

History and Obstinacy

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Introduction

The Anthropology of Capital

It is hard to comprehend that scarcely a decade separates the first and second collaborations between Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, so different are the two works in temperament, focus, and physiognomy. Despite its generally cool analytic demeanor, *Public Sphere and Experience* (1972) still bears distinctive traces of the late 1960s, an era that imagined itself on the brink of rupture with the existing capitalist order. Fueled by the antagonistic spirit of the protest movement, *Public Sphere and Experience* reads like a tactical program for engaging with contemporary social institutions and events still unfolding around it. The heart of the book, for example, is a spirited broadside against the media cartel of the day, whose stupefaction of the populace and gross ideological distortions could be corrected, the authors propose, only by reintegrating systematically obscured aspects of lived existence such as labor and family, production and intimacy, into the public sphere. Similarly, the book's basic distinction between two public spheres, one bourgeois and one proletarian, along with its many references to "capitalist interests," paints the kind of emphatic, high-contrast picture necessary for gathering political energies for historical action. Even the book's more historical elements, such as its critique of Communist Party strategy and the council systems of the 1920s, seek to revisit the earlier organizational failures of the Left in order to get "collective liberation" right this time.¹ To be sure, given its inexorably lucid analysis and the methodical exposition of its arguments, *Public Sphere and Experience* hardly resembles the occasional idiom that one finds in a manifesto, but the program that it presents still calls for political commitment, if not direct implementation. For those readers who still

to one another. In a second appearance of the collective worker, this time on the Eastern Front during the Second World War, a captured Russian tank driver sitting among German soldiers unintentionally allows his gaze to linger too long on a technical defect in one of the tanks in front of him—a screw that is loose and that would damage the tank if not repaired: following the Russian’s sight line, a German tank driver notices the problem, discerns his enemy’s concern, and has the screw fixed. “This understanding, which runs either below or above the structure of enmity and which is grounded in the experience of production: this would be a proletarian element.”¹²⁸

In both of these episodes, the appearance of the collective worker suspends the distinction between friend and adversary, making possible unexpected and even politically undesirable alliances across enemy lines. For Negt and Kluge, the proletarian element always seeks cooperation. It is, they write, the “subterranean association of all labor capacities.”¹²⁹ The result is an unconscious choreography of solidarity that supersedes the will and interests of the ego, which remains confined within domains of individual identity such as nation-state citizenship, family genealogy, class affiliation, and social standing.

Emotional Life

If the distinction between friend and enemy, per Carl Schmitt, is foundational for the concept of the political as such, then the previous examples show that the collective worker is not a political being.¹³⁰ It doesn’t know party slogans or recognize ideological divisions. For this reason, the search for proletarian traits today is more likely to discover bonds of solidarity and social cohesion in the realm of the human emotions than in that of politics, which ceased to be a practice of collective being (*Gemeinwesen*) back in the eighteenth century.¹³¹ According to Negt and Kluge, proletarian traits in fact share the same ontogenetic origin as feelings: both are grounded in the primary sensation of touch and contact as originally encountered by the young animal clinging to its mother. “This haptic sensorium, the proximity of the mother—this is the first thing that motivates the development of the hand and, with it, of labor. All further characteristics will then be developed out of this motivation.”¹³² The infant’s foundational experience of skin contact and of its qualitative aspects—pliancy, firmness, timing (“seizing”), and so on—will