Political economy of life

Negt and Kluge’s *History and Obstinacy*

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The translation of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, now finally appearing in English in an edited, shortened version under the title *History and Obstinacy*, introduces an English-reading public to one of the most eccentric and ambitious books to have emerged from the legacy of the Frankfurt School. Originally published in 1981, *History and Obstinacy* is the centrepiece of a collaborative authorship stretching over three decades, which, since 2001, has been available in a two-volume collection entitled *Der unterschätzte Mensch* (*The Underestimated Human*). This includes their prior collaboration, the only part to have been translated into English until now, *Public Sphere and Experience* (1972, translated 1993), along with two collaborations subsequent to *History and Obstinacy*: a work dedicated to politics, *Mafverhältnisse des Politischen* (*Relations of Measure of the Political*, 1992) and a collection of transcribed conversations derived from Kluge’s practice of television interviews, *Suchbegriffe* (*Keywords*, 2001).

*Public Sphere and Experience* can be read as an introduction to *History and Obstinacy*. The attempt to bring to light experiences generated from the production and reproduction of labour, which are obscured and distorted by both a bourgeois culture, free from labour, and a post-bourgeois culture oriented to the capitalist exploitation of labour, is a project that both books share. However, *History and Obstinacy* digs much deeper into and surveys much wider over this hidden terrain, revealing a vast subterranean network of labour’s characteristics, properties and obstinacy. (The terminological associations of *Eigensinn* with *Eigenschaft* – property in the sense of attribute – and *Eigentum* – property in the sense of possession and ownership – should be kept in mind; so too the sense of self-relation, self-orientation and even autonomy that ‘obstinacy’ attempts to render into English.) This subterranean network constitutes the fragmented and distorted proletarian public sphere, towards which *Public Sphere and Experience* was oriented. However, in so far as this network does not yet fully appear in that book, Negt and Kluge go so far as to say that their first book turned out not to be about the proletarian public sphere, but rather remained a critique of the bourgeois public sphere. In this sense, *History and Obstinacy* does not merely complete *Public Sphere and Experience*, but provides the material and theoretical groundwork for a new field of research.

Form and content

The obvious material differences between the books display this, although they have been muted somewhat in the English edition. *Geschichte und Eigensinn* is a vast, labyrinthine text, comprising nearly 1,300 pages. Its three main parts burst at the seams with umpteen subsections in traversing sequences. Conventions for setting text are exploited to the full, with capitalized and emboldened emphases, text boxes, some reversed onto black pages. It is littered with illustrations: photographs, film stills, drawings, illuminated manuscripts, scientific diagrams, and so on. Some of these illustrate the text; others render the text illustrative, or project tangents. Some are isolated within pages of text; others gather together in semantic sequences of their own. The book remains predominantly composed of text, but the images expose a compositional use of montage that extends to the organization of the text itself. At only a third of the length of the original, the translation is a more modest and sober affair, but all of these formal elements are retained in some measure. What is qualitatively lost is something of the original’s unreadability. It is overwhelming, frustrating and fascinating; absorbing and distracting. Its unreadability is not only the challenge to read it right through, but also the relief at not having to do so. Negt and

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Kluge invite the German reader to read it not from beginning to end, but now and again.³ They did not extend this invitation to the English reader; they did not need to.

The peculiar composition of History and Obstinacy has invoked comparison to Kluge’s film-making practices and Benjamin’s Arcades Project besides a whole series of other experimental models.⁴ But the characterization of the book’s composition is superficial until it is derived from the content of this form; that is, until it is grasped as the composition of a history of labour’s obstinacy. And this requires grasping what is encased, it must be said, obstinately in Negt and Kluge’s dedication of the book to a ‘political economy of labour power’. This is the major theoretical enterprise of History and Obstinacy, and it discloses the theoretical groundwork that is all but submerged in Public Sphere and Experience. Understanding its points of departure from Marx’s critique of political economy is the essential and formidable task presented by History and Obstinacy. This task has been underestimated by its reception to date.⁵

History and Obstinacy is an excavation of the presuppositions of Marx’s critique of political economy, unearthing a history of labour’s powers that reaches back into its ontogenesis and phylogenesis, its pre-history. These powers are repressed by the capitalist mode of production and its use of labour. Their instrumentalization blocks the realization of their ends, which are then projected inwards, into an inner reality and its fantasies. This is the proletarian world that Negt and Kluge attempt to chart. Freud’s model of the conservation and sublimation of libidoal energy is their concealed compass. History and Obstinacy is an atlas of this world’s obstinate realities and unrealities, composed of projections and projections on ‘The Cantankerous Brain’ and ‘Ice Age’, ‘Cells’ and ‘Disobedience’, ‘Universal Tool’ and ‘Pieter Brugel the Elder, The Tower of Babel, ca. 1564’ (104–5 and 228–9). The history of capitalism meets its mythology. The critique of political economy reverts to mythlogy, and myth is already a critique of political economy.⁶ The originality and ambition with which this dialectic of enlightenment is pursued as an aesthetic critique of political economy makes History and Obstinacy a monument to the legacy of the Frankfurt School and Western Marxism more broadly.

Negt and Kluge dedicate their exploration of the emancipatory potential of labour power’s characteristics to the Frankfurt School’s abandonment of the proletariat as an emancipatory class or subject of history (220). However, they also reconstitute the proletariat’s emancipatory composition by these characteristics, recovering it from its contraction into Adorno and Horkheimer’s appeal to the residues of free bourgeois individuality. Likewise, Negt and Kluge’s history of labour retraces Adorno and Horkheimer’s extension of the critique of instrumental reason back into its prehistory, unveiling a history of destruction to match Benjamin’s, but, in so doing, they recover a richer and more resilient history of labour as an emancipatory power. It is in this profound sense that Negt and Kluge refuse to follow Habermas’s turn away from the search for emancipation through labour and towards a theory of communicative action. This opposition, already visible from the alternative that Public Sphere and Experience offered to Habermas’s The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, comes into full view in History and Obstinacy, even though the polemic against Habermas is nowhere to be seen.⁷

Negt and Kluge’s political economy of labour power faces a further determination of its position within the Frankfurt School’s legacy by the emergence of the so-called Neue Marx-Lektüre, the new reading of Marx initiated by Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt.⁸ Inspired by Adorno’s critique of capitalist society as dominated by the principle of exchange-value assuming a social objectivity, the Neue Marx-Lektüre radicalized Marx’s logic of the value-form into a benchmark for the critique of political economy, below which falls much of the Marxist tradition and a considerable proportion of Marx’s own writings. Negt and Kluge do not confront this reading in History and Obstinacy, unless it can be attributed to their occasional references to a ‘logic of capital’. But it is clear that they are heading in the opposite direction. (And even their investigations of primitive property do not share Adorno’s fascination with primitive exchange.) Whether Negt and Kluge provide a complementary or a competing account to that of the Neue Marx-Lektüre hinges on the precise character and consequences of their claim to have exposed a dimension of labour power presupposed by its value-form.

If Negt and Kluge seek emancipation within the scope of the value-form, it is in the obstinate reaction of labour power to value, and the unsubsumed life this discloses. Rather than radicalizing Adorno’s insights into the subsumption of life by capital – whose nihilistic and enthusiastic consequences have fuelled a trajectory shared by Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Negri and Virno – Negt and Kluge
have sought to radicalize Adorno’s equally insistent insights into the non-identity presupposed by capitalist identity.

But to grasp this project presupposes the capacity to read History and Obstinacy. In their Afterword to the German text, Negt and Kluge declare, in exhaustion, that the book is a fragment. They suggest: ‘One must read between the gaps.’ Indeed. But these gaps are not just between its bits and pieces. They are also closed within them. To read between these gaps, one must first disclose them.

The two economies
Negt and Kluge’s outline of the project of History and Obstinacy reads as follows:

this book is about the political economy of labor power: Of what do those human characteristics capable of bringing about material change consist? How do the ‘essential powers’ of humans come into being, so that we are able to work, control our own lives, and become autonomous?
The economy of this labor capacity is ... capital’s polar opposite. It constitutes countercapital. (73; this passage does not appear in the German original)

However unproblematic this outline may appear, a host of problems are exposed once we consider its relation to Marx’s critique of political economy. In so far as Marx understood classical political economy as a bourgeois science, an ideological understanding of the capitalist mode of production, his dedication to its ‘critique’ was not an idle claim. Should we therefore read Negt and Kluge’s formulation as an absent-minded failure to recall this? Or do they intend a contribution to classical political economy? Has Marx’s critique become merely a moment within this tradition? Or do Negt and Kluge propose an altogether new conception of political economy?

These questions are deepened once we reflect on the completed phrase ‘political economy of labour power’. Marx’s critique of political economy hinges on its failure to distinguish ‘labour power’ from ‘labour’. In this sense, we appear to be offered a continuation of Marx’s critique after all. However, the allusion to ‘essential powers’ recalls a moment from Marx’s early writings, prior to his isolation of labour power from labour. How are we to make sense of these issues within Negt and Kluge’s appeal to labour power?

Finally, how are we to understand the claim that labour power or labour capacity constitutes ‘counter-capital’? In so far as labour power is, for Marx, the commodity form of labour, which the labourer sells to capital, it stands opposed to capital. But it also stands within the circuit of the exchange of values characterizing capitalist societies. Must we understand countercapital in this ambivalent sense, which includes labour power not being opposed to capital?

Negt and Kluge’s outline presents us with questions rather than answers. But once we have raised them, we can at least begin to discern answers elsewhere. Thus, in chapter 3, dedicated to ‘Elements of a Political Economy of Labor Power’, we find a subsection on ‘The Two Economies’, where Negt and Kluge write:

We begin with a simple observation: We clearly possess an elaborate theory of the political economy of capital: Marx’s Capital. The polar opposite of this would be a political economy of labor power, for which no theoretical groundwork has ever been laid. Marx never recorded any such political economy of labor power, even though his thought system immanently presupposes it as the opposite of capital. (120)

We are offered a clarification. Negt and Kluge’s political economy of labour power is projected as the polar opposite of Marx’s, whose critique has been reduced to a ‘theory’. They refer elsewhere to the ‘logic of capital’ (Kapitallogik) (124). Furthermore, their political economy of labour power is presented as fundamentally original. Its debt to Marx is reduced to his presuppositions, the presence of an absence. Indeed, in so far as it provides the theoretical groundwork of Marx’s presuppositions, Negt and Kluge’s political economy of labour power is projected as a new foundation for Marx’s critique of political economy. As such, these political economies are not polar opposites in the competitive sense of seeking to replace one another, but rather as opposed poles of a world, whose description requires both. And yet this competitive sense does persist, especially with regard to the hierarchy of presupposition to supposition, foundation to what is built on this foundation. This clarifies Negt and Kluge’s intentions, but focuses our attention all the more intensively on their conception of labour power and how it differs from that of Marx, since labour power appears to form the hinge or surface where these two political economies both touch and depart from one another.

The second double-character of labour
An opportunity to grasp this is offered in the following subsection on ‘The Two Economies in Relation to Wage Labor and Capital’. Summing up this subsection, Negt and Kluge write:
We have just observed the following: when an exchange is finished for the owner of money, a twofold form of work begins for the owner of labor power. He works for capital, and he performs work on himself in order to engender within himself the aptitude for his labor. (124)

In order to understand this in ‘polar opposition’ to Marx, we need to recall his own conception of the twofold form of work of the labourer, who works both for himself and for the capitalist, both performing labour to realize the value of his labour and performing surplus-labour to produce surplus-value. However, Negt and Kluge refer to another twofold work. They are not concerned with labour realizing its value, but rather with a form of work that the labourer performs ‘on himself’, which concerns not so much his labour but his aptitude (Eignung) for it.

If we look for a fuller account we find the following:

There are two products where the capitalist or national economist only sees one. One product arises in the relation of exchange between capitalist production and wage labor; the other consists of the exchange of the inner relation of labor power with itself, which is to say, in the production relations of labor power as commodity with respect to itself as a living being [Lebewesen]. From the perspective of the political economy of labor power – contrary to the vantage point of the logic of capital [Kapitallogik] – the result of labor is the by-product, whereas the process within the labouring individual is the primary product, a piece of real life. The other side of labor power as commodity is thus not the character of its use-value. (123–4)

This passage makes clear, albeit rather quietly, that Negt and Kluge are proposing a double-character of labour that is fundamentally different from Marx’s crucial conception of the double-character of labour, as both exchange-value and use-value. The last sentence clearly states that they are not concerned with the use-value of labour in opposition to the commodity form of labour. In Negt and Kluge, labour power is hereby opposed to its exchange-value as well as its use-value. Hence, the distinction of exchange-value from use-value is effectively reduced to one side of a more fundamental opposition. The double-character of labour outlined by Marx is exposed to a third character of labour power, which stands in opposition to both the exchange-value and use-value of labour, producing a distinct and more fundamental double-character of labour. This is the opposition between ‘two economies’: between the ‘primary product’ of the internal process of labour power and its ‘by-product’ in all the other external processes to which this internal process is applied. That is to say: between the commodity form of labour, as both exchange- and use-value, and labour as living being, as real life.

So long as we retain the crucial sense in which life is conceived here as the product of a process of this inner labour, we can avoid the terminological confusion created by Negt and Kluge’s appropriation of Marx’s concept of labour power, by reformulating their project as a political economy of life. However, the terminological confusion is not just misleading; it also leads us to the crux of Negt and Kluge’s relation to Marx.

One of the difficulties in making sense of Negt and Kluge’s double character of labour, is that it appears to reproduce many features of Marx’s own conception. The double character of labour, according to Marx, derives from its form as a commodity, which, like all commodities, consists of both an exchange-value and a use-value. However, Marx maintains that the use-value of labour is unlike that of all other commodities, in so far as its use can produce more value that it is exchanged for. This makes it the source of surplus-value and thereby capital, in so far as capital is the product, or rather process, of the generation and accumulation of surplus-value. Marx’s distinction of the object of the exchange-value of labour, which he calls ‘labour power’, from the use-value of labour, which he calls simply ‘labour’, is crucial to exposing how this process involves an exploitation of the use-value of labour, which is concealed by the exchange of values, making it appear as though surplus-value is the product and property of capital rather than labour. Marx’s argument is that the wage labourer appears to sell his labour, its use-value, but he does not. Rather, he sells his labour power, an exchange-value. At the point of sale his labour does not exist. All that exists is his capacity and promise to labour. His labour only comes into existence when it is put to use in the work process, owned by the capitalist. As such, its use is owned by the capitalist, as are the products and surplus-value this use creates.

Marx hereby discloses a realm of labour’s use that is systematically obscured by the exchange of value. This extends the double-character of labour into a series of further double-characters within the production process, in which labour encounters a series of values owned by the capitalist. Labour’s use meets the values of means of production and raw materials, in an encounter of ‘living labour’ with ‘dead labour’, in which living labour both transfers the value of
dead labour to new products, and maintains the value of dead labour by its very use. ‘Concrete labour’, labour’s deployment to produce specific products or use values, meets ‘abstract labour’, labour’s deployment to transfer the value of socially necessary labour time to its specific products, in order to produce not just concrete useful products but also value.

Negt and Kluge effectively displace the focus on all these double-characters of labour. Their project is not to expose the obscured world of labour’s use, whether as living labour, concrete labour or abstract labour. Indeed, this would hardly correspond to something presupposed by Marx. Rather, this obscured world is reduced to the external by-product of a still more obscured world, the inner life of labour power.

Let us consider a passage neighbouring those we considered above:

The owner of money confronts the laborer in such a way that the laborer appears as the owner of the commodity labor power itself. Possession by the owner of labor power, however, is a fiction, since he acts as if he’s the vendor of this commodity, but by no means has it at his disposal at the time of sale. He may have in his head the requisite willingness, even when all his sense, his organs, and the perfidy of his education constitute such willingness, but he must first still do the work. For example, if his consciousness does not obey him, his movements evince self-will [Eigenwillen]. He then makes mistakes, and fantasies of escape ensue. As the owner of the commodity labor power, he constantly has to acquire the labor power anew that he is expected to deliver.

In this labor process transpiring within labor power itself, both the natural characteristics and the labor that is already mastered by the disposition to work [Arbeitsdisposition] and derived from the economy of these very same natural characteristics either do battle or enter into an exchange. (123)

This passage makes clear that Negt and Kluge’s point of departure from Marx concerns precisely his distinction of labour power from labour in the transition from exchange-value to use-value. The insight that the labourer’s sale of his labour power involves a fiction is also Marx’s point. However, the difference is that, whereas Marx conceives of this fiction as presupposing the use of labour in its exchange-value, Negt and Kluge identify a deeper fiction in the presupposition of the ‘disposition to labour’ in both the exchange-value and the use-value of labour. This third character of the disposition to labour is what Negt and Kluge identify as the inner economy of labour power’s life, presupposed by Marx.

Marx clearly recognized the ability and willingness to labour as a condition of the production process. What he presupposed was that this constitutes a labour process of its own, which could be examined as such. This is enforced by Marx’s reduction of the labour process to the use of labour, when this disposition to labour is already achieved. In another respect, this presupposition is enforced by the reduction of the disposition to labour to an act of will, of agreement or refusal. But, as Negt and Kluge point out, the disposition to labour is irredicible to the will, in so far as the will does not itself constitute the power to labour. The labourer’s will to labour presupposes that he will be able to labour.

Perhaps the most promising candidate for Marx’s recognition of the disposition to labour might be derived from his conception of the reproduction of labour power, namely the process through which the labourer consumes what can be exchanged for his wage, including the reproduction of his capacity to return to work. However, Marx notoriously neglected the analysis of this reproduction process in any detail, judging that it was dominated by natural drives to self-preservation and procreation, which spontaneously achieved the reproduction of labour power for capital, without capital’s intervention. Its reduction of the wage to a minimum is enough to reduce the labourer’s reproduction to the reproduction of his capacity to labour. In some respects, Negt and Kluge’s focus is precisely this reproduction of labour power. And this is demonstrated by their attention to various processes taking place outside the production process, especially childhood. However, in other respects, Negt and Kluge focus on a disposition that takes place not just prior to, or outside of, production, but that underlies production too.

It is also conspicuous that, in contrast to Marx’s projection of spontaneously compliant forces of nature, Negt and Kluge see obstinate forces. For Negt and Kluge, the disposition to labour must negotiate an internal world of characteristics, both natural and historical, and must orient these characteristics towards labour. This orientation is not a spontaneous natural process, nor an act of will, but rather a labour process. Its product is not the product of labour’s use, but rather labour’s use itself. This means that the disposition to labour must orientate the whole inner life of the labourer in such a way that this life can enable use and, conversely, in such a way that this use can enable life. If this disposition to labour is unsuccessful the result will be the more or less conscious refusal to be useful.
The two histories

Characteristics are not matters. They are not a substance to be organized, used or left unused. Rather, they are capacities or properties. As such they have a more or less powerful tendency to be oriented to what is proper to them; that is, to be self-regulating, autonomous and conservative. In other words, they have a tendency to be obstinate. The orientation of these characteristics towards being useful is therefore not one of injecting living spirit to dead matter, or acting to overcome inactivity. Rather, it demands reorienting the orientation already acting within characteristics.

Negt and Kluge differentiate natural characteristics from historical characteristics. Natural characteristics include the capacities of the cell, the brain, the skin. These characteristics have evolved from a natural history that demanded the capacity to grip, tenderly or violently, to return from separation, to balance, to self-regulation. The history of these characteristics is extended into the history of modes of production, gripping tools, from hammers to pens, balancing with load of bricks or books, returning from a day’s work, regulating one’s energies, and so on. These characteristics have more or less powerful tendencies to be self-regulating or obstinate. Natural characteristics tend to be powerful. Their reorientation is therefore especially difficult, if not impossible. The crude attempt to reorientate them is likely to result in failure – for instance, demanding that someone works without sleep or speeds up the term of their pregnancy. These natural characteristics are therefore left to their own self-regulation. However, in so far as natural characteristics remain essential to the use of labour they cannot be abandoned.

But Negt and Kluge’s differentiation of natural and historical characteristics is not only a matter of their evolutionary primitiveness. It is also infused by the very obstinacy they present to historical orientation. The more obstinate a characteristic, the more natural it is, or appears. Furthermore, this is not merely a matter of whether they are compliant or not in general, but whether the specific use to which they are put enables them to be compliant or not.

Furthermore, the significance of these natural characteristics is not only in furnishing a natural science of labour, but, more importantly, in furnishing a historical science of labour. Negt and Kluge argue that historical characteristics become sedimented within labour power as the result of previous dispositions to labour. These characteristics have their own properties, their own tendency to be self-regulating and obstinate. Like natural characteristics, if they are crudely instrumentalized they become obstinate. In so far as they are not integrated into the use of labour, they will tend to persist in their self-regulation, and realize themselves in an inner world of corporeality and fiction.

History and Obstinacy is a historiography of these characteristics. This is the new field of objects disclosed by Negt and Kluge’s political economy of labour power. And this is opposed to Marx’s history too. It is as if the two economies produce two histories. Their relation can be discerned in Negt and Kluge’s
observation on Marx’s conception of the process of production, distribution and consumption:

This transpires, in fact, in two directions: (i) the destruction of historical labor power, and (2) in the form of a larger abundance of collective labor capacities. As a social abundance, however, this is paid for by the individual impoverishment of productive forces. (126)

The history written by Marx is presented here as a history of the destruction of traditional forms of labour by a modernizing drive to combine and enhance the power of labour. It is therefore a history of impoverishment that takes place within and through a history of growing wealth. Capital emerges as the agent of this process, but also another of its victims, in so far as it produces a new agent in the combination of labour powers, the proletariat. Formed through the radical subjection of its powers, the proletariat becomes the subject of these powers, emancipating itself from capitalist accumulation. This history, which extends into the future, is therefore a history of compensation for the destruction of the past.

Negt and Kluge read this history against the grain, from the perspective of the failure of proletarian emancipation. Without this redeeming agent, history is reduced to a history of individual impoverishment and the destruction of past labour powers. However, this is misleading if it suggests only an inversion, a reversal of perspective, a looking back rather than forward. This perspective is disclosed by a conception of history and the proletariat that appears in Marx, but is not grasped in its essence by him. This is the history of labour power’s obstinacy. In so far as Marx presupposed this, it is presupposed in his history. This is why Negt and Kluge’s history looks so different. It investigates the natural and historical characteristics constituting the internal labour of disposition for use.

By contrast, the employment of this use itself is externalized, in an external economy and an external history. This external history is not irrelevant or inconsequential for the history of obstinacy. It constitutes the objectives to which the disposition to labour is directed. However, these are reduced to objectives, by-products of the primary process of life. The history of this external economy and its objects does indeed appear within Negt and Kluge’s history, but only as a collection of by-products, which are presented in order to disclose the primary product underlying them. This disclosure appears in the form of obstinacy, in so far as obstinacy is the form of appearance of what is not exhausted by the history of labour’s use. History and Obstinacy is a historiography of these appearances and what they disclose. Negt and Kluge do not merely reverse Marx’s redemptive history of destruction into a history of destruction without redemption; they write a history of labour’s power of resistance to this destruction and the redemptive agency of this resistance.

‘Marx never wrote on politics’

For the same reasons, Negt and Kluge do not merely reverse Marx’s conception of the proletariat, abandoning it as the redeemer of the history of destruction. Rather, they establish its redemptive agency by abandoning its reduction to the subject of this history of destruction, reconceiving it as the subject of the history of obstinacy towards this destruction. This brings us to an alternative conception of politics. This is asserted most dramatically as the consequence of Negt and Kluge’s contention that Marx did not provide a political economy of labour power: ‘We assume that this is the reason why he never wrote on politics. Politics necessarily presupposes a theory of the proletarian public sphere, and this in turn requires a theory of the developmental history of each and every labor capacity’ (121).

How are we to understand this ostensibly ridiculous claim that Marx ‘never wrote on politics’? More importantly, what is this absent politics? We can begin by reflecting on the validity of this claim in Marx’s own terms. Marx’s conception of ideology reduces politics to a superstructure built upon an economic base, which renders politics the more or less conscious response to its determination by this base. In this sense, it could be said that Marx only wrote on politics as an effect of economics. This underwrites his conception of the proletariat as the product of capitalism, which then turns against capitalism.

However, if this is true of Marx, it appears no less true of Negt and Kluge, in so far as they also conceive of politics as underwritten by an economy, albeit a different one. Indeed, their insistence on a discourse of political economy appears to enforce this fusion of politics and economics. This is underpinned by their reference to a proletarian public sphere as constituted by the history of labour capacities. They do not seek to preserve the autonomy of the public sphere from economics, returning to the bourgeois public sphere, but to expose the public sphere to the political economy of labour power. History and
Obstinacy radicalizes the project of Public Sphere and Experience by disclosing the history of labour capacities composing the proletarian public sphere. More significantly, it discloses the obstinacy of these capacities and how this populates the proletarian public sphere. This seems to drive Negt and Kluge’s conception of politics here.

A daring hypothesis emerges that partially flies in the face of the bulk of historical empiricism: all this points to the core of labor power’s self-will. The need for the confederation and association of producers (as a subjective labor capacity and labor power) does not objectify itself because of the obstinacy of these needs. (127)

This hypothesis is ambiguous, but its ambiguity condenses the tensions at stake here. In one sense, it resonates with Marx’s contentions that the radical need for an association of producers is enabled by capitalism’s destruction of the limited needs of traditional associations. In other words, the radical need for association is produced through the destruction of the obstinacy of traditional needs for association. However, this obstinacy has acquired an altogether different and more positive valence in the context of this passage. Furthermore, there is no attempt to appeal to capitalism’s agency in overcoming this obstinacy. Indeed, capitalism is rendered responsible for provoking it. Therefore we are faced with an altogether different contention, which requires that we read the final sentence above as follows: the need for association both derives from the obstinacy of labour power and is obstructed by this obstinacy. This appears to be a contradiction, but it discloses a task that is projected as the task of politics. This can be stated as follows. The absence of obstinacy does not inspire the need for association, but evacuates it. But the presence of obstinacy both inspires and obstructs the need for association. Association must therefore overcome obstinacy without destroying it. If it attempts to destroy it, obstinacy will turn against it. Association must orient the self-orientation of labour characteristics towards the self-orientation of their association. This is the task of politics. This is what Marx did not write on because he presupposed the overcoming of labour’s obstinacy.

Life itself
In so far as Negt and Kluge are successful in extracting a political economy of labour power from the political economy of capital, a fundamental question arises about their relation: is this inner economy of life a natural or transhistorical economy, or is it specific to the history of capitalism?

Marx’s recourse to concepts of life in his critique of political economy presents an acute ambivalence. His concept of living labour isolates a vital dimension of the production process, irreducible to the dead labour that surrounds it there. Living labour hereby opposes capital, which itself constitutes the totality of dead labour. But this opposition does not constitute living labour’s independence from dead labour. Rather, it constitutes a dialectical process in which capital produces itself through this opposition and the overcoming of this opposition. In this sense, capital is not merely dead labour, but a vampire-like process of vivifying dead labour by sucking the life out of living labour. Marx even refers to capital’s life process. This living death invokes a more radical opposite, a non-dialectical independence, in a living life, which is projected as the emancipation from capital, the final death of capital. It is here that the ambivalence of living labour is exposed. It is the agent of this living life, the potential form of its actualization, and yet, as living labour itself, it is not this actualization. Living labour is alienated life. Its opposition to dead labour is itself its alienation. The overcoming of its alienation would be the overcoming of its separation from dead labour, in a life process free from the life process of capital.

Marx appeals to a concept of life again in his conception of labour power, in so far as it presents ‘the bodily and mental capacities existing in the corporeality, the living personality of a human being, and which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind’.12 This displays an even more acute ambivalence. In so far as labour power stands outside the production process, as merely a capacity to labour, but not the actualization of labour, it is even more independent from capital than living labour. It is a life that is free from the actualization of capital. However, in so far as capital owns the means of production, this independence is alienated from the means of reproducing itself. Its freedom is therefore impoverishment. Moreover, the independence of this life is not the result of its autonomy, but rather the result of its separation from the means of its reproduction. This means that its independence is also non-capital, like living labour, but, just as with living labour, this non-capital turns out to be a moment within a dialectical process that is the reproduction of capital. Labour power is outside the production process, but, in so far as it is essential to this process and this process is essential to
its survival, this outside turns out to be a moment within the wider process of capital reproducing its conditions of production. This indirect subjection of labour power to capital means that the independence of its capacities is reduced to the capacity to be used by capital. Its potential is reduced to the potential to actualize capital. Indeed, in so far as capital produces concrete products only in order to accumulate value as an abstract equivalent of these products, measured by socially necessary labour time, labour power's potential to produce concrete products, through concrete labour, is subjected to its potential for abstract labour. Labour power encounters this indirectly in the concrete labour process, but directly in the wage, where the labourer encounters the subjection of his potential to the potential to earn money, abstract value, regardless of how this is concretely achieved. In this respect, the radicalized potential of labour power is one side of a freedom whose other side is its abstract actualization in the accumulation of value.

Negt and Kluge's isolation of the inner economy of life from the use-value of labour evades the investment in living labour as life itself, at least in so far as this is achieved by the reduction of use to a by-product of the primary product of life. Furthermore, their isolation of the inner economy of labour power from its exchange-value equally evades the investment in this as life itself, although the extent to which they effectively invest in an elaborated account of what Marx refers to as labour power's 'living personality' is less clear. In any event, the price of isolating labour power from its exchange-value is the suspension of the determination of labour by the value-form, thereby regressing from Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production to the critique of a pre-capitalist mode of production.

This is precisely what we are confronted with in Negt and Kluge's proposition that capitalist accumulation is underpinned by a persistent form of primitive property that is subjected to a persistent form of primitive accumulation. Whether this constitutes a simple regression or not hinges on the nature of this underpinning; that is, whether this primitive property and its accumulation take on, paradoxically, a specifically capitalist form. It is in these terms that Negt and Kluge's peculiar approach to the naturalization of labour power as a form of life and the form of its alienation can be exposed.

**Permanent primitive accumulation**

The first chapter of *History and Obstinacy* introduces us to “The origins of labor capacities in separation (the permanence of primitive accumulation).” Labour power is a result of alienation, not free from it. The text surrounding this claim gives us very little to furnish an understanding of this permanence. In the opening remarks to the chapter we find the claim that “There is evidence that this primitive accumulation not only stands at the beginning of modern human development, but also permanently renews itself in every moment” (81). We also find repeated insistences that Marx's account of primitive accumulation in England was only a special case, and that it took different and less radical forms elsewhere, especially in Germany. We are therefore invited to understand it differently from Marx, but without saying how. Let us therefore try to reconstruct how this permanence might constitute a point of departure.

Marx addresses primitive accumulation in order to distinguish it from capitalist accumulation. As such, it lies outside the capitalist mode of production. However, primitive accumulation remains essential to accounting for the conditions that capitalist accumulation presupposes. The presupposition at stake here, for Marx, is the process that produces the encounter between wage labourers and capitalists. That is, the process that separates part of the population from their property and enables another part to accumulate this property. According to Marx, capitalist accumulation is derived essentially and strictly from the exploitation of wage labour, whereby this labour is employed in means of production that are the property of the capitalist, enabling the capitalist to accumulate the result of this production as their own property. But this form of accumulation does not account for the emergence of wage labour in the first place – that is, the separation of this population from the means for their production. Unless this separation is treated as natural, which Marx insists against, an unnatural or historical process must have taken place, strictly before capitalist accumulation. This process is what Marx calls primitive accumulation.

It is a process that takes different forms in different regions, but Marx treats the process in England as its 'classical' form. It is the process through which a peasant population, who through their land and common land own or possess the right to means of production, are violently dispossessed by an aristocratic class in order to make way for sheep pasture and the production of wool, which could be sold lucratively. This process does not involve the accumulation of wealth through the exploitation of a class of wage labourers by a class of capitalists. However, it does produce a dispossessed class, which
is then transformed into a class of wage labourers through the subsequent encounter with a class of capitalists, which, having inherited the wealth of this dispossession, transform it into means of production, which employ the only property remaining to this dispossessed class, namely their labour power.

In so far as capitalist accumulation takes place through the free agreement of persons – the exchange of one person’s property, labour power, for another’s, money or wages – this is not the violent dispossession of primitive accumulation. However, in so far as this does not return the means of production to the labourer, but at best reproduces their labour power, then the dispossession achieved by primitive accumulation is sustained, and sustained indefinitely – that is, permanently – within capitalist accumulation. There is thus a certain sense in which Marx describes the permanence Negt and Kluge allude to. However, on further reflection, these points of contact turn out to be points of departure. Most conspicuously, it is evident that Negt and Kluge’s claim that primitive accumulation ‘permanently renews itself’ intends something beyond Marx’s recognition of how it is sustained by a subsequent and qualitatively distinct form of accumulation. However, Negt and Kluge’s characterization of its permanent renewal faces an obvious objection: how is it possible? If primitive accumulation is understood as the dispossession of land, or access to common land, then how can this be permanently renewed? It would require that this land be repeatedly repossessed in order for it to be repeatedly dispossessed.

**Primitive property**

In order to establish whether the idea permanent primitive accumulation dissolves into this contradiction or not, we can look to Negt and Kluge’s conception of primitive property, since this is what they suggest is renewed as permanently as it is accumulated.33

[Primitive property] embodies a human behavior (whether real or imagined) toward the natural conditions of production – the ground upon which humans toil and the community of which they are a member – as something belonging to them, something which constitutes, as it were, only an extension of his body.

In accordance with Adam Smith, Marx repeatedly designates this relation of original property as a ‘natural workshop’ of human characteristics. More precisely, this relation is the notion of something of one’s own (such as identity or subjectivity), one’s language, an association with a community, or one’s labor and life capacities. Ultimately, it is the subjective precondition for successful separation. With primitive accumulation, a second, ‘historical’ laboratory emerges, its ‘vessels and chemical apparatus’ producing the shape of labor’s future discipline: its capacity for precision maneuverability. This is separation energy assuming the form of human character. (86; see also 81–2)

In one sense this definition dissolves the idea of permanent primitive accumulation. Negt and Kluge clearly distinguish a ‘natural workshop’ of primitive property from a ‘historical laboratory’, produced through primitive accumulation, and which evidently constitutes a new form of property that is subject to a new form of accumulation. On the other hand, it is evident that their description of primitive property includes many of the properties that they attribute to labour power as it emerges from primitive accumulation. We are therefore faced with the proposition that part of primitive property, namely the life of labour power, survives primitive accumulation. But can this residue of primitive property amount to primitive property, given that the ‘extended body’ of primitive property contradicts this residual property? If this can be granted, then its survival enables it to be primitively accumulated. But, in so far as it survives this, in what sense is it at all subjected to primitive accumulation?

We might find an explanation in the following passage on ‘The Secret of Primitive Accumulation’, where Negt and Kluge write:

There exists a capitalist economy fuelled by automatism that both presupposes and contains within itself primitive accumulation. In addition, there constantly exists a crude grasp of what, on account of separation energies, is supposed to accumulate anew within the context of capital. This crude grasp, however, is devoid of any economic measure or principle, because it lacks any and every measure. ... In the context of capital, we find therefore two distinct economies: one that resembles a legislative machine and a second, cruder one that is unavoidably bound to the first. (85)

This passage is confusing since it appears to refer to Marx’s account of capitalist accumulation as the exploitation of labour’s use, which is in many respects without measure. However, we know that a value of labour independent of both its use and exchange is at stake here. And, in this sense, we can even say that the use of labour is subjected to measure and the precise grasp of its use through the production process. By contrast, the disposition
to labour that is presupposed by use is more radically excluded from measure. It is presupposed and grasped crudely in this sense by the employment of labour's use. In this sense, the disposition to labour is not directly subjected to the capitalist accumulation of labour power through accumulating the value of its use. Moreover, the fact that this disposition to labour must be permanently renewed outside the capitalist production process, enabling it to be permanently accumulated, can be granted. But for this to constitute primitive accumulation, the disposition to labour must be understood as primitive property. And this requires treating the inner life of labour power as a primitive property, rather than the residue left behind by primitive accumulation.

To put it another way, Negt and Kluge concede that labour power is not primitive property in the strict sense, by the very fact that it has emerged as a result of primitive accumulation. The fact that it is irreducible to the private property is not enough to secure labour's primitive property in its means of production as an extended body. The characterization of labour power as primitive property has something exaggerated about it, as it was meant to carry this sense of an extended body, while applying it to the separated body that is disposing itself to labour. In other words, primitive property does not seem to recognize the separation of this body, but instead attributes an extended body to its very separation. Rather, primitive property conceals the extent to which this extended body has become obstinate, projected inwards to an inalienable life and outwards to fantasies of a life before alienation. But once we recognize this, primitive property also becomes the sign of this obstinate life and its fantasies.

Need

Negt and Kluge relate primitive property explicitly to the irrepresible idea of a golden age: 'As a claim staked out by humans vis-à-vis their present moment, the notion of a golden age seems irrepresible. In this respect, it makes no difference whether what is at stake here is myth or bygone reality' (82). The perspective this offers becomes further explicit in conjunction with the following passage on primitive property:

One such primitive property is a need, i.e. an objective relation, not a natural drive to appropriate, but already a reaction to alienated relations. Out of not having such a property results the need. ... A primitive property ... is that which in second, social nature one would call a natural relation, in the sense that it fits humans and their prehistory.16

If primitive property is a need resulting from not having, from an alienated relation, then its presence is its absence. As a natural relation, primitive property stands opposed to alienated relations, but it does so from the standpoint of alienation, from within second, not first, nature. As Negt and Kluge suggest above, the issue is not whether the golden age of primitive property exists or not, but the irrepressible need for it. Primitive property is mythical in so far as it conceals that it is the projection of a need, presenting itself as enduring nature. But to dismiss primitive property as mythical because it is a projection conceals the reality of the need producing it, effectively presenting alienated nature as enduring nature.

To apply this to the problems we have been dealing with above, it suggests that primitive property is a need produced by primitive accumulation. Primitive property is therefore a projection of what does not exist. But to say that it is therefore only a projection is to deny the existence of the need for it. The contradictory appearance of primitive property and the permanence of primitive accumulation in Negt and Kluge's account results from their approach to primitive property as a need, a projection. In other words, primitive property appears contradictory because it is indeed contradictory: a contradiction between the reality and unreality of it as a need.

This suggests why and how fictions are so significant for Negt and Kluge's political economy of labour power: they offer the projection of needs that do not conceal that they are projections. This means that their unreality must not be dismissed. It is the rare evidence of the reality of needs. 'The Obstinate Child', the Grimms' tale of a child who raises its dead arm from the grave, projects a history of proletarian obstinacy (292–3). However, this is only one passage through the contradiction of need, from its unreality to its reality. The other passage is from its reality to its unreality. This suggests that the appearance of nature within History and Obstinacy should be considered as the projection of a need. In so far as history as such is experienced as alienating, the need to escape it sees in nature the fulfilment of its wish. The self-regulating natural systems that Negt and Kluge depict within labour power, such as the cell or brain, are therefore revealed to be projections of a need for self-regulation. The brain's natural self-regulation becomes a figure of the alienated need for social self-regulation.
Notes
2. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Geschichte und Eigensinn, Zweitausendeins, Frankfurt am Main, 1981, p. 88. These claims are not included in the translation.
3. See Foreword to ibid., p. 5; again, not translated.
5. The characterization of History and Obstinacy as an anthropology is no substitute for this task; this is Jameson’s initiative in ‘On Negt and Kluge’, which Devin Fore elaborates in his ‘Introduction’ to the translation. This task is also largely displaced by Christopher Pavsek’s consideration of the book’s relation to the ‘post-Marxist’ political theory of Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek in his ‘History and Obstinacy: Negt and Kluge’s Redemption of Labor’, New German Critique 68, 1996, pp. 137–63. This displacement or indifference characterizes even the most extensive assessments of Negt and Kluge’s work. See Christian Schulte and Rainer Stollmann, eds, Der Maulwurf kennt kein System: Beiträge zur gemeinsamen Philosophie von Oskar Negt und Alexander Kluge, Transcript, Bielefeld, 2005.
10. The translation of Lebewesen has been altered from ‘created’ to ‘living’ being to draw out correspondence to ‘real life’, wirkliches Leben. Admittedly, this loses the important sense of a product of a process that ‘created’ captures well. See Negt and Kluge, Geschichte und Eigensinn, p. 91.
11. ‘The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation. All the capitalist cares for is to reduce the worker’s individual consumption to the necessary minimum.’ Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1, trans. B. Fowkes, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 718.
12. Ibid., p. 270; translation altered. Fowkes’s translation of Leiblichkeit as ‘physical form’ does not grasp the quality of a living body at stake here. ‘Corporeality’ is better in this sense. I’ve translated köperlichen as ‘bodily’ to maintain the distinction.
13. Negt and Kluge tend to treat labour capacity (Arbeitsvermögen) as synonymous with labour power (Arbeitskraft), in so far as labour power is a capacity that is irreducible to what it actualizes as ‘labour’. In this they follow Marx, although with a different orientation to their actualization.
15. The issue here is not whether primitive accumulation and capitalist accumulation assume mixed or oscillating forms, as when capitalism resorts to war or violence, either periodically or systemically. However compelling such an account might be, this does not seem to be what Negt and Kluge have in mind.