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Negt and Kluge's Alternative Collective Worker and Synthetic Apperception¹

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Buried at the end of the first edition of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's sprawling *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (History and Obstinacy) is a text entitled "Synthetic Apperception and the Collective Worker."² As the second of three supplements to a "Commentary," it does not even appear on the contents pages, which list only the commentary as a whole, "The realistic [realitätsmächtig] but false collective worker created through capital."³ Despite this

¹ First published as Stewart Martin, "Alternativer Gesamtarbeiter und synthetische Apperzeption bei Negt und Kluge" trans. E. van Hulzen in *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* (volumes 46–47, 2018), 166–186. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author. With thanks to Tanya Tomasch for assistance with translations.

² Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, "Synthetische Apperzeption und Gesamtarbeiter" in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1981), 1237-46.

³ Negt and Kluge, Kommentare 16 "Der durch das Kapital geschaffene realitätsmächtige aber falsche Gesamtarbeiter" (Commentary 16: The Powerful but False Collective Worker Created through Capital) in *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, 1225-52. The other two supplements are "Die drei Grundcharaktere des Gesamtarbeiters" (The Three Basic Characteristics of the Collective Worker) and "Macht des Faktischen – Realitätsprinzip als

obscurity, it is a title that announces a conjunction or complex that is especially instructive for approaching some of the philosophical impulses of Negt and Kluge's common work, and especially Negt's work more broadly, as well as their relation to Frankfurt School Critical Theory and its legacy. It is therefore fitting that the whole commentary was subsequently republished in the more conspicuous form of the fourth chapter in Negt and Kluge's following book, *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen* (Proportions of the Political).⁴ Regrettably, this relocation removed the text from consideration for the heavily abridged English translation of *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, which offers the short entry "Collective Worker" but without mentioning synthetic apperception.⁵

Produktionsöffentlichkeiten" (Power of the Factual – Reality Principle as Public Spheres of Production).

⁴ See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Maßverhältnisse des Politischen: 15 Vorschläge zum Unterscheidungsvermögen* (Proportions of the Political: 15 Proposals for the Ability to Distinguish) (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992) 101-34; subsequently published in a two volume collection of Negt and Kluge's co-authored writings: *Der unterschätzte Mensch: Gemeinsame Philosophie in Zwei Bänden* (The Undervalued Human: Common Philosophy in Two Volumes) (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2001), 1:765-91. Further references to "Synthetic Apperception and the Collective Worker" and the Commentary to which it belongs will be to this latter edition, unless otherwise indicated. (The version of *Geschichte und Eigensinn* published as Volume 2 of *Der unterschätzte Mensch* no longer includes the Commentary).

⁵ Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, trans. R. Langston et al (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 409.

I

The principal conjunction announced by “Synthetic Apperception and the Collective Worker” is that of Kant and Marx; more specifically, Kant’s disclosure of a unity within the perception of apparent diversity, and Marx’s disclosure of a sociality within the work of apparently independent workers. What is at stake for Negt and Kluge is the disclosure of a relationship between these apparently unrelated figures and their discoveries; a related conception of combination, which is constitutive of what it combines. The sense of equivalence suggested by this conjunction appears to give way in the text itself to more of a transition from the former to the latter, especially in the context of the “Commentary” as a whole, which even suggests that synthetic apperception is realized by the collective worker. Nonetheless, synthetic apperception is not simply dissolved and remains at stake throughout in some of its more specifically Kantian registers.

It is also notable that Negt and Kluge present Marx’s concept of the collective worker as the realization of an anticipatory tradition that extends far beyond Kant to German idealism as a whole and, less predictably, a lineage of social utopianism:

The conjecture that in the Marxian concept of the collective worker as a concrete totality, which does not add up but synthetically combines instances of social labour, is expressed a material representation that is just as prominent in utopian images of society (Bacon, Campanella, Robert Owen, Saint-Simon) as it is epistemologically in German Idealism, has been observed many times in the critical Marx literature.⁶

Although they go on to indicate something of Kant’s relation to German idealism through a brief discussion of Fichte, his relation to these utopian images of society remains implicit. The “critical Marx literature” is also not explicated, but a comparison with the original

⁶ Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 777.

edition of the text reveals that this substitutes the citation of an example, Hans-Jürgen Krahl's *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Constitution and Class Struggle).⁷ Krahl is dedicated to similar considerations of Marx's relation to Kant and German idealism, including some striking reflections on the relation of synthetic apperception to the collective worker. For example, Krahl claims: "The I think, that must be able to accompany all my representations, the transcendental apperception, is the legal person, whose original synthetic constitution is achieved by the commodity-producing collective worker."⁸ This deduction might be considered a background for Negt and Kluge's reflections, but their orientation to social utopianism in the origins and horizons of this relation is distinctive.

As to who else might inform this critical Marx literature, Negt and Kluge go on to offer a relatively extended discussion of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, which may be regarded as foundational for this general approach to Marx in terms of German idealism. However, it clearly predates the intended literature, and their criticisms of Lukács' conception of the proletariat and the party suggest an altogether different approach.

⁷ Compare the original edition of *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, 1238. The reference is to Hans-Jürgen Krahl, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf: Zur historische Dialektik von bürgerlichen Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution. Schriften, Reden und Entwürfe aus den Jahren 1966-1970* (Constitution and Class Struggle: On the Historical Dialectic of Bourgeois Emancipation and Proletarian Revolution: Writings, Speeches and Drafts from the Years 1966-1970) (1971; Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 2008). Negt co-authored the introduction to this posthumous edition of Krahl's writings.

⁸ Krahl, "Produktion und Konstitution" (Production and Constitution), in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, 330.

Regardless of who else they might have had in mind, we can project a certain trajectory of critical theory for which this relation is pivotal. The work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel would appear foundational in this respect, especially when one considers that his magnum opus, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, was only published in 1970.⁹ Sohn-Rethel's focus on the correspondence of transcendental subjectivity to money or exchange abstraction is distinct from what we find in Negt and Kluge's text, but they share a deep preoccupation with a Marxian theory of social synthesis prefigured in Kant.¹⁰

Theodor W. Adorno is another important candidate. Indeed, Sohn-Rethel's thesis, which he began to articulate in the 1920s, had a profound impact on Adorno dating back to the 1930s. This was then renewed in the 1960s as can be clearly detected in *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1966.¹¹ A utopian notion of the collective worker is absent and alien

⁹ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthesis* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970); translated by Martin Sohn-Rethel as *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: MacMillan, 1978).

¹⁰ This is confirmed by Negt's most extended discussion of Sohn-Rethel, which is admiring of his Kantian-Marxist theory of social synthesis in general, but silent on his criticisms of Kant as a bourgeois ideologue of the consciousness of money or exchange abstraction. See "Alfred Sohn-Rethel" in Oskar Negt, *Unbotmäßige Zeitgenossen: Annäherungen und Erinnerungen* (Insubordinate Contemporaries: Approaches and Memories), in Oskar Negt, *Schriften*, Band 9 (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 46-68. Negt also recalls here that it was Krahl who first introduced him to the work of Sohn-Rethel.

¹¹ Adorno's initial response to Sohn-Rethel is recorded in *Theodor W. Adorno und Alfred Sohn-Rethel: Briefwechsel 1936-1969* (Correspondence, 1936-1969) ed. Christoph Götde (München: text + kritik, 1991), in particular Adorno's letter from 17 November 1936. Adorno's subsequent response can be observed, for example, in the sections "Reversal of the Subjective Reduction" (where Sohn-Rethel is cited) and "Interpreting the

to Adorno's writings, but he nonetheless provided, especially through his lectures and seminars in the 1960s, what proved to be a seminal context for the critical re-engagement with Marx that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, not only in the work of Krahl, Negt and Kluge, but also that of Alfred Schmidt and the so-called "neue Marx Lektüre" (New Reading of Marx) associated with Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt.

We could also extend this trajectory beyond what Negt and Kluge likely intended to the work of Paolo Virno, who, admitting some influence by Sohn-Rethel, has developed a theory of post-Fordist labour grounded in a linguistic reformulation of Kant's account of synthetic apperception.¹² Here it is the very capacity to speak—that I speak, rather than that I think—which forms the general intellect as a common social activity. Despite the family of influences and the genuine sense in which Virno presents something approximating a communist conjunction of synthetic apperception and the collective worker, his affirmation of this purified capacity to speak is in many ways opposed to Negt and Kluge's preoccupation with the obstinacy of labour capacity.

The differences and tensions in this trajectory are deepened to a breaking point if we include within it the work of Jürgen Habermas. His theory of communicative action can also be understood as presenting a linguistic version of synthetic apperception, according to which speech acts presuppose consensus, not merely capacity to speak, as a necessary synthetic unity. The collective subject that emerges from this theory may offer an alternative

Transcendental" in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 176-80.

¹² See, in particular, Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*, trans. G. Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015).

collective worker, but only insofar as it is *not* a worker. Habermas deploys this linguistic turn in order to evade the problems of a labour theory of society, problems that Negt and Kluge seek to resolve within a political economy of labour power.

This survey is obviously rough and incomplete, but it is sufficient to indicate a rather more contentious trajectory than Negt and Kluge suggest, as well as some landmarks by which we can approach their place within it.

II

The presentation of Kant's conception of synthetic apperception as a prefiguration of the collective worker, both in and beyond Marx, raises the explicitly interpretative and implicitly historical issue of how a form of consciousness can be understood as a form of labour. Their solution or negotiation of this issue cannot be regarded as self-evident or unremarkable, even within the critical Marx literature. Sohn-Rethel, for example, sought to understand synthetic apperception as a form of consciousness of money or exchange value, which is thereby decisively separated from production.¹³

Negt and Kluge's solution takes place effectively in two moves: the first through an exposition of Kant, the second—which is scarcely developed here except for a few hints at

¹³ See, for instance, chapter 6, "The Analysis of the Exchange Abstraction" in Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 35-57. For an analysis of how Sohn-Rethel derives synthetic apperception from exchange abstraction, albeit with a view to how it could be elaborated into a critique of Kant's aesthetics, which Sohn-Rethel does not attempt nor envision, see Stewart Martin, "Sohn-Rethel's Critique of Epistemology and Art" in *Das Wissen der Arbeit und das Wissen der Künste* (The Knowledge of Labour and the Knowledge of Art) eds. Fugellie and Gerber (Paderborn: Fink, 2017), 29-47.

what is elaborated elsewhere—through a more historically informed reflection on changes in the form of labour.

First is the simple claim that synthetic apperception is a form of labour by virtue of being a form of activity, which is, moreover, a productive activity insofar as it produces the coherence or unity of appearances.¹⁴ This claim appears indisputable. There is no question that Kant conceives of synthetic apperception as an activity that produces a formal coherence in an otherwise chaotic world. It is also evident that this opens an activist turn within philosophy that is radicalized by Fichte and Hegel, and arguably by Marx too. But the characterization of this activity of the understanding as labour threatens to collapse a distinction of great significance for Marx. It is certainly difficult to conceive of synthetic apperception according to Marx's definition of labour as the production of a use-value.

Sohn-Rethel, by contrast, does not argue that synthetic apperception is labour simply by virtue of its activity or productivity. He argues that it constitutes a form of intellectual labour, but again, not simply by virtue of its activity. Rather he approaches it as the conscious or ideological form of money or exchange value, which is itself constituted by the activity of

¹⁴ "Because for Kant, whose philosophy is a critique of all formal logic, although the original synthesis for this is framed by the logical model of the relation of subject and predicate, it is not surprising that for him labour as the activity of understanding presents the most clearly shown form of all labour. That labour is at stake here is shown in the many descriptions of this form of original activity. It is not merely an I-identity as the functional point of reference for thinking, judging, knowing; also not in the Freudian sense of the ego that manages the regulated adaption to reality. It is a producing I, that is admittedly merely a formal activity, which transforms the unstructured chaotic material of the objective world into a cosmos of associations." Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 779.

exchanging commodities and the social synthesis that this confers upon the world, as opposed to the activity of producing what is exchanged.¹⁵ It is, therefore, on the social basis of exchange expressed in money that he approaches the intellectual labour of the understanding or science in Kant.

The distinction in these approaches is complicated. Negt and Kluge proceed to make a correlation between synthetic apperception and value, which appears to join up with Sohn-Rethel's arguments.¹⁶ However, the analysis of the activity of exchanging commodities, which is foundational for Sohn-Rethel, is absent from Negt and Kluge's account, resulting in the derivation of value from the form of labour rather than the form of exchange. This might appear an unremarkable Marxian conclusion, but Sohn-Rethel notoriously sought the reverse: to derive the form of labour from value as a form of exchange.

These differences are not merely interpretative but also relate to issues around the development of capitalism. Negt and Kluge's untying of synthetic apperception from the form

¹⁵ See the Introduction to Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 1-12.

¹⁶ "By emphasising that this activity of association is originally synthetic, Kant indicates that it presents *general labour*, a combination of social labour power, not made by individuals, that is realised in general expenditure. But if we strip away the transcendental-logical context from Kantian philosophy, or better yet, if we extend this context to the social labour that underlies it, then we are left with nothing other than what Marx describes as value: value is a general social relation that comes about through a constitutive nexus of coherence [Verknüpfungszusammenhang] between all objects of possible experience." Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 779-80.

Note the Kantian formulation of value as unity of objects of possible experience. Surely Marx's problem is not unity of experience, but unity of society; and yet, here, the synthetic unity of society and experience coincide.

of exchange renders it available for approaching the social form of labour more generally, even with regard to anti- and post-capitalist social forms. This concerns the second aspect of Negt and Kluge's argument, albeit only hinted at in the text. The point is already implicit in their rather inoculated characterization of Kant's approach to the activity of understanding as the form of labour in general, and it touches the surface in their somewhat mesmerizing characterization of "general intellect":

If one conceives of science as general work, as *general intellect*, then Kant articulates this specific form of activity precisely when he says: "The **I think** must **be able** to accompany all my representations... . Thus all manifold of intuition has a necessary relation to the **I think** in the same subject in which this manifold is to be encountered."¹⁷

This is a perplexing claim in many ways, but the principal point at stake here is simply the attribution of synthetic apperception to a form of labour associated with a late and even crisis-prone stage of capitalist industrialization. This transforms the nature of science from a contemplative and leisurely pursuit into a technology of economic production impacting all kinds of labour. Consequently, this transforms the significance of Kant's conception of synthetic apperception. Negt and Kluge's exposition of it as labour in general no longer appears like a collapse in its distinction from manual labour, but, rather, the disclosure or anticipation of what would become an economic reality.

This transformation in the social constitution of labour is pivotal for many neo-Marxist theories, but the comparison with Virno's is remarkable given the common proposition that general intellect constitutes a form of synthetic apperception. However, this

¹⁷ Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 781. The quotation is from Immanuel Kant, 'On the original-synthetic unity of apperception', in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), (B132-2) 246.

comparison reveals a contrast. Virno conceives general intellect as the exposure of a general capacity to speak, regardless of what is specifically spoken, as a common sociality of post-Fordist capitalism. This effectively constitutes a new form of collective worker, but it is not the alternative sought by Negt and Kluge. The emptying of labour capacity of its specific potentialities presents, for them, no more than capital's image of the collective worker. An alternative would be, rather, a synthesis of labour capacity's specific characteristics.

III

Negt and Kluge's attempts to demonstrate that synthetic apperception is a form of labour largely presupposes the principal topic of the text, namely, the relation to the collective worker, at least in its more specific determinations. This is literally the case, since their analysis of the collective worker precedes their reflections on synthetic apperception, taking place in the opening or main text of the "Commentary" and in the first supplement, "The Three Basic Characteristics of the Collective Worker."

Here they claim that, although Marx appears to coin the term, the idea of a collective worker embodying all the productive activities of a whole society, that is, all the activities that a society cannot abandon without undermining its existence, is much older and can be detected in almost all utopian visions of society. They refer, in particular, to the parable of Saint-Simon.¹⁸ These utopias are characterized by the emancipation of a productive class from a ruling class that is unproductive or merely consuming. Marx's assumption of this idea

¹⁸ The so-called "Parable of Saint-Simon", first published in 1819, is translated as "First Extract from *The Organizer*" in G. Ionescu ed., *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon* trans. V. Ionescu (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976) 138-42.

is marked, however, by a peculiar transformation and dissimulation, since the bourgeoisie or capitalists are the first ruling class to claim that they are the productive class. Marx's task is, then, to reveal that this is false and that the collective worker is yet to be emancipated.

Negt and Kluge draw attention to how the collective worker is obscured by two distinct forms of fetishism according to Marx's critique of political economy. The first is the fetishism of commodities, which induces the illusion that, as Marx writes, the "social relationship between producers and collective labour [appears to] exist externally to them as a social relationship between objects."¹⁹ That is to say, in the sphere of the market or the exchange of commodities, the social relations of the producers of these commodities is obscured, and the value of these commodities appears as if it was constituted in relation to the exchange value of other commodities. The social constitution of value, a relation of persons, hereby appears as a "social" relation of objects.

The second is the fetishism of capital, where the social relation of producers appears again as alien, but now constituted by the capitalist production process. This dissolves the fetishism of commodities, since the production process of value is exposed, but replaces it with a more mysterious form of fetishism, since the social relations of producers appear themselves as the social relations of capital. This appearance derives from the fact that, while producers indeed come together and produce what society needs together, this combination and its results are directed and appropriated by capitalists in the interests of capital,

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume 1, trans. B. Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976) 164. Translation amended. Quoted in Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 767.

rendering the whole social process alien and overwhelming to the individual producers and their individual powers.²⁰

The horizon of Marx's critique of political economy is, then, the emancipation of this collective worker from capital, but it is only a horizon. And Negt and Kluge suggest that the workers' movement has often failed to go beyond this, effectively remaining in the grip of the fetishism of capital, according to which the only real collective worker appears to be the one formed by capital, an alternative appearing as merely an idea, utopian. An alternative collective worker demands, they insist, an alternative to Marx's critique of political economy, which they call a "political economy of labour power."

Negt and Kluge distinguish the political economy of labour power by its attention to a "subject-object-relation":

It is therefore not only a matter of what can be objectively discovered in the forms of expression of labour power, but always also a matter of the potential that is left behind, is displaced, becomes repressed, or is directed towards objects that provoke perversions [*Verkehrungen*] in the subject.²¹

Elsewhere, they emphasize the decisive significance of the *realization* of labour capacity, not just as the resulting product or use-value, but as the expression of labour capacity itself, for which the product is a by-product.²² From this point of view, what is crucial about the

²⁰ See quotations from Marx in Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 767-8.

²¹ Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 772.

²² On the emphasis of realization, especially as process rather than product, see *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, for instance, "Der Satz vom eingeschlossenen Dritten" (The Law of the Trapped Middle) (42-4) and "Arbeitskraft als Resultat und als Prozeß" (Labour Power as Result and Process) (104-7). The political economy of labour power may be regarded as the general topic of *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, but it is addressed most directly in chapter 3, "Konstituierende Elemente einer politischen Ökonomie der Arbeitskraft" (Constitutive

production process is not that a use-value is produced, but rather that its production enables the realization of workers' labour capacities. The political economy of labour power focusses, then, on how this realization takes place. More critically, it focusses on what happens when, as indicated above, this realization does not take place or takes place only partially. In other words, it concerns the resistance or obstinacy, whether conscious or not, of labour capacity to its realization.

It is illuminating to speculate on what is projected negatively here, namely, a purely objective and purely subjective political economy. A purely objective political economy would appear to concern the objectification of labour or dead labour. As such, it could be derived from Marx's analysis of capital. But it might be developed as an analysis of non-capitalist production of use-values. This would suggest a collective worker emancipated from the fetishism of capital as well as the actual orientation of production towards the accumulation of surplus value, and instead constituted by the social relations of concrete labour power objectified in use-values. It is evident that this would not necessarily be concerned with the realization of labour power as such or its obstinacy, which would distinguish it categorically from Negt and Kluge's orientation. We could project a still more objective account which concerned only the existence of use-values, or an analysis of dead labour independently of living labour. This is, perhaps, something conjured up by the fetishized world of commodity exchange, but it would be distinct from Marx's account insofar

Elements of a Political Economy of Labour Power) (87-220). For an attempt to illuminate the distinction of this political economy of labour power from Marx's critique of political economy, see Stewart Martin, "Political economy of life: Negt and Kluge's *History and Obstinacy*," *Radical Philosophy* no. 190, March/April 2015, 25-36.

as it would exclude labour from the constitution of exchange value. This would be even more starkly opposed to Negt and Kluge's account.

Conversely, a purely subjective political economy could be understood as concerning living labour alone. Again, this could be derived from Marx's analysis of capital, which is largely focused on living labour as the sole source of surplus value and thereby capital. And again, this could be extrapolated into an analysis of non-capitalist societies, in which living labour is not oriented towards exchange value or the accumulation of surplus value—nor to its objectification in use-values, as in an objective political economy—but rather to the purely subjective exercise of living labour. Negt and Kluge's political economy of labour power might appear no more than a corrective to the objectivity of Marxist economics, adding to it something of this subjective dimension. But it is difficult to see how this would extend Marx's own account. The subjectivity of labour power cannot be identified with the subjectivity of living labour; insofar as the latter presupposes its successful employment in the production of commodities or even use-values, since this would presuppose that labour is realized in the production process, excluding the consideration of whether or to what extent it is unrealized.

We could identify a still more purely subjective political economy, which would concern labour power's existence as personality, that is, in its purely political-legal status as a person. This might be understood, as Krahl suggests, as a bourgeois discourse that is the object of Marx's critique. Or, it might be approached as a reconstitution of personality in the light of Marx's critique, perhaps also in the context of a post-capitalist society. Negt and Kluge do not propose a reinversion of Marx's critique, although they do propose a restoration of the value or dignity of personality within the sphere of labour, and the conjunction of Kant

and Marx is indicative of this.²³ Their political economy of labour power does not, then, propose to reassert personhood over and besides labour—as in Habermas’ displacement of the labourer with the linguistic-political subject—but seeks to invest dignity in labour power at the level of its capacities, whether realized or not, and not merely in labour as successfully employed.

The constitution of an alternative collective worker from the perspective of Negt and Kluge’s political economy of labour power concerns then the social relation of the realizations or expressions of the labour power of individuals, rather than the objective relations of commodities or capital, or even use-values, and rather than the subjective relations of successfully employed living labour or legal-political persons. Furthermore, and more critically, Negt and Kluge conceive of this collective worker as exposing a more comprehensive process through which an individual’s labour powers are realized and so enter into social relation with others. This draws attention to the conscious and unconscious organization of labour power within the individual in their very capacity or disposition to successfully enter into, and participate in, a social production process; which, in turn, draws attention to what happens when an individual protests against social production.

But, at this point, we need to ask: how comprehensive is this alternative collective worker? More precisely, could social production ever comprehensively realize the labour capacities of individuals? If not, then what kind of horizon are we offered? Is it a utopia that

²³ See discussion of Marx’s delimitation of the concept of value in Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 780-1. The conjunction of labour and dignity is discussed elsewhere in *Geschichte und Eigensinn*. See also Negt’s *Arbeit und menschliche Würde* (Labour and Human Dignity) Oskar Negt, *Schriften, Band 13* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016).

can be realized or not? Or realized only virtually or imaginatively? These issues invoke more profound objections. Is the emancipatory potential of the collective worker exhausted, even if it is yet to be realized? Is the renewal of its utopian dimension doomed to obscure and obstruct the emancipation called for today?

IV

If we now return to Negt and Kluge's reflections on synthetic apperception, then we are afforded a deeper sense of what is presupposed in its conjunction with the collective worker. We also have the opportunity to question this presupposition more radically. To this end, it is illuminating to return to some of the more rudimentary or ostensive features of Kant's account in order to draw more critical attention to what is at stake in its redeployment.

Kant's theory of synthetic apperception is intended, not as a theory of labour, but as a theory of transcendental consciousness or subjectivity. Its proof—that I think must be able to accompany all my representations, otherwise something would be represented to me that could not be thought—exposes an activity of thinking that all empirical individuals are capable of: their capacity for a transcendental activity that forms a subjectivity distinct from their empirical selves. This transcendental subjectivity forms a unity for all empirical appearances, as well as a shared or quasi-social relation between all empirical individuals, insofar as they are capable of this activity.

The prefiguration or homology, or perhaps even identity, this suggests with the collective worker is compelling, if also problematic. Whether or not synthetic apperception can be conceived as labour or labour in general, as Negt and Kluge propose, there remains an important sense in which Kant's explicit conception of it as a form of consciousness is

highly significant to the constitution of the collective worker. This is especially evident in its fetishism by commodities or capital, which both concern a kind of false consciousness. But it also concerns the projected constitution of non-capitalist societies, which would still confront individual workers with recognizing their relation to collective work. The very notion of the collective worker, as opposed to or as irreducible to collective work, suggests a conscious subject, a collective “I.”

More profoundly, synthetic apperception evidently concerns a form of social relation immanently constituting individuals, rather than their dissolution in a common substance, or their external classification as if they were self-sufficient—their mere “addition,” as Negt and Kluge stress. However, it is crucial to register that the form of synthesis presented by apperception is not simply the relational constitution of individuals, by which individuals are necessarily synthetically constituted by virtue of their individuation from one another. This would suggest a society constituted through individuation, in which the social individual is *social as an individual*, that is, insofar as an individual can only exist socially or in relation to other individuals. This form of synthesis or society is effectively repressed in Kant, appearing only under the guise of an absence of synthesis or society, a Hobbesian war of all against all.²⁴

²⁴ See Kant’s reference to Hobbes in his famous conception of the critique of pure reason as a “court of justice” in opposition to “war,” in “The discipline of reason with regard to its polemical use,” *Critique of Pure Reason*, (A751/B779) 649. (This passage is quoted in Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 777-8.) See also Kant’s description of dogmatic metaphysics as a “battlefield of ... endless controversies” that has “degenerated through internal wars into complete *anarchy*,” and sceptics as “nomads who abhor all permanent

By contrast, apperception presents a form of synthesis that is precisely a form. In other words, the synthesis is constituted by the abstraction from empirical individuals and appearances in order to expose a commonality, a form, through which they all relate to one another as the same, as a universality, despite their particularities or differences. This form is nothing other than the form of the activity of transcendental apperception, the activity of a transcendental subjectivity. Hence, the concept or model of society presented is essentially determined by such a form. The social individual is therefore social, not directly as an individual, but rather insofar as the individual has something in common with other individuals, a form or form of activity. This is the logical specificity of synthetic apperception as a model of the collective worker.

By implication, it is evident that synthetic apperception offers a model for conceiving different societies according to differences in their form or how a certain form determines relations within a society. For this reason it resonates particularly with Marx's account of capitalist societies; the determination of their social relations by the form of exchange value or abstract labour, as an activity abstracted from individual workers and use values. Equally, it resonates particularly with Marx's account of the formation of consciousness within capitalist societies, especially the fetishism of commodities and capital, which both approximate a kind of recognition or misrecognition of synthetic apperception. However, for the same reasons, one might expect the collective worker—perhaps even as it is formed within capitalist societies, and certainly as an alternative formed within post-capitalist

cultivation of the soil, [and] shattered civil unity from time to time." Preface to first edition, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (Aviii-ix) 99-100.

societies—to have a different social constitution, a different form of synthesis, perhaps one no longer determined by abstraction, or even by form.

If we step back from Negt and Kluge's conclusions and reconstruct the correspondence of synthetic apperception and the collective worker in its more literal or crude terms, then some of the key issues surrounding their account are more dramatically exposed. Consider, for example, the following correspondences: the capacity for apperception as labour capacity; the activity of apperception as labour or living labour; appearances as products of labour, that is, both as "objects"; the necessary synthesis of all appearances in apperception as the socially necessary unity of all products in labour; the transcendental subject as the collective worker; the empirical individual as the individual worker. And, the following correspondence to Kant's proof: the capacity to labour must be able to accompany all products of labour, revealing a social unity to all products. The subject of this unity is the collective worker, which the individual worker relates to through their labour power, rather than as a distinct individual. This suggests a further correspondence with regard to the issue of recognition or alienation and fetishism, although this requires approaching synthetic apperception as a task of recognition. For example: in order for the empirical individual to recognize their capacity as a transcendental subject, they must abstract their capacity for apperception from their individuality. If the individual is not capable of this recognition then the transcendental subject appears alien. In the mode of the collective worker: in order for the individual worker to recognize themselves as a collective worker, they must abstract their capacity to labour from their individuality. If the individual worker cannot do this, then the collective worker appears alien.

These correspondences reveal that the fetishism of commodities and capital present two forms of misrecognition in the individual worker's relation to the collective worker, which are homologous with a misrecognition of the empirical individual's relation to transcendental subjectivity. The fetishism of commodities involves the individual worker's encounter with his products outside the production process on the market in the form of exchange values. The inability of the worker to recognize exchange values as measures of their abstract labour—as socially necessary labour time of collective work, which forms a socially necessary synthesis of all commodities homologous to a transcendental subject—instead attributing value to a social relation between commodities that is somehow invested in their materiality, constitutes a failure similar to an empirical individual's inability to recognize their capacity for transcendental apperception. Except that, rather than fetishizing their particular properties as a person, they fetishize the particular properties of the appearances of commodities. Likewise, the fetishism of capital involves the individual worker's failure to recognize the social relations of production or collective work as a form of their own labour, instead attributing this to capital. The incorporation of their labour within a collective worker thus appears alienating of their very identity, which they are liable to protest against, as if they were an empirical individual protesting against their incorporation into an alien transcendental subject.²⁵

²⁵ "Seen from the side of production, one can say that this form of general labour presents an original synthetic unity, a sensible-supersensible universe of activities, that makes up the collective worker brought together by capital. It is a collective-I as capacity, as pure activity, whose unity, as seen from the standpoint of the actual subject, seems to have nothing inherently empirical about it." Negt and Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, 1: 784-5.

An alternative collective worker formed outside of capitalist societies would presumably be free of these specific forms of fetishism or misrecognition. However, it is evident that a form of alienation or failure of recognition would not be dissolved, insofar as individual workers would still be faced with the incorporation of only some of their labour capacities into socially necessary labour, rather than all of them or their labour identity as a whole. An association of free producers would not automatically result in producers being realized within the production process. The potential for protest and obstinacy would persist. This exposes the value of Negt and Kluge's proposition of an alternative political economy of labour power, which would concern, not merely concrete labour, but the extent to which concrete labour realizes the labour capacities of an individual.

V

Nonetheless, the proposition of an alternative collective worker raises more intractable issues. The notion that an individual could be realized in their labour suggests that their total or essential activity is labour. Negt and Kluge expand the notion of labour beyond many of its traditional specifications, suggesting that they do approach individuals as essentially labourers. But, even if the individual is essentially a labourer, their realization within social labour is only possible if they find employment there. If their labour capacities are obsolete or too new or too strange, then they cannot be realized. The limitation of production to socially necessary production or a limited system of needs accordingly limits the realization of the individual. The individual is always faced with abstracting from themselves in order to participate in labour, sharing the same fate as the empirical individual with regard to transcendental subjectivity.

If social production were to be unlimited, then this would offer the horizon that the individual could realize themselves eventually. The alternative collective worker would thus offer a utopian future to come. But unlimited production would appear to contradict the very idea of socially necessary production. An alternative collective worker would, then, demand overcoming socially necessary production. Otherwise, it would present a utopia that is incapable of realization, a fantasy, which would either compensate or oppress the unrealized individual. This would also infuse the gothic dimension of the alternative collective worker, especially in regard to obsolete labour powers, which would haunt the collective worker like undead spirits in a hopeless search to return to life.

These issues suggest a more profound criticism of the collective worker, even in its alternative form. Its utopian image is forged in opposition to an unproductive ruling class, a class of mere consumers. It represents an emancipation of the oppressed in the specific form of a class of producers, those who are necessary to the existence of society, as opposed to those who are socially inessential and expendable. The collective worker, therefore, represents emancipation in general and society in general. However, this is an image forged in oppression and its realization exposes its emancipatory limits. A “republic of labour” would emancipate only those who are essential to social production, and only insofar as they are. Everyone else would be rendered parasites, as if they were merely a residue of the old order, whereas, in fact, they would form a new oppressed class of the unproductive. Even the class of producers would encounter their own consumption as parasitical unless it could somehow be cast as simultaneously productive. If production developed to require fewer producers, so all the more would be thrown out of power. All other activities besides production, such as contemplation or interaction, would be reduced to forms of

consumption, unless they could somehow prove to be productive. It would appear that the emancipatory impulse of the collective worker could only be sustained if it absorbed everyone, but, within a republic of labour, this horizon would become oppressive. For all those incapable of being productive members of society it would become an impossible possibility. The realization of this horizon is blocked by the very utopia of the collective worker, whose idea of society is one of survival, of a revolution or crisis in which the society of the unproductive would die out.

These criticisms of the collective worker concern its social form. It is the form of production—not merely as a kind of activity, but also as a selection of activities that are productive—which determines the society of the collective worker. Insofar as any form of society would institute a condition or rule of society, these criticisms could be extended to the very conception of society as form-determined and, thence, to the very logic of society indicated by synthetic apperception. The individual does not become social as an individual, but as capable of an activity shared as a common form with others capable of it. In order to become a social being, the individual must distinguish this activity and abstract it from all its other activities or characteristics. The formation of the collective worker within capitalist societies already reveals the alienating character of this logic, and its oppressive nature can be traced in the projection of an alternative collective worker. If the collective worker is prefigured by synthetic apperception, then perhaps the emancipation of a society of individuals would require an emancipation from both the collective worker and synthetic apperception.

If one were to seek an alternative to this formal logic of society, one might return to what is buried under the images of war by Kant. A society of individuals would not

presuppose their abstraction or adaption or identification with a form, but, rather, the expression of their individuality as itself a social relation with other individuals, a dynamic and unlimited process of individuation or differentiation. Society would not demand a particular activity, such as labour or speech, since any and every activity of an individual would occasion social activity. This would harbour its own peculiar potential for alienation: the misrecognition of individuality as a state of isolation or separation, or even war, which may be suffered anxiously or obstinately affirmed, or even destructively fought out. But these responses are not only failures to recognize the social constitution of individuality as such, they are also self-destructive. Isolation, separation, and war all result in the dissolution of individuality because they dissolve its social relations with others. Overcoming this alienation would not require abstracting from individuality, but rather its affirmation and, thereby, the society it presupposes.