

Philosophy, Capitalism, Individualism, and History

Thomas Klikauer

Under Review:

Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt. *History and Obstinacy*. New York: Zone Books, 2014. 541 pp., hbk., endnotes, index, \$39.95. ISBN: 9781935408468

History and Obstinacy is the 430 paged reduced English language version of the German (1283 pages) original published in 1993. But the book's earliest version (1981) was subtitled "the historical organisation of labor power, the production of the public sphere in Germany and its link to violence." With a thirty year history of writing and re-writing behind it, the book was published by philosopher and Habermas collaborator Oskar Negt and film-maker Alexander Kluge who worked with Fassbinder, Wenders and Herzog. Both Negt and Kluge are giants of Germany's intellectual elite. Unsurprisingly, Habermas introduced the work with the words: "This book is an astounding manifestation of an improbable constellation between a great writer/filmmaker and an important social philosopher. Readers will enjoy the illuminating insights and surprising discoveries from the revealing assemblage of ideas, arguments, and imaginations" (publisher's website). And indeed, the book is an assemblage of ideas, arguments, and imaginations resisting any classification other than to say that it might evoke for some the idea of a Brechtian surrealist technique or perspectives from Deleuze and Guattari's "Thousand Plateaus" and perhaps even some of Foucault, though Kluge and Negt would most certainly reject being classified as postmodernists.

History and Obstinacy remains an exceedingly unusual work, one that resists easy summary, though Devin Fore offers a reasonable attempt in his

introduction. But Fore's depiction of the "murdered industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer" (18) is utterly wrong. (It is important to be clear about this given the prominence of his demise at the hands of the Red Army Faction in discussions of German politics in the sixties.) Nazi and SS Obersturmführer Schleyer wasn't an industrialist. He had no industry or factory. Instead, this top ranking Nazi was in charge of selling slave labor to Germany's Nazi industry, wholesaling Jews for about five Reichsmarks each to German companies (spiegel.de; de.wikipedia.org, jewishvirtuallibrary.org). With such credentials and a spotless transition from Himmler's SS-industry circle of friends (Freundeskreis Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler) into post-war Germany, Schleyer quickly became the boss of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) before being executed by the RAF.

Perhaps the key to this book is its philosophical discussion of "the capitalism within us [and the] political economy of labor power" (78) and how this breaks with the role of labor in Marx's *Capital*. Their view contrasts as well as with recent labor process theory (www.ilpc.org.uk). To illuminate the political economy of labor power, Kluge and Negt use a combination of "Marx, Smith, Ricardo, Keynes . . . French philosophy (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Serres), the Frankfurt School, system theory (Parson, Luhmann, Baecker) and Richard Sennett" (92). The authors argue that "whoever cannot think of something intelligible when we invoke the expression 'political economy' needs only ask what an unpolitical economy or an un-economic politics would be" (122). They proceed "from the perspective of the political economy of labor—contrary to the vantage point of the logic of capital—the result of labor is the by-product, whereas the process within the laboring individual—a piece of real life—is the primary product" (124).

Key to their perspective is the claim that "according to the punch clock, the intervention of labor is a flow, whereas the pauses that a worker makes constitute interruptions. For the lived time of labor power, the exact opposite is the case: labor is the interruption" (134). One can draw a parallel to the corporate mass media: it is not the commercial break that interrupts the movie, but the exact opposite: the movie interrupts the commercial. But it is the interruption of the human embodied in labor set against the relentless flow of capitalism that is at the heart of the book. Kluge and Negt see obstinacy (*Eigensinn*) as "a fundamental current observable throughout human history. It develops out of a resistance to primitive expropriation. Its elements continually construct themselves anew and grow . . . out of resistance. It is possible only to observe how obstinacy necessarily develops in the social evolution of intelligent beings" (390). Being part of post-war German history and Germany's critical philosophical tradition, resistance is intimately associated with the single most significant event of the twentieth century, Auschwitz. Hence, the authors note, "as a representative of critical theory whose thinking was confronted by fascism, Adorno commanded:

'arrange [your] thought and actions so that Auschwitz will never repeat itself.' This demand is the motive behind our entire book" (199).

Written in the tradition of historical materialism, labor remains, as Claus Offe once said in a seminar I attended in Germany, "a key sociological category". The powers of labor not only manifests themselves in commodity production but also exists as social relations as they develop inside workplaces and the community of Brecht's proletarian milieu. For Kluge and Negt, the product of obstinacy and labor is history. This explains the thoroughly historical character of the book. But this has never been a linear, one-dimensional and smooth history because labor also "possesses obstinacy when the authors note, 'every act of fettering, plundering, and exploitation inflicted on a human characteristic entails, on the one hand, a loss—every adversity elicits, on the other hand, resistance, invention, a possible way out'" (98).

Given this, the authors "seek to expand the concept of what constitutes labor' just as they do with the concept of 'production'" (147). With this, Kluge and Negt "disrupt our habitual ways of seeing" (76) labor power, philosophy, history, and political sociology. But undeniably this also leads to what the authors call the "labor of annihilation" (418) and "labor as personal relationships" (364). In a rather brief section, Kluge and Negt apply Hegel's philosophy to World War I drawing out on the multitude of interfaces provided by the "master-slave relations" (262). They see social relations not so much in terms of Hegel's and Honneth's concept of recognition, but instead in terms of a conception in which recognition provides obstinacy and perhaps even revolution a ground, and a sociological-philosophical *raison d'être*. Kluge and Negt argue that it is labor—as opposed to recognition—that remains the fundamental category of all social relations.

In conclusion, the book makes for an extremely demanding read. It moves through texts, illustrations, and many excursions that combine theoretical insights with tales, histories, and reflections on the history of science. The book risks overloading the reader, even contributing to a sense of disorientation. But even when Kluge and Negt's way of approaching the history of labor and obstinacy is unsettling, the historic-philosophical and, above all, encyclopaedic endeavour undertaken in the book is thoroughly commendable. Kluge and Negt have accomplished a thought provoking and intelligently written volume on how the history of obstinacy shows when and where human beings have resisted the seemingly uninterrupted flow and overwhelming ideological power of capitalism.

