

Interview: Critical Theory's contexts of cooperation *

Oskar Negt and Johan F. Hartle

Translated by Richard Langston

Johan F. Hartle: I want to discuss the possibilities of Critical Theory that you and Alexander Kluge develop in your collective project. To that end, I would like to ask you to reconstruct a few points from your biography. Let's start off by having you describe your path to the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and then sketch how your work started out in conjunction with Frankfurt School thinking.¹

Oskar Negt: I am currently working on the second volume of my biography and what plays a central role in this is why I gave up my plans to study law in Göttingen and instead take up philosophy and sociology. I connect these two disciplines to the normative side of validity, on the one hand, and the genesis or developmental conditions of norms, on the other. The fact that a student could study philosophy and sociology at the same time was decisive for my decision to go to Frankfurt. My departure from Göttingen was not easy inasmuch as I was content with the lectures I attended in the law school there; Göttingen at that time had one of the most famous law faculties in the world, with Bockelmann doing criminal law and many other renowned professors. But one day a friend asked me: What exactly are you getting your degree in? That's easy, I said: I'm studying law and am, in fact, matriculated at the law school. On the contrary, he said, you don't study law, you're studying legal philosophy. That's something entirely different. I thought

* Originally published in a slightly different form in *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (Spring 2019), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/interview/interview-critical-theorys-contexts-of-cooperation>. Reprinted with the permission of the author and the publisher.

about that for about two to three weeks and then said: He's right. I'm not studying to become a tutor who just discusses individual cases. I'm studying legal philosophy. Law did not fulfil my educational dream. On top of that, Frankfurt was already preoccupied with issues like the trade union movement. The city had quite simply so much of what I wanted. The connection between the labour movement and Critical Theory was a reality there because a large portion of IG Metall's brains trust included people who studied in Frankfurt.²

Hartle: Of Critical Theory's representatives who have occupied academic positions in the ensuing decades, you are probably the only one who has a strong relationship to the labour movement.

Negt: That's right. But why is that the case? Once again, that has something to do with my family's tradition. My father had been a member of the SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany] since the workers' and soldiers' councils. He constantly challenged me. He commented on practically every one of the SPD's movements, for example, the Godesberg Programme. It came naturally to me that I would find my friends in Frankfurt among the unionists.

Hartle: How did you experience this at the Goethe University in Frankfurt and the Institute? Just how prevalent were the traditions of the labour movement there? Were you able to rediscover them with Adorno or Horkheimer?

Negt: Attitudes at the Institute were not hostile to unions, but there was an attitude that somehow being part of a social movement—being involved in the tradition of the labour movement—was more ideational. There were no direct political projects of any kind that led from the Frankfurt School to the labour movement.

Hartle: Can you say something about your position in the academic programme there and your relation to Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas. How did you arrive in this setting?

Negt: You know, so much was based on factors that I am not able to describe in detail. There were, however, two experiences with Adorno that did determine my future path. I was an industrious student but didn't participate in the seminars. I didn't give presentations until I reached a point when I said to myself: I have to somehow show my gratitude using everything that I've accumulated. I agreed to write a protocol for a class on a very difficult text by Kant, namely his 'transcendental schematism'. I worked my way right into the context of that dark chapter and gave my presentation. Adorno was beside himself with joy on account of my protocol, nodded at every other sentence, and at the end of the seminar came to me and said: That was an object lesson in how to write a successful protocol. Protocols played a much larger role in philosophy than reports because they made discernible whether one had understood the text.

The second moment was in the old institute on the other side of the street in Senckenberg. There I gave a lecture on Marx. Adorno's assistant checked it before I gave it. The assistant in question was Habermas. That was my first encounter with him. He gave me the extremely long text back—which, by the way, appeared in thousands of copies³—along with a note that Adorno was in agreement that we offer more such lectures on Marx. The point of the story is that I had the feeling that I was actually in line with Frankfurt School thought. An entirely new phase of my studies began at that point.

Later, Habermas came to me one day and said: Do you want to become an assistant? At a point in time when Adorno and Horkheimer each shared a *single* assistant, namely Hermann Schweppenhäuser, it wasn't the case that open positions for assistants were in large supply as was the case a decade later. A very specific kind of cooperation evolved with Habermas, to whom I owe quite a lot. My habilitation was supposed to be about Fichte, but it naturally never came about. Nevertheless, cooperative friendships evolved.

Hartle: You also met Kluge at this time. When was that roughly? And how did this encounter come about? You represented two different contexts.

Negt: For reasons not entirely clear to me, I became an authority when I was in Frankfurt. In other words, I had contact with every group. In 1970, I organised a colloquium at the Juridicum in Frankfurt on legal philosophy. All these people who were politically engaged, like Cohn-Bendit and Joschka Fischer, but who were somewhat unorganised, attended. And there I saw someone who always sat all the way at the back and diligently took notes. One day he approached me and said: May I introduce myself? I'm Alexander Kluge. I said: I know you. You're a friend of Adorno's. I'm surprised that you have the feeling you can learn something from me. We then arranged to meet over dinner and since then we have had this relationship.

Hartle: Does that mean that your own intellectual socialisation and the development of '68 have no shared experiences with Kluge? You met Kluge for the first time two years later?

Negt: That's right. But 1968 played a big role for us because the book project that we collectively pursued was based on a book idea on the specific forms of the public sphere in '68 that I originally proposed to List Verlag. I asked Kluge whether he could imagine writing this book together with me. I was incidentally in a precarious situation because I had already received 2,000 marks for the book, back then an insane amount of money, that I would have had to return if I did not publish with List. And Kluge said that he didn't want to publish it with List but rather Suhrkamp. The decision to write this book came about perhaps two weeks after our first meeting.

Hartle: In this respect, '68 was a preliminary study for *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (1972) [*Public Sphere and Experience*, 1993], but the experience of '68 was separate? You had your experience of '68 and Kluge had his?

Negt: The lines were fairly distinct. Kluge was already in Frankfurt back then. I came from Heidelberg, from a political diaspora if you will, which incidentally resulted in me having to give speeches more than I ever had before in my life. Habermas certainly spoke incessantly and he also had a special strategy for speaking. When we debated through the night, he was always determined to support my arguments even when they faded in order not to lose his interlocutor. It was, in other words, a very intense but completely apolitical situation with a view onto the unfolding activities in Frankfurt.

The events of the time didn't initially challenge my political socialisation in this respect. Even the tradition of the labour movement was never called into question for me. On the contrary, shortly before '68 I was an assistant instructor at the Federal Trade Union School in Oberursel. Several unionists were looking within the SDS [Socialist German Student Union] for a deputy head for the School. The bookseller, Josef Lang, asked me whether or not I felt up to working as an assistant there. But it lasted for more than a year and it was also much more than just the job of assistant because the director, Herbert Tulatz, had gone for several years in order to organise unions in Africa. That meant my relationship to the unions preceded all that. As you already suggested at the beginning, it also meant that I was the only one who had an intense, concrete relationship to the labour movement. Back then, unions represented for me the labour movement.

Hartle: At this time there was an intellectual and political conflict with Habermas. You edited the book *Die Linke antwortet Jürgen Habermas* [The Left Answers Habermas] (1969). What circumstances led to this? How do you see this from today's perspective?

Negt: It's a relatively complicated course of events. My intention was to get Habermas out of the line of fire that he started with his concept of 'left-wing fascism', which he himself had applied to the student movement. I had discussed with him that I was editing this book. He wanted to write

an afterword. But the book developed more and more into a polemic against Habermas and had already gone so far that it was no longer possible to roll it back. Twenty years later, I apologised for a host of reasons, one of which was the fact that, in the interim, certain contributors were no longer leftist but rather had wandered over to the Right. Uncoupled from the theoretical shifts, my friendship with Habermas remained steadfast. By the way, back then it was possible for a full professor to let an assistant go without further explanation. But Habermas didn't do that. I still believe that he always knew that the trajectories of our scholarship were never very compatible.

Hartle: Where then would you locate the differences?

Negt: He and I talked about that: Habermas takes a leftist position in which the labour movement and labour appear nowhere at all.

Labour and socialist politics

Hartle: Let's linger for a moment longer on Habermas. He published his paradigmatic essay on the distinction between labour and politics, 'Labour and Interaction', in 1968.⁴ Your efforts with Kluge to relate the concept of the public sphere back to the concept of production, in other words, to the contexts of labour and experience that belong to the life of production, are an attempt to keep these two strands bound tightly together. This is also your reply to Habermas. Because 'living labour' remains a key concept throughout your theoretical work, perhaps you could say a little more about the trajectories that emerged from this different interpretation of the concept of labour.

Negt: Naturally. Habermas gave me his essay on 'Labour and Interaction'. 'What did you think of it?' he asked. (We addressed one another using the formal Sie, which was a good form of protection for such a long-term cooperative relationship.) I said that we represent remarkably different lines of thought and that our relationship had nevertheless endured. Evacuating the concept of labour

from interaction and communication is to give up on it politically. Even the way we form our concepts is quite different. I suddenly had the impression that when Habermas spoke about something 'proletarian' it was more an aesthetic category. 'Proletarian' for me was closely associated with an origin story, namely my own history. The story of one's life is always involved in the formation of categories. That also applies to Habermas' middle-class life story.

Hartle: Against this backdrop, how did you conceptually manage to get together with Kluge? You had this experience with Habermas. A certain break with Habermas took place and then two lines started to distinguish themselves more and more. You said that you wanted to write from the perspective of your political experience of '68 as well as the public spheres of '68, and then quite suddenly the agreement with Kluge has you writing a book together with him. Your theoretical impulse and interest were clearly visible, namely to strengthen the concepts of 'living labour' and the 'proletarian' both politically and sociologically in order to grasp the public sphere as a context of production involved in the formation of ways of life. How does Kluge get involved? What were the synergies that suddenly emerged in the first conversations with him?

Negt: When I presented it to Kluge, it was initially the diversity in my concept of labour that instantly fascinated him. Labour is not just wage labour. That means that the rich means of expression for labour must be named if we wish to consider the context of life. We quickly departed from the discursive thought that Habermas imagined. We didn't want discourse but rather literal activities, in the sense of one's own objectivisation as a subject as well as the recognition of people in their objects. That was largely based on Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* with an eye to the dimension of reification as well as the idea that 'the *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present'.⁵

Hartle: That is also a quotation you comment on explicitly in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981) [*History and Obstinacy* (2014)] and that you use again and again. Does that mean that it was also a fundamental impulse for *Public Sphere and Experience* to think through the history of sensuousness and the constitution of human subjectivity via the history of production contexts?

Negt: I mean the entire substructure of labour, its corporeality. Kluge is an extremely enthusiastic intellectual. When I outlined for him that the substructure goes entirely missing in Habermas and must therefore be filled in, he caught fire. And so we then went on to write these two books. *Public Sphere and Experience* influenced an entire generation with its development of a proletarian public sphere and counter-public sphere because ‘proletarian’ refers to not just the labour movement but also the substructure. The public sphere stops being a rational form that offers the citizen a liberal platform.

Hartle: Help us readers imagine what went on in your heads, yours and Kluge’s. What played a role when you decided to write *Public Sphere and Experience*? There is the backdrop of the *Paris Manuscripts* and the idea that human subjectivity must also be understood according to the history of the relations of production. When looking back from today’s perspective, one might say that these ideas of the public sphere or cultural action and the contexts of production go back to Benjamin. You can find it in his essay ‘Author as Producer’ and, of course, in his ‘Work of Art’ essay. On the whole, the idea of experience plays a central role. You have stressed that the concept of experience was probably Adorno’s central concept.⁶ How would you yourself describe the central theoretical impulses that you two were able to quickly agree upon?

Negt: We had to somehow balance out our different origins, which naturally played a big role. But we were careful with how our backgrounds determined our work because the idea of cultivating reason, if I may apply an agricultural concept, presupposes farmworkers: Every person tills their

own mental field. But we decided to survey for starters the expanses of the past to discover whether certain answers are better than the ones we ourselves came up with. This theoretical form of agriculture wanted to analyse life contexts as concretely as possible.

If one now considers current political developments, then I can only say how sad it is that so much of what we feared has now come true. When, for example, people's everyday contexts are not worked on, when people don't take their distorted fantasies seriously politically, all the fears of expropriation can add up to the accumulation of a society's raw fears; that then brings people to chase after charlatans and redeemers, as is now the case. That means that the view from below remains crucial.

On this point, another conflict arose that has continued all the way up to Habermas' most recent publication. I challenged him—in my estimation Habermas has a lot of influence—to mention this underside just once and leave out the contractual side of the European context. Lisbon and Schengen are the only things that remain of these agreements. Mention just once the project of labour and refrain from saying that labour's utopias are exhausted. This is a barrier in his work.

Hartle: The concept of labour links you to the tradition of Marxism. There are different Marxist traditions. Another was implemented by Peter von Oertzen at the University of Hanover. There are different discourses, methods and political positions that were carved out in the seventies. Much more than Kluge, you have maintained a relationship to this Marxist spectrum. Looking back now, how would you describe your position? How was your relationship to colleagues at the Socialist Bureau like Frank Deppe, Joachim Hirsch, Wolfgang Streeck? There were extremely different positions within Marxism and nevertheless a collective labour emerged. How do you see your theoretical project within this spectrum?

Negt: My strategic intention with the Socialist Bureau was to create a forum where rapprochement was possible without the pressures of having to become a member or worrying about sectarian exclusions. It was a space for understanding where different positions could bring about something by watching. The concept of ‘looking on’ [*Zusehen*], which is quite essential for Hegel’s dialectic, has once again moved me in recent days. How can someone like Hegel say that the dialectic is looking on at how things develop? How true is that? *Zusehen* also means critically following and commenting on the political development of time. My formulation of ‘meta-fractional consciousness’ plays a big role for a portion of the Left.⁷ In the second volume of my biography, I place a strong emphasis in my RAF speech given at Frankfurt’s Opernplatz. It helped illustrate for sympathisers what was wrong and what didn’t work, as well as what did work and what socialist politics can really achieve when alliances and associations are organised.

Hartle: If we consider the unique feature of your theoretical work written together with Kluge within the spectrum of Critical Theory, then it possibly consists of the question regarding political organisation and political strategy.

Negt: Hans-Jürgen Krahl was possibly the one exception. He was the only one who dedicated himself to the old Marxist unity of a grand formulation of theory and questions of orientation, the orientation of social movements. Other than him, this hardly existed within Critical Theory. Adorno’s ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’ offers small insights into what he dared to advance regarding organisational questions.⁸ Essentially, he left the matter up to others. When you bring into view the unique features of Krahl’s thinking, then you see a collective political project whose central concepts—the proletarian public sphere, the counter-public sphere and, later, self-regulation—also accompanied the political development of the seventies and eighties.

Cooperations: self-regulation and Surrealism

Hartle: Your approach to working together remains unique. A cooperative context like yours is an exceptional situation involving an exceptional form of theory. Can you clarify for us how your collaboration with Kluge took shape?

Negt: The images and photographs of our collaboration reveal a mountain of books. We wrote every sentence literally word for word together. Recall the photo reproduced on the front endpaper of the original German edition of *History and Obstinacy* that shows us sitting together at a desk. We had a mountain of literature and manuscripts next to us and dictated our ideas. There were always other people present who took notes. Adorno's secretary, Elfriede Olbrich, was there with *Public Sphere and Experience*. She understood everything, so she refrained from transcribing when we talked nonsense and conversely recorded thoughts that were not dictated. She collaborated. Kluge often started with a sentence that I then continued. That is how it literally took place.

Hartle: How then did you reach an agreement regarding your larger arguments? Did they emerge out of the smaller building blocks of your mosaic? Or did you have a concept in mind that was then translated into or realised as detail work? The concept of the public sphere was already established. You hadn't yet realised the book project for List Verlag that was suddenly supposed to be pursued together with Kluge.

Negt: The question as to how a person manages to write a five hundred-page book is no small feat. You can well imagine that yourself. We had a rule that prevented us from fighting over a concept or idea for more than ten minutes. If no agreement was reached, then the version first formulated was incorporated into the text. Fights over concepts were less important to us than the constitution

of the book's overall context. We never worked together for more than fourteen days to three weeks at a time. We would go our separate ways and then a month later arrange a date to meet again. Some time ago, the German department at Princeton University invited me and Kluge to present on stage how we worked together. For many academics, that must have sounded quite unreal.

Hartle: Let's try and think our way into *History and Obstinacy*. The German original is a huge, 1,300-page project that operates simultaneously on multiple levels. How would you describe today the intention of developing such a large project both theoretical and poetic in nature? The book's argument is based on isomorphisms propped up by the concept of self-regulation. Normally, one would say that empirical social research or psychology have their own domains. With the central concept of self-regulation, you choose both a terminology and a method. You confront image with text and explode every boundary in order to allow this guiding concept to prevail as a poetic principle.

Negt: A specific form of poetics naturally comes from Kluge, but not entirely. Many literary references come from me and many non-literary ones come from Kluge. I can say that writing *History and Obstinacy* was quite pleasurable. In truth, self-regulation was conceptualised as a comprehensive principle. It deals with self-regulation as a psychological category; how single organisms keep themselves balanced using processes of self-regulation. Self-regulation is, however, also a quasi-cosmological principle in the sense that physical processes including the formation of the planets can be understood as the balancing of forces. At the same time, self-regulation is a political concept that describes the balancing of recalcitrant impulses and affects within a community. What brought about this wide-ranging discussion? When you tear down these barriers, a layer becomes visible otherwise hidden from academic discourse.

The concept of self-regulation does recall neo-liberal practices and rules a bit, but it really emerges from the basic idea—this was my experience with educational projects—that when people’s fantasies and activities have no place to assemble within the processes of socialisation and the formation of personalities, then certain prejudices and exclusions are ingrained in them. The Glocksee School is an effort to bridge childrearing and education, continuing education, political education.⁹

I believe that it was also important that my biography ran somewhat against the grain of the merits and currents in academia. When I was at the Hegel Congress in Stuttgart in 1981, Habermas and I ate together and I asked him: ‘How far along is your book? It should be coming out shortly, right?’ Habermas replied: ‘Well, you have it easy. Yours is a surrealist book.’ He was right in a certain sense. I am actually amazed time and time again that step by step this approach brought me all the way to publishing my collected works.

Materialist theory of education

Hartle: If your intellectual profile runs against the grain of a certain type of academic training, academic philosophy and the academic social sciences (which naturally have been cultivated and stressed in the subsequent development of Critical Theory after Habermas), does that perhaps also relate to a certain type of Critical Theory and critical intellectualism? Would you say, to put it less defensively, that an imperative is hidden in your profile?

Negt: The Glocksee School and my experience with other non-institutional and non-institutionalisable forms of personality formation indeed count among the essential sources of my intellectual activity. This attitude has still other biographical reasons like the aforementioned year when I was an assistant in Oberursel at the German Trade Union’s federal school. I had not taken

my exams. I was still a student. That unencumberedness allowed me to examine much closer what went under the name of proletariat. When Horkheimer wrote in an early essay on the proletarian fighter, he idealised him. That is the rebellious expression of an entrepreneur's son who could afford to do so. I saw how long it took to turn a normal worker into a fighter. Education [*Bildung*] is required. An upbringing, another word for exemplary learning [*exemplarisches Lernen*], comes about by way of experience. There are, however, sources of obstinacy and they, too, must be taken into consideration. Political training cannot therefore be the sole thing associated with education. There must also be spaces for free forms of socialisation. My experience with the Glocksee School builds on this. When my wife and I had kids, I asked myself: if we go to Hanover because of my professorial appointment, should we hand our kids over to public schools? At that point, my situation turned into a battle for an alternative school.

Hartle: These two aspects of learning—the tradition of workers' education and your efforts to create alternative forms of childrearing and childhood learning—would you describe them as a central impulse for the collaborative work with Kluge? You derived the concept of self-regulation from it. Essentially, Kluge's work on the public sphere in small institutional niches is also an attempt to bring enlightenment or learning into contexts in which they are not a matter of course. Would you say that Negt and Kluge's project is primarily an educational project [*Bildungsprojekt*]?

Negt: Yes. It is an educational project inasmuch as it creates a basis for socialisation that has to do with the stability of democracy, for democracy is the single governmentally organised social order that has to be learned. All other governmental contexts—authoritarian societies, for example—do not make people need more education. They make learning obsolete. In this respect,

this also focuses on a prerequisite for democracy. Democracy can't exist if the level of fear is too great or when mental prerequisites don't exist.

Hartle: Traditionally, the concept of learning, which already represents a strong humanistic tradition, presupposes idealistic basic principles. I believe I do you no wrong when I say that the exceptional thing about Negt and Kluge's project was that it wanted to be explicitly materialistic. Perhaps you could say something more about the fault line 'learning and materialism'?

Negt: That can be sketched out in distinction to Habermas' project. In Habermas' discourse, the rational citizen plays the role model of the political. In *Public Sphere and Experience* and in *History and Obstinacy*, the contexts of production and self-regulatory mechanisms take this citizen's place. Self-regulatory mechanisms identify the organism and its corporeal processes. In this respect, the book relies heavily on materialist motives. These differences with Habermas are embodied in a movement. Probably seven or eight years ago when I gave a lecture at the community college in Munich, Habermas appeared with his wife Ute. Afterwards we went to dinner. He said: 'I completely agree with your analysis, but I consider one of your theses completely contrived: the system does not capsize.' And then I said: 'Its stability is a conjecture that departs from presuppositions that we don't yet know. We know not how the system changes.' Habermas captioned the speech he gave on my eightieth birthday with the words 'I underestimated you', and continued by saying that his underestimation consisted in the fact that even the Socratic side of including living conditions is indeed an essential factor for the stability, consensus and inclusion of others. In this respect, my project was seen not only as an educational project but also a socio-theoretical one as well.

But you are right: the collective project with Kluge is only an educational project provided that it is thought of in materialist terms with respect to the superordinate conditions of educational labour

and socialisation processes, but also provided that it is understood as a socio-theoretical project. Conversely, it could also be said that the materialist project analysing the social dynamic of capital and labour processes can only be correctly understood when it is also grasped as referring concretely to subjectivation processes and experiences that have to do with the emergence of personalities and the balancing of production contexts.

Politics of the non-identical

Hartle: You have related self-regulation heavily to the developmental-psychological context. The concept is, however, a broader one that describes democratic ways of life. You speak about self-regulation as a principle of communal living in the seventies. Perhaps one could say, because you always emphasised strongly the importance of the council movement and its discussion for '68 and its aftermath, that self-regulation is also a principle for the democratic self-governance [*Selbststeuerung*] of community [*Gemeinwesen*]. Certain forms of political organisation and the institution of the state can be oriented according to principles of self-regulation.

Negt: Yes. The basic requirement that forms the basis of the democratic constitution of our society has to do with the fact that people comprehend the fact that their interests, even individual interests, are not realisable without the inclusion of a social context. Often those who do something willingly are really guided by interests insofar as they relate their social engagement strongly with themselves and don't consider it as a self-evident restoration of certain things to the community. That means that the human being is a social creature. It is not born a political creature. This connection between learning and organisation of social context is so clear to me that I am naturally always glad when I see feedback between socialisation processes and subjectivation as well as general social processes, as well as when these connections are not considered completely unreal.

Organising the capacity for resistance, obstinacy and proletarian energies is always then a part of these mental connections when it becomes creative and endows a community with form.

Hartle: The concept of the proletarian acquires in your hands a very unique constitution devoid of substance. This is something you stress later in your television conversations with Kluge. In *History and Obstinacy*, but also in your television conversations with Kluge, it seems that whenever the topic turns to the concept of the proletarian, the non-identical as defined by Adorno is also strongly present. The proletarian and obstinacy are in a certain sense negatively defined.

Negt: Indeed, we use the concept not in terms of any substance but rather as one of characteristics. It is a counter-concept, so to speak, that ignites due to the modes of sociation [*Vergesellschaftung*], a counter-concept for which those social principles responsible for identity formation are central. It constitutes itself by way of exclusions and setting limits. Mobilising exclusions means doing proletarian politics. But the question regarding the non-identical naturally touches on the problem of idealism. For Adorno, the non-identical, not the identical, is the actual material that reason and a person's life contexts work on. Nevertheless, the battle is naturally also waged over the identical. In other words: What am I? What am I expressing? What belongs to me? That ultimately has to do with not only big political questions but also the central question regarding identity during childhood.

Fundamentally, I would say that concepts like 'negative dialectic' delimit themselves from the rattling scaffold of philosophy that Hegel criticised already in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It has to do with the simple fact that the world cannot somehow be completely absorbed in the identical. There remains something like—remainder isn't the right word—a block or, as far as I'm concerned, a thing-in-itself. These are different metaphors for what remains outside wherever efforts to integrate and incorporate are detected.

Hartle: There are potentials of obstinacy or the capacity for resistance that are undirected. Some forms of obstinacy and resistance don't lead to emancipation, while others do. Which moments of obstinate development—or obstinate subjective potentials—do you consider to be typical of our age? Where do you locate this distinction 37 years after publishing *History and Obstinacy*?

Negt: Today's situation is linked to a concept that I've used for a while, namely the 'crisis of erosion'.¹⁰ It means that those structures that once produced bonds have loosened. Structural bonds and loyalty get lost, and the fear of loss is naturally tied to obstinacy: I lose something. The subject moves in the direction of a new self-centredness such that the idea of community disappears or frays apart. At this level, emancipatory power gets lost, obstinacy gets constricted, and this ultimately leads to atomisation.

Hartle: From the way you've reconstructed the concept from the title of your book, obstinacy ultimately describes something external. The processes of capital, including labour conditions, constitute types of subjectivities, but then there are the proletarian capacities for resistance and obstinacy that lie outside. A prevalent thesis of our age is that under post-Fordism capital no longer knows exteriority because neoliberal capitalism is capable of incorporating all subjective capacities and potentials. Would you say that this calls into question the model advanced in *History and Obstinacy*? Just how far would you go along with the epochal thesis that capital no longer knows any exteriority?

Negt: The epochal thesis is partially correct. It's correct in the sense that capitalism's potentials are so far-reaching in ways that Marx himself never could have imagined. In the *Communist Manifesto* he used the comparison of a pyramid in order to describe the enormous dynamic of capitalist production.¹¹ That made a big difference for his argument. That capitalism co-opts, as it were, the total potential of human development including artificial intelligence, etc., that was

something I believe Marx could not have imagined by a long shot. He addressed the productive dynamic of capitalism, but not its integrative dynamic. This positive, integrative side of capitalism has self-destructive elements because it doesn't lead to the organisation of life where subjective potentials retain their aims and objectives. That means that dimensions and dynamics of self-optimisation—we can deliberately use this concept in contrast to self-regulation in order to denote the subjective conditions of contemporary capitalism—can be described with the help of a figure that Adorno calls in his essay 'Theory of Half-Education' a kind of 'self-preservation without a self'.¹²

Sociability

Hartle: How are you currently engaged in the analysis of society? What are you working on?

Negt: My lectures from 1972 to 1982 are recorded on 680 hours of tape. The Hans-Böckler Foundation awarded me support to edit them. I would like to condense these lectures that span from Plato to Freud into three volumes under the heading of a political philosophy of sociability [*Gemeinsinn*]. I believe this is acquiring ever-greater significance. In contemporary society, the balanced relationship between the individual and society has simply come undone. There is no dialectic any more but instead disequilibrium. Collective interest no longer arises from the sum of individual interests. Mandeville's maxim 'private vices, public benefits' is mistaken.

Hartle: You now touch upon community and sociability. This reflects your collaborative work with Kluge. The form of collaboration presents cooperation as an essential feature of living labour. You argue in this context that the labour of relationships [*Beziehungsarbeit*] and productive labour cannot be divorced from one another. Kluge's exhibition in the Württembergischen Kunstverein

was titled ‘Gardens of Cooperation’. Forms of collaboration sprout and proliferate in those gardens. Are these forms of cooperation models for the development of community?

Negt: Kluge relies heavily on cooperation, whereas for me the purpose of cooperation also needs to be considered. Consider the recent volume of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* entitled *Stichwort: Kooperation* [Keyword: Cooperation]. Cooperation as it is conceived therein is too abbreviated and under-theorised for my taste. If the dialectic between local and spontaneous forms of cooperation and farther-reaching goals is not considered, then you get a cooperative context that only produces catastrophes. Cooperation as such is not the solution.

Hartle: You’ve named the determination of aims as a principle that allows cooperation to achieve validity and exemplarity. Let’s consider once again the cooperation between you and Kluge, driven by the aim and idea of advancing the project of Critical Theory, and relating it back to the contexts of experience. This collaboration was an opening up of subjectivity, a form of spontaneous—as Habermas said, surrealist—interaction that bore itself a trace of emancipation. In any case, cooperation has many requirements in order to be able to become a model of emancipation. Which aspects must cooperation include for this to happen?

Negt: For example, the idea of reciprocal help must once again acquire greater validity. In the tradition of the labour movement, forms of self-help are essential. Consider Kropotkin, for example. Unfortunately, all these forms were phased out because they were deemed unsustainable for the revolution. Simultaneously, the central organisational forms of the labour movement, cooperatives and associations, are essential and I am trying to show that in the second volume of my history of sociability. The history of phasing out ideas leads to a false definition of reality. Exclusions are justified with the claim that certain conduct is devoid of reality, which is incorrect. Fantasy still plays a big role, even sociological fantasy. I am quite heartened that my book

Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen (1968) [Sociological Fantasy and Exemplary Learning] is still acknowledged now and then. I'd like to think that I still hold on to the book's argument about unleashing the creativity of social relationships.

Hartle: In closing I would like to talk a bit about your work's reception. What would you say have been the particularly important waves of reception of your thinking, and not just in the German-speaking world, but also abroad? Who are the important disseminators who have triggered and even channelled the reception of your work?

Negt: Already in *Public Sphere and Experience* the development of a conceptual world emerges in which the bourgeois element no longer plays a dominant role. It occurred to me while studying Kant's lectures that he always delayed his big publications because he had so little time. He was preparing his lectures. The influence of the person who gave lectures in the form of grand arcs was much greater than the influence of his writings. With regard to my own influence here in Hanover, I can say that in my ten years lecturing I've trained a significant portion of the teachers working here. In other words, effectiveness transpires on different levels.

Hartle: Are there moments beyond this that have been important for the reception within or beyond German-language discussions of your theory of labour penned together with Kluge? The recently published translation of *Geschichte und Eigensinn—History and Obstinacy*—has brought about a new wave of reception.

Negt: I'm naturally happy when we're read and discussed. That goes for every author and naturally for Kluge too, who is now putting on a great many exhibitions. But you are correct: the translation will certainly inspire a new wave of reception and discussion for those readers lacking a strong command of German. Naturally, it will also produce new interpretations. *History and Obstinacy*

is currently being inserted into a context along with models of post-Marxism and Western Marxism of the eighties, of which the German reception possibly lost sight. In Germany, the orientation around subjective processes that accompany capital and its processes was hardly to be found in other theoretical models. Our theoretical proposal was unique.

Translated by Richard Langston

Notes

¹ This interview was conducted in Hanover on 27 February 2018 and was published originally as, ‘Kooperationszusammenhänge kritischer Theorie: Johan F. Hartle im Gespräch mit Oskar Negt’, in *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* 46–47 (2018), 145–65. Judith Milz prepared the transcription.

² IG Metall is the major metalworkers’ union in Germany, and Europe’s largest industrial union.

³ The text was published in 1959 in a pirate edition distributed by the SDS with the title *Über das Verhältnis von Ökonomie und Gesellschaftstheorie bei Marx* [On the Relation of Economic and Social Theory in Marx].

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s Jena *Philosophy of Mind*’, in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 142–69. This article was originally published in *Technik und Wissenschaft als ‘Ideologie’* (1969).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan and Dirk J. Struik, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3: *Marx and Engels*, 1843-1844 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 302.

⁶ Oskar Negt, ‘Der Soziologe Adorno’, in *Soziologie im Spätkapitalismus: Zur Gesellschaftstheorie Theodor W. Adornos*, ed. Gerhard Schweppenhäuser (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 3–26.

⁷ For a historical overview of Negt’s concept of meta-fractional consciousness’, see Oskar Negt, ‘Das Sozialistische Büro als Organisationsforum des ‘überfraktionellen Bewußtseins’, in *Achtundsechzig: Politische Intellektuelle und die Macht* (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 1995), 155–9.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 259–78.

⁹ The Glocksee School is a progressive educational school in Hanover that Negt (along with Thomas Ziehe and Albert Ilien, among others) helped to establish. The school stresses the intrinsic developmental wishes of individual children and attends to a child’s own temporal structures as well as the possibility to move freely in space. External disciplinary guidelines (in the sense of a lesson plan or fixation on the classroom) are minimised in the learning process.

¹⁰ Negt’s use of this concept dates back to the seventies; the first sustained use of the term in his publications can be found in Oskar Negt, *Lebendige Arbeit, enteignete Zeit: Politische und kulturelle Dimensionen des Kampfes um die Arbeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1984), 53–66.

¹¹ See: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6: *Marx and Engels, 1845-1848* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 487.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, 'Theorie der Halbbildung', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, *Soziologische Schriften I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 93–121. See, in particular, 115.