

# The Project of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in the History of Contemporary Critical Theory

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The English publication of *History and Obstinacy* brought on a new wave of interest for the theoretical project of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge.<sup>1</sup> The publication was responsible for, along with a general boon to Kluge's celebrity on the contemporary scene,<sup>2</sup> a reawakening of questions concerning the alternative lineages and resonances of critical theory that had increasingly been neglected. These lineages and resonances are both structural and content-related, as well as institutional.

It can be said that some of these aspects were already accentuated by Peter Bürger in a text that appeared in a 1987 *Kunstforum*, "Kunst und Philosophie im Zeichen der Postmoderne" (Art and Philosophy Under the Sign of the Postmodern). Here, Peter Bürger diagnoses a schism in theoretical practice beginning in 1968 which still influences the differentiation and valuation of the different lineages of critical theory. Starting with Herbert Marcuse's designation of the utopian impulses of 1978 as "surrealistic," Bürger identifies two contradictory formations within (in a very broad sense) critical theory. "Habermas and the French post-structuralists," says Bürger,

...draw from the student movements' unrealised hopes for a radical social revolution contradictory conclusions. Habermas constructs a critical social theory, which is supposed to offer the framework for political reform that comes to grips with 'the pathological side effects' of the process of modernisation. For this, radical positions of older critical theory have to be relinquished. The French philosophers basically retreat from social theory altogether, but at the same time attempt to bring into philosophical theory the projects of destabilisation undertaken in the avant-garde movements.<sup>3</sup>

Bürger goes on to argue that this is the way any theoretical perspective calling for revolution within everyday practice falls asunder: into a "reformist faction" on the one hand, and an "anarchic,

revolutionary one” on the other, “that, however, comprehends revolution as the purely theoretical aesthetic subversion of dominant concepts.”<sup>4</sup>

Habermas himself, according to Oskar Negt, once called *History and Obstinacy* a surrealist project.<sup>5</sup> With this, Habermas is implicating the entire theoretical-political structure of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s work, which, contextualizing it in the schema of Bürger’s schism, moves consequently in the wake of the older critical theory. It exemplifies what a unified position or theoretical formation that emerges from radical social and performative theory would look like. Utilizing spontaneous text-image-relations from a textual dynamic of montage and detail, systematic exegesis and fragment, as well as historical analysis and essayistic commentary, it sustains throughout its entirety an effective critique of the formation of modern subjectivity. Nonetheless (and even in light of Bürger’s contradistinction, the project can hardly be called post-structuralist), Negt and Kluge’s theoretical work is born of the 1968 impulse (which Negt speaks to in a conversation with me),<sup>6</sup> but with no recognizable retreat from social theory. In direct comparison with the first generation of critical theory, Negt and Kluge’s recourse to the different experiences of political organization and institutionalization, in the context of the workers’ and protest movements of the 1960s, can be understood as a kind of political concretization of its original project. Central to this in every respect is the category of living labour, which they deploy as a key figure in their analysis of social configurations of subjectivity and the respective materialist analysis of the political.

But, if and when “labour” is posed as an essential category for the political sphere and not opposed to it, as it has been since Habermas’s famous essay “Labour and Interaction,”<sup>7</sup> then the project of Negt and Kluge is fundamentally in opposition to the idea of a bourgeois public sphere belonging to rational *citoyens*, as it is criticized by Marx and then rehabilitated by Habermas.<sup>8</sup>

Seeing as faith in the bourgeois public sphere has its limits, it is of little surprise that the self-organization of critical theory's conditions of production and reception becomes itself a subject. With a view to the fundamental materialist analysis of Alex Demirović, who placed emphasis on the Frankfurt School's efforts to institutionalize and socially anchor nonconformist thought,<sup>9</sup> one witnesses a further continuity between first- and second-generation critical theory: their intellectual practice does not restrict itself to the politics of academic appointments and publicity work in the press and academic journals. It strives to impact the design of human experience through the institutionalization of their very possibility. This is accomplished through the creation of institutional spaces in which raw material for nonconformist life-practices can be made available. Oskar Negt's engagement in institutions of the classical workers' movement is important to mention here, just as important as his focus on teacher education and the founding of a reformist school. Alexander Kluge's film and television work offers even more famous examples—from his co-authorship of the *Oberhausen Manifesto* to the founding of the dctp (Development Company for Television Program).

Theoretically, these efforts are anticipated in *Public Sphere and Experience*. In her contribution to the genealogy of a critical theory of television, Lioudmila Voropai reconstructs the historical logic of this position with great attention to detail. Her contribution also provides us with the opportunity to sketch the contours of the perspectives of a critical media theory that would remain true to the original impulses of early critical theory.<sup>10</sup> Examining the contemporary reception of Kluge in this light, with a focus on his influence upon the televisual format, makes a theoretical contextualization possible that places Kluge clearly within the Frankfurter theoretical project and its further development in cooperation with Oskar Negt.<sup>11</sup>

In Horkheimer's foundational texts, critical theory was a cipher of Marxist historical materialism (in the anniversary year of Marx, this is not easily forgotten). Stewart Martin's essay emphasizes that *History and Obstinacy* especially, in making the discussion of the thoroughly ambiguous Marxist concept of the workforce explicit, is also a contribution to the interpolation of Marx, and because of this also a contribution to the theoretical history of Marxist leftists in the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>12</sup> They were always able to find in the critical analysis of capital (and of *Das Kapital*) hints towards the possibilities of alternative social relations.

All of these aspects of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's formation of critical theory cast a new light on the typical historical understanding of critical theory, which Habermas promoted as a legitimate inheritance of the first generation. So goes the famous sentiment from Benjamin: "Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it."<sup>13</sup> This also applies to the understanding of the history of critical theory itself. There are neglected, neutralized perspectives that, in this work of understanding, can always be revitalized again—in order to deploy them as contemporary approaches. The contributions to the theoretical project of Negt and Kluge in this journal can be seen as stimuli to such important historical work.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, trans. Richard Langston (New York: MIT Press, 2014); see especially the introduction to the translation by Devin Fore. See also Stewart Martin, "Political economy of life. Negt and Kluge's *History and Obstinacy*," *Radical Philosophy* 190 (2015): 25-36.

<sup>2</sup> The tidal wave of Kluge exhibits in 2017 comes to mind: the exhibit in Folkwang Museum, Essen, in Württembergischen Kunstverein and in the Fondazione Prada, and not least of all the "Projekt Pluriversum" of the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Bürger, "Kunst und Philosophie im Zeichen der Postmoderne," in *Das Altern der Moderne. Schriften zur bildenden Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 174; my translation.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Bürger, “Kunst und Philosophie im Zeichen der Postmoderne,” 174.

<sup>5</sup> See the conversation with Oskar Negt, published in this issue, *Contours* 11. Previously published as “Interview: Critical Theory’s contexts of cooperation, Oskar Negt and Johan F. Hartle,” *Radical Philosophy* 2.04 (Spring 2019), see: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/interview/interview-critical-theorys-contexts-of-cooperation>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Labour and Interaction. Remarks on Hegel’s Jena Philosophy of Mind,” in *Theory and Practice*, trans John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 142-169.

<sup>8</sup> See Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46-70; See also Jürgen Habermas, “Labour and Interaction.”

<sup>9</sup> See Alex Demirović, *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle: Die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie zur Frankfurter Schule* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> See Lioudmila Voropai, “Against the Public ‘Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie’: The Project of an Emancipatory Critique of Television in *Public Sphere and Experience*,” *Contours* 11.

<sup>11</sup> See Christoph Streckhardt, *Kaleidoskop Kluge: Alexander Kluges Fortsetzung der Kritischen Theorie mit narrativen Mitteln* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Stewart Martin, “Negt and Kluge’s Alternative Collective Worker and Synthetic Apperception,” *Contours* 11.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), 4:391.