. He consistently argued that the process of struggle produces altered human beings, new subjects'. (Lebowitz 2003, 181) The character of struggle implies that labour is beginning to reject its subordination to capital. Without struggle there can be no revolutionary transformation of society. Whether this development means that labour becomes a subject is contested, but the point is that without the resistance of labour to the domination of capital, the reduction of labour to the imperatives of valorisation cannot be

overcome. In contrast Black's formula is ambiguous, suggesting that the character of labour is defined by its value aspect. However, Marx considers the character of labour-power is explained by its process of alienation or separation: 'In fact, the seller of labour-power, like the seller of any other commodity, realizes ... its exchange value, and alienates ... its use-value.' (Marx 1976, 301) Hence an integral aspect of class struggle is that labour tries to establish control over his/her labour-power. The point is the value character of labour is not necessarily durable and its condition can be transformed if labour rejects its role as labour-power. This process is explained by labour regaining its control over its own labour-power which has been alienated to the capitalist for the purpose of valorisation and capital accumulation.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations Black has also outlined a convincing criticism of the dogmatic view that the philosophical logic of Hegel represents the logic of capital: 'Hegel's Logic, even as it represents the logic of capital, is like all of his philosophy imbued with an absolute negativity, which can be read as anticipating Marx's critique of capital, in which the logic of the system intimates a realm beyond it.' (40) However, in my opinion, this comment still defers to those critics of Hegel who consider him an apologist for capitalism. According to Norman Levine, Marx was actually influenced by the criticism of the early development of capitalism in the work of Hegel. What Marx rejected in Hegel was the conception of philosophical and historical development as the work of the spirit. This rejection enabled him to reconstruct Hegel in an historical materialist manner: 'It is my contention that Marx eliminated the Speculative substance from the 'Lordship and Bondage' chapter. He did not look upon 'Lordship and Bondage' as an evolutionary stage in the achievement of 'Absolute Knowledge' but repositioned their relationship into a politico-economic content. Within the structure of Marx's thought the combat between 'Lordship and Bondage' was not over consciousness, but over labor: the capitalist, the lord, sought to expropriate the labor of those in 'bondage', or the proletariat.' (Levine, 238-9) Consequently, Marx was interested in how Hegel would enhance his understanding of capitalism and in this process rejected his idealist philosophical system. The result was the reconstruction of spirit as labour.

Black outlines a detailed study of the ideas of the Situationists and explains how they contributed to the understanding of class consciousness, reification and the prospect of transforming present capitalist society into an emancipatory alternative. Unfortunately he concludes by supporting the perspective of Postone that the working class cannot transcend its value character within capitalism and so the aim should be the abolition of work: 'For a modern class to "qualify" as an historical subject it must have economic power of some sort, political representation, intellectual leadership and a "program,"

“historic mission” or *raison d’être* (though in truth no class in history has ever achieved power *consciously* in this sense). In the case of the bourgeoisie, the “program” can only amount to being, or aspiring to be, at home in the alienation of capitalism. The working class, on the other hand, has never had a “program” for abolishing value-production, and in that sense can be said to have never been more than a pseudo “historical subject,” whose objective role has been to push capitalism into developing more efficient forms of valorization. If, as the young Marx said, the proletariat is nothing if it is not revolutionary, then the revolutionary being of the proletariat can only be constituted by its not being, and it can only fulfill its subjectivity by abolishing itself.’ (72-3)

An astonishing comment. Not only does it deny the importance of empirical events when labour has struggled against its subordinate relationship to capital. It also denies the theoretical significance of the perspective of Marxism, which is to move towards abolishing value-creating production via influencing the character of the class struggle. Marxism is the programme for the abolition of the value status of labour. Thus in another work, Lebowitz explains that Marx wrote *Capital* in order to encourage workers to struggle against the domination of capital. The aim was the creation of a society in which workers are not reduced to value, or socialism and communism: 'As long as workers do not understand that capital is the result of exploitation, they will always be dependent upon it – no matter how much they may struggle on particular questions, such as questions of “fairness” (e.g. fair wages). And that is why Marx wrote *Capital*. Precisely because of capital’s inherent tendency to develop a working class that looks upon capital’s requirements as “self-evident natural laws”, Marx’s purpose was to explain the nature of capital to workers and to help them understand the necessity to go beyond capitalism.’ (Lebowitz 2010, 20-1) And: 'Understanding that capitalism is a perverse society that deforms people and that capital, itself, is the result of exploitation is not enough, however. If people think there is no alternative, then they will struggle to do their best within capitalism but will not waste their time and energy trying to achieve the impossible. For that reason, a vision of an alternative is essential.' (Lebowitz 2010, 21)

The above quotes indicate that the struggle to achieve an alternative to capitalism is complex and is not guaranteed by any ‘laws’ of history. But the fact that success has not yet been realised in achieving the aim of socialism does not mean that labour is nothing more than the creators of value within capitalism. Marx wrote *Capital* in order to put forward a serious argument outlining that labour could overcome its role as the expression of valorisation and so make advances towards creating a society that was an alternative to capitalism. The crucial problem was that this prospect of change could only occur through the role of class struggle. Contrary to what some commentators have

argued there is no inevitability to the demise of capitalism and the realisation of socialism, owing to the difficulties involved in defeating the economic and political power of the capitalist class. However, these difficulties can be explained in empirical terms and are related to the influence of Social Democracy and Stalinism. But it is unsatisfactory to reject dogmatically the view that the working class is a subject. The character of the working class as a subject is not defined by success in history and is instead the outcome of the role of labour as the creators of capital. Tony Smith explains: 'For Marx, the concept of capital is not exhausted by capital's claim to the status of essence (or subject, or self-moving substance, and so forth). That is only the beginning of the story. The more important part of Marx's concept of capital is the destruction of that claim. *Capital's claim to be the essence of the valorisation process is ontologically false*: 'The secret of the self-valorization of capital resolves itself into the fact that it has at its disposal a definite quantity of the unpaid labour of other people' ... The heart of Marx's concept of capital, I believe, is the critique of capital fetishism; ontologically, capital is a mere 'pseudo-subject' and 'pseudo-self-moving substance'. The process of 'creating capital out of capital' is nothing but the exploitation of wage-labour.' (Smith 2009, 181-2)

The crucial point is not the status of labour as a subject. This issue cannot be resolved by the application of philosophical, historical materialist, or political economic criteria. Instead what is important is that the capital-labour relation is based on exploitation. Capital is created by labour. Labour does not have any control over this process. This accounts for class struggle. Marxism argues that this situation can only be resolved when the domination of capital is ended. Until that occurs what will characterise reality is the continuation of the class struggle. It is not Marxist doctrine that imposes a revolutionary status onto the working class. Rather, revolution is the possible outcome of the class struggle and expresses the political basis to resolve the conflicts of the class struggle in the interests of labour. (Lebowitz 2010, 110-2) In contrast, Black cannot explain the offensive of capital against labour since the 1980s because he glosses over the importance of the class struggle and its causes. These methodological problems are connected to his reduction of the alienated role of labour in value creation and the effective denial of the antagonistic aspect of the economic connection between capital and labour. The subversive point of Marx's analysis is that labour can overcome its reduction to the role of value. Black seems to deny this.

But it would be unsatisfactory to consider this book limited by tensions within its reading of Marxist political economy. The majority of the book offers important arguments providing reasons for recognising the importance of philosophy for studying the character of contemporary capitalism. Black also relates these themes to the historically important

work of Marx, Hegel and Lukács. This book can be recommended in the study of the role of philosophy for promotion of perceptive study of capitalism.

8 June 2014

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- Smith, Tony 2009. *Globalisation: A Systematic Marxist Account* (Chicago: Haymarket Books).

Comments

David Black wrote, on 13 Jun 2014 at 2:22am:

Phil Walden, who has come up with not so much as review as a polemic, relies very heavily on the arguments of three theorists (Lebowitz, Levine and Smith). As none of them are mentioned in my book, I will in the main stick to Walden's criticisms.

Walden finds the following to be 'controversial'.

'The general value form reduces all actual labor to the expenditure of labor-power – in a bad infinity of unlimited “growth” and accumulation of capital. Under the thumb of capital, labor is substance, not subject. Labor is not actualized as subject in a conflict between “good” use-value and “bad” exchange-value. “Labor”, as the proletariat, only becomes a “subject” in its self-abolition and uprooting of value-production.' (33-4)

It 'is controversial as it does not account for labour's struggle to overcome its subordinated status within capitalism.' But why should it? The context is a discussion of Rubin and Dunayevskaya's insights into the Hegelian logic in Chapter One of *Capital*, in which Marx explicates how labour-power is subordinated within the commodity form; not how labourers struggle against their subordinated status. Walden writes. 'The point is

the value character of labour is not necessarily durable and its condition can be transformed if labour rejects its role as labour-power.' Unfortunately, he does not follow through his own argument. If the workers were to go beyond collectively resistance to the subordinating demands of capitalists and reject outright commodification of labour-power, they would also have to reject commodity production . As value and use-value, abstract labor and concrete labor, are inextricably bound within the commodity form, the conditions of alienated labour could only be eliminated by a total break with the logic of capitalist accumulation (the 'bad infinity of unlimited "growth"").

Walden concurs with what he sees as my 'convincing criticism of the dogmatic view that the philosophical logic of Hegel represents the logic of capital'. However, even if is true (as Walden claims) that what 'Marx rejected in Hegel was the conception of philosophical and historical development as the work of the spirit', I argue that what Marx did not reject in Hegel was the conception of philosophical and historical development as absolute negativity. In Marx's Capital, the expropriation of the expropriators is the negation of capital's negation of proletarian subjectivity. (I do not buy Levine's apparently Kojevian argument that Hegel's 'Lordship and Bondage' provided Marx with any sort of critique of capital or gave 'politico-economic content' to class struggle in an industrial society – though I should mention perhaps that I do have a critique in the book of Kojève's notion of the 'End of History').

Regarding my alleged 'supporting [of] the perspective of Postone that the working class cannot transcend its value character within capitalism and so the aim should be the abolition of work', Walden finds the passage he quotes from pp. 72-3 'astonishing'. However, I do not argue that 'the aim should be the abolition of work'; I merely point out that former English Situationists, such as T.J. Clark, have endorsed the Postoneite writings of Anselm Jappe as a development of the anti-work ethic of Debord ('abas le travail'). In Situationist thought the question of the 'abolition of work' was inextricably linked with the self-abolition of the proletariat. Inasmuch as 'work' is opposed to 'life-activity', I would concur.

I do not disagree with Tony Smith's description of capital as a pseudo-subject rather than a real subject. My own criticism of Postone, which Walden ignores, centers on the characterization of 'Value' in Marx's Grundrisse and Capital as an 'automatic subject'. Although Marx does write of the appearance of capital as 'an automatic subject' of value, he does so in a discussion of the process of circulation (M-C-M'). Marx makes it clear that the 'occult ability' of value to 'add value to itself' is dispelled once the analysis shifts

to the production process and the internal limits imposed by the relation of abstract to concrete labor. The power of capital is limited by – and only limited by -- the revolutionary potential of human power as its own end. Totalizing power is proportionate to disintegration within its absolute negativity.

Finally, Walden claims I ‘deny the importance of empirical events when labour has struggled against its subordinate relationship to capital’. If he does want to read an empirical account of an actual revolutionary subject in the history of class struggle I suggest he looks at ‘1839: The Chartist Insurrection’ (Unkant Publishing 2012) by myself and Chris Ford. As regards more recent, and regressive, times, I would suggest that the Lebowitzian gloss Walden paints over objective developments ‘since the 1980s’ does not, and cannot, address the implications of those developments for revolutionary subjectivity in our own century.