

The Production of Counter-Publics and the Counter-Publics of Production: An Interview with Oskar Negtⁱ

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The last decades have seen an international revival of interest in public realm theory and it has become the foremost means to understand the changing social conditions for democratic practices. The debate about “public sociology” in the US - initiated by Michael Burawoy’s address to the American Sociological Association - has underscored the stakes of understanding how publics work: It reminds us that an analysis of the public sphere is not only a task for specialists within the academy, it is a condition of all intellectual practice that aims to be reflexive about the conditions of its own possibility and its effectiveness in the world.

The work of Oskar Negt is a key resource for these debates. In “*Public Sphere and Experience*” (Negt/Kluge 1993[1972]) Negt and Alexander Kluge provided a historical analysis of the limits of the bourgeois public sphere and pioneered the concept of “counterpublics.” A focus on the production of experience is central to this work: It allowed Negt and Kluge to go beyond individualist and rationalist notions of subjectivity and also paved the way for transcending the dualism of “culture” and “the economy”.

This move formed the basis for what has become a reconstruction of critical theory as a whole. In the decades since “*Public Sphere and Experience*”, Negt has continued his collaboration with Kluge in “*Geschichte und Eigensinn*” and “*Massverhältnisse des Politischen*” (Negt/Kluge 1981,1993). An interest in education runs through his work – from the discussion of the student movement in “*Public Sphere and Experience*” to the later “*Kindheit und Schule in einer Welt der Umbrüche*” (Negt 1997). In various writings, Negt has addressed questions about work - the significance of the struggle over

labour-time, the relationship between dignity and work, and the role of the trade unions - while always pushing us to go beyond economic or otherwise narrow understandings of what work is (Negt 1984, 1989, 2001, 2004).

Negt's work has been underutilised among sociologists in the English-speaking academy. Most of his work following "*Public Sphere and Experience*" remains untranslated (but see Negt 1976, 1977, 1978). The politics of the cross-national translation of critical theory has meant that his work has almost exclusively been discussed by philosophers or theorists in literature or film departments in the English-speaking academy (Jameson 1988, Hansen 1993, Pavsek 1996).

This interview engages Negt critically on key concepts of his theory from a sociological perspective and invites him to discuss their contemporary applications.

MK Monika Krause
ON Oskar Negt

MK "Public sociology" has become somewhat of a catch-phrase in the US and many scholars are discussing at the moment how sociologists can play a larger role in the public. In the way the term is often used, a danger seems to be to take the public itself for granted and equate "public sociology" with simply reaching out to a larger number of readers. Your work suggests that the public for sociology or any other form of intellectual production needs to be produced; you cannot just deliver to it.

ON Exactly. The public sphere is for us a process of production rather than an object that pre-exists and that you can then cater to with your own output. It is articulated in the process of intellectual practice, for example by a book. In the past years, I have produced more than fifty dialogues for TV on very specific sets of questions with Alexander Kluge and a practice like that produces its own public. And this public can then be broadened but it is not the case that this is simply a form of popularisation. The problem of translation cannot be reduced to writing more simply. Adorno was once asked by an American publisher to rewrite his "*Philosophy of New Music*" for an American audience.

The publisher said nobody would understand the text the way it is. Adorno of course refused to do this. I often find to my surprise that it is not simply a question of language, when books do not transcend a certain set of readers, that it is often also a question of content. My publisher has initially told that my long book on “*Labour and Human Dignity*”ⁱⁱⁱ would sell very slowly. It came as a total surprise to both of us that it sold very quickly; the first printing was sold out after four weeks and now it is nearing six to seven thousand copies. It means that not only the language matters. The relationship between labour and human dignity is so central today that many people labour through this long book. These problems of translation and education will be a central theme of the book I am working on right now, about political judgement. Political education and rhetoric are a central element of the work of translation.

It is key for such a form of public practice that one does not conceive too narrowly of the sites, where one speaks. I have again and again spoken at church congresses but also in front of trade unionists. At the moment the question of trade unions is central and so I have a lot of events with trade unionists.

MK In developing your notion of a counter public you draw on the experience of the labour movement in Germany. Can it be applied to other contexts and conflicts and if so with what precautions?

ON We understood the proletarian public sphere as a form of counter public, as something, which is in process, which denotes a process, not a state. In that sense, we are somewhat cautious with the construction of models of successful proletarian public spheres. We also talk in the book only of beginnings or departures. Proletarian public sphere does not only stand for the working class but for oppressed relationships, for things and interests, which are not expressed.

When something like a counter-public emerges, it often also involves stalled processes. The wildcat strike of Opel workers this year in Bochum, for example, was watched with a lot of distrust on behalf of the official trade unions because they don't know where that is going. They never know where that is going if it is not planned. This is for us a beginning for a proletarian public sphere, a public from below. The masses won't let themselves be regulated anymore; they don't let themselves be told that they are not angry. Rather, they engage in fusions, they form connections. In that sense, counter public for us is a process of igniting solidarity among people who might otherwise have very different ideas, about the question of foreigners, for example. And in that sense counter public is always its own process of learning, which sometimes may even have deadly consequences when, for example, something that could be seized is endangered by spontaneous unrest. I would like to emphasize the process character. The bourgeois public sphere in contrast is something like a pre-given foil. So the newspapers, the media are in this case the pre-given screen, which filter these experiences and often do not render them.

MK In "*Public Sphere and Experience*" you criticise forms of political action, which are based on a reproduction of the world in abstract ideas and rooted in a division of mental and manual labour. What does this critique of abstraction imply for the role of theory? Doesn't critical theory necessarily also rely on abstractions? On what basis do we distinguish helpful and damaging abstractions?

ON When we speak of abstractions, we use it in a Hegelian sense of *abziehen*, the separation from processes of production of life. It can happen that certain real abstractions - thus not only mental abstractions but real abstractions - have a great influence on the impeding or blocking of such processes of the production of life, more rarely for the facilitation of such processes. For example, today, when the real flow of commodities is worth one dollar, then the flow in the world of finance is worth about 150

dollars. A stock market crash in New York can destroy whole economies, as it happened in Argentina, when a change in the exchange rate suddenly ruined the whole Argentine economy. It is a very powerful real abstraction, which has nothing to do with the strength of the Argentinean economy. Thus a level of abstraction emerges, which has immense influence on what is happening at the societal basis. If we speak of intervention, we always mean to refer to the concreteness of conditions and that means establishing context, to reverse fragmentation, it thus means the opposite of abstractions.

In a certain way, abstraction is also always associated with a more universal validity of concepts, categories, and historical achievements. For example, formulated in general, the idea that after the Enlightenment has come into being as an intellectual movement one should not make arguments that fall back behind it, is an abstraction. But when one says for Kant, Enlightenment is the exit of man from self-induced tutelage, then you have concretised a general principle in the freedom of movement of people--the freedom to transcend prejudices and previously held biases (Voreingenommenheiten). This is a useful abstraction.

We are not concretists, that is, people who only appeal to unmediated experiences. We remain committed to general theories and traditions of theory and argue with them. But we do not only conserve them as a form of cultural heritage but we work with them. Then sometimes such abstractions are useful.

MK What, then, is the role of theory?

ON The role of theory consists in the fact that only on this level something like a political context for interpretation (Zusammenhang) can be produced. This is also our critique of positivism, of factual man and of the science of facts. Husserl, the great

phenomenologist, has once said that the science of facts only produces factual men and this science of facts always rests on juxtaposing isolated facts. Theory in our sense has the function to create contexts and relationships (*Zusammenhang*). Theory is the production of the political context for interpretation (*Zusammenhang*)

An important element of theory consists in the critique of the fragmented. And this is then in itself a process of production, of new contexts in what would otherwise be a rather fragmented in social reality.

MK Is experience a form of theory? What is its relationship to theory?

ON As we conceptualise it, experience is a form of engagement of people with reality that goes beyond sensations or lived moments (*Erlebnisse*). It is already preserved and processed reality. In that sense it is a crucial element of the equipment and content of processes of theory.

Miriam Hansen has explained this well in her introduction to *“Public Sphere and Experience”*: The English “experience” is narrower than “Erfahrung” in German because the German term refers also to the inner processes of a human being and also contains in that sense an element of self-experience. Only to the extent that this inner process of formation is possible, can one be able to open oneself up to objects.

In this sense, the idea of dialectical thinking continues to play an important role in my and in Alexander Kluge’s work, i.e. the constellation of subject and object that can not be torn apart. When the subject becomes charged with facts of experience the objects that the subject is oriented towards change too. This living form is what we call experience, and in that sense experience is a constitutive part of the creation of theory. It is not identical. We do not believe that from the processes of experience of individuals

something like theory emerges. We think that theory has its own logic and its own tradition. For this reason we go back to the great philosophical traditions of Aristotle, Kant and Marx. And we include the accumulated, conserved experience in these traditions into our concept of theory.

MK You placed experience at the centre of a critical theory, which holds on to the idea of a fundamental transformation of society. Doesn't this position overestimate the ways underlying conflicts can be experienced in a complexly mediated society?

ON One can only start from oneself here. In my experience, the idea of a fundamental transformation of society remains an idea but it instructs the concrete steps differently than if this idea was absent. For that reason I argue for a utopia in the sense in which perhaps every human being has in his or her head an idea of how society and how his or her own life would have to look like. These are utopias that work inside every human being. I think this function of utopia, which Bloch has described, is valid. It is a wishful imagination, even if it is totally twisted. It contains hopes and expectations for life conditions that don't even disappear in psychological illness. These always transcend the present condition. And they are very important for a thinking that makes connections and establishes context and for action.

Adorno once said: 'Who does not know what transcends the given does not understand the given either'.

This tension, with concrete change on the one hand and that, which used to be the idea of revolution, is a very old topic. Luxemburg discussed it as the dialectic of reform and revolution. It has many other facets today but I think that still the central problem is the fact that the surplus of facts destroys the norms, the concern with how the world

should look. This disturbed balance between “is” and “ought”, the hegemony of being - in a social sense not a Heideggerian one- is a central problem, which I am working on.

If the question is: which is the point which I can use to unhinge the whole system, this Archimedean point, which is part of the old revolutionary theories: it does not exist. But there is something like a multitude of Archimedean points.

MK Your analysis gains part of its distinctiveness by systematically taking into account something like a psychological base. You take people’s anxiety very seriously and their needs and hopes. Could you explain what your assumptions are in this respect?

ON That is right, we extend the notion of subjectivity downwards, with respect to the deep level of subjectivity but also upwards to the level of consciousness. I try to bring the whole tradition of philosophy towards the present. So we do not just consider the equipment of subjectivity, the labour of subjectivity. I share this with Alexander Kluge; we don’t have a sharp separation between subject and object. There are always subject-object relationships. The work the subject does on itself is always mediated by the work of subjects on objects, and related processes of experiences and of self-experience. I stick very strictly with the subject-object dialectics. It is basically a psychoanalysis turned materialist. Freud’s concepts like structure of the personality, the unconscious, the super-ego, drives, are of great importance to us. The original version of Freud is of huge analytical importance to me.

MK What difference does your conception of critical theory make for teaching? What remains of the emancipatory claims for teaching inherited from the enlightenment when re-thought in terms of material and relational practices?

ON I can only speak of my own practice here. I have always held large lectures, with four hours a week over two days. I have observed that with this whole fragmentation of knowledge and the division of labour, people have a strong need for relationality (Zusammenhang). For that reason, I have always gone back to texts from antiquity in these lectures, say about globalisation or about the origins of European thought. I teach Greek texts but combine them with historical examples and always relate them to the present. My sociology students have always learned everything in different contexts. So when I read Heraklites, I have always taken examples from everyday life and so retained the connection to the present. These are sedimented texts, such as there is sedimented experience in philosophy. In my teaching, I have mostly drawn from my experiences in two contexts of learning: one is the Glocksee school, the school project that I have founded here in Hanover, which refers to the experience and the learning of children. The others are the educational institutions of the trade unions, which concerns adults. In this way, I could fascinate people with what I call public thinking. I have learned this from Adorno. Habermas didn't do that as much. Habermas read from his notes in his lectures and his lectures weren't that good. I was his assistant for eight years and I saw how people were bored in these lectures. But Adorno spoke based on his notes almost without preparation, just like following one of my favourite texts, Kleist's "*On the gradual formulation of ideas while speaking*". This has always induced students to also think by themselves and learn. I was mainly concerned to create motives for learning, rather than to only share knowledge. That's why I often used combinations, such as when I taught "Hegel and postmodernism" for two semesters. Or Freud and Kant combined to confront Kant's philosophy of validity and the genetic way of thinking in Freud in order to create

friction. I have always enjoyed such lectures. In contrast, small workshops were always hard work for me; in the end I stopped doing those.

MK That is interesting because large lectures are very much devalued in today's discourse about German universities; they are seen merely as a cheap way of teaching.

ON Myself and others have learned much more through such lectures than by any other means. The seminars with Horkheimer and Adorno for example with about 20, 25, 30 people were really depressing and painful, because the pressure to not only look intelligent but also to say intelligent things, has put students under so much stress. In contrast unburdened listening (entlastetes Zuhören) depends on some measure of anonymity and this anonymity has something productive about it. Richard Sennett has discussed how important this balance is between distance and proximity in his books about cities. Especially in academia, it is very important that students have a chance to listen without pressure.

MK What are the lines of conflict within the universities today and how if at all are they articulated politically?

ON This is a question that is difficult to answer at the moment. Universities are in a phase of radical change. This is also happening in the US but by far not to the extent that it is in Germany. The universities are practically turning into corporations and forms of learning that happen outside the university are imported to the university out of commercial concerns. I think that at the moment the front lines are so complex that clear lines of protest or of a public sphere cannot be produced at the moment. But it is a potential for disquiet. An unstructured potential. Nobody is really satisfied with this change in university education and education in general so that I assume that at some point these

contradictions will be articulated and will intensify. But which forms these conflicts will take is hard to say. It could be that social conflicts that have emerged from the destruction of the welfare state and deterioration for large parts of the population then create something, which allows for a protest to become visible in the universities, in collective action that is not visible yet.

MK How does this affect the interests that are articulated through a university, the role universities can play in the larger public?

ON I think there is polarisation within the university and a polarisation of university education. This process may be much further underway in the United States. Ivy League universities, which have billions of endowments, are radically different from the average universities there. This process has so far not existed in German universities. The social Darwinist struggle for survival has so far not been organised as a competition among universities. I fear that this polarisation is happening between publicly- and privately-funded elite universities, on the one hand, and pragmatically limited short training courses on the other hand. This could be an element which destroys the tradition that comes from Humboldt for the first time.

It is one of the ironies of history that the proposal for elite universities is made by social democrats. The conscious embracing of inequality among universities has so far been taboo in Germany. But with this, a thinking emerges that is connected to the just-in-time principle, so knowledge is produced for the short term, short degrees, which is a disadvantage in the long run in this modern form of production. Long-term learning processes that motivate to learn more will become more and more important, that is the learning of learning. But these short degrees are not intensive processes of learning but

appropriation of contents and in that sense it is a fatal tendency, which is expanding when such economic relations are increasingly taking over the education system.

MK You have always been a critical companion to the trade unions. What are the challenges for the labour movement today?

ON At the moment the trade unions are of course with their back against the wall. That is the problem I address in my latest book. Trade Unions are now literally fighting for conservation, for salvaging. That cannot work in the long run if they do not have a sense of how a society should be. This is the central problem and I argue that if the trade unions are not to lose their central task of representing collective interests, they need to build extensions. They need to extend their concept of work, the concept of interests, of their political mandate, their cultural mandate, which means they need to develop more than work-place interests.

The traditional concept of work in the trade unions is rather limited, referring mostly to industrial work, that is, to work in an organised factory. Now we have forms of work that are taken out of the factory, many things are produced at home. There are many areas, where people work but are not paid. Raising children is not recognised as work. This specifically affects women, as is shown, for example, in the new report on poverty and wealth by the federal government. This concerns mostly the women who work but who still learn a third less. A concept of work so focused on industrial labour is no longer enough. There are many informal forms of work and they must be valued more highly. Forms of relationship work, of work that is not industrial and related to commodities must be brought into societal consciousness.

The unions also need to extend their concept of interests. A concept of interest that is limited to an interest in wages is not even sufficient for fighting for these wage interests. They need to move to cultural dimensions to survive in these struggles. This is why I advocate an organisational basis for the unions outside of work places. Contexts of life are increasingly anchored outside the workplaces, and the unions are still blind to that.

MK In your writings, you insist on the reference to the whole. Counter publics always emerge in the context of a relationship to other forms of public spheres, and you insist on the need to always re-establish that connection. But you seem to always assume the whole to be anchored on the national level.

ON It is always less so. Only when you include the notion of globalisation, which at the moment is reduced to dimensions of free trade into that which is world society, you get a perspective, which leaves national territories. Still I hold the view that the tension between globalised relationships and the proper processes of production of people needs to be maintained. The production is not global, the exchange of goods is global but as far as the production of a human being is concerned, in the families, in the schools, it is very local and very place-bound. There is a dialectic between general problems, i.e. problems of world society, and the places of productions that continue to be concrete with respect to global relations as well as to European relations. We will be more and more confronted with these relations, in which, however, immense problems emerge. If for example the problems of work are not solved, then in Europe more generally we will have a situation like in the Netherlands, in which people's discontent will be directed against foreigners, which suddenly transforms the multicultural situation as if in a fit of rage. Holland was always seen as the country where cultures were living together peacefully and suddenly

a whole society explodes, partly because the social climate deteriorates. This always leads to projections onto the enemy within. This is possible also in Germany. Six or seven million unemployed project an image of a society in which some problems cannot be solved. This produces fear and projective fantasies. Who is the cause of this calamity? This always leads to ethnic projections, ethnic cleansing and ethnic fantasies: the foreigner is to blame for everything.

MK Do you see a basis for a global counter- public?

ON There is international solidarity, as evidenced by NGOs like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and also aid organisations such as CARE International. There are many contexts that relate to assistance in solidarity. But there are few such contexts of experience that are concerned with production.

The problem in Iraq, just like in Afghanistan, is that as long as production is not built up to a level that can compete in the world market, it will never be a land capable of peace, even if soldiers remain for 200 years. Afghanistan cannot sustain itself in terms of production excepting hashish, that is, drugs. If the production of drugs is destroyed too then there are no products in the world market, which come from Afghanistan; and as long as this is not the case, it cannot be a society of peace. This is a very different context than the one I have experienced in China, where an industrial society has been built up with immense rates of growth. Shanghai is a second New York, also with respect to the skyline. The Hyatt building is the second highest in China and the airport is hyper modern. But in rural areas mass unemployment emerges. And in China that always means many people, these are 300 million unemployed and 50 million migrant workers.

But still there is something like a basis for production that can compete in a global market.

The occupation of Iraq costs 3.7 billion dollars per month. Imagine 3.7 billion dollars could be used each month to build-up production sites! I would say if you used these means this way you would have a democracy in Iraq more quickly than through permanent occupation. In that sense, this global society needs the absurd to happen: that capitalism builds up its own competition, which of course it does not. If capitalists want free trade, the building up of production in these countries and thereby the production of their own competition would produce equality of opportunity and this is where projects are lacking. On this level of production, projects are lacking and they are not lacking by accident. If capitalism is as dominant as it is today, it will not feed its own competition.

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ⁱ The Interview was conducted in November 2004 in German. It was translated by the interviewer.

ⁱⁱ See Negt, O. (2001) *Arbeit und menschliche Würde*. Göttingen: Steidl.