

Creativity vs. Unskilled Labour: Kant on Class Struggle

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Abstract: I explore what I argue is a formative theory of class struggle in Kant, placing it in the context of his view of antagonism as a driving force of historical progress. I relate Kant's positions on those issues to the politico-economic theoretical environment in which they unfolded as well as to Marx's subsequent critique. I suggest that something much like the division between creative and unskilled labour drawn by Kant has continued to inform our thinking about the intertwining between the political and the economic.

Keywords: *Kant, class struggle, Marx, labour, creativity*

Lenin famously identified three major sources of Marxism: German philosophy, British political economy, and French socialism, three broad thought currents that – thus Lenin's argument – gave Marx the starting points for developing, respectively, historical materialism, a new labour theory of value, and the idea of class struggle.¹ Of course, this neat stylization does not imply that the three components of Marxism bear no intrinsic ties or were developed independently of each other. In particular, the idea of class struggle is pivotal for the transformation Marx imposed on classical political economy in arguing that value is produced by the creative power of labour – a fact that, he argued, prior economists obfuscated, thus in effect rendering a service to capital. Marx's critique itself constitutes an ideological dimension of class struggle, but there is also a sense in which it is critique in Kant's vein. In questioning the claims of former systems, Marx was exposing the grounds for their illusions – which, it turned out, were rooted in the very dialectic of the subject matter – and, based on that, he was exploring the conditions for gaining an adequate view. These involved the articulation of historical materialism, the study of how class struggles throughout history have shaped and have been shaped by different modes of production.

It goes without saying that before Marx, the three sources of Marxism identified by Lenin did not develop in isolation, either. In particular, research has established how British political economy was instrumental for Hegel, having influenced him not only in matters socio-politic.² In the present article, I will explore *Kant's* take on political economy, prospectively relating this reading to Marx's critique of preceding economic thought. Although Kant never explicitly developed a political economy at any length, he has left a number of systematically related remarks on the tense interrelations that bind the political and

1 Lenin 1963 (first published 1913).

2 The groundbreaking work here is of course Lukács 1975 (first published 1938). For more recent studies from other perspectives, see Dickey 1987 and Herzog 2013.

the economic. In doing so, as we shall see, he articulated contested conceptual determinations that continue to shape our thinking about economic productivity to this day.

Putting Kant into dialogue with Marxist thought is no news after Karatani's important book, which placed Marx's critical analysis of capital in the light of Kant's transcendental inquiry into the structure of experience.³ As Žižek has admitted in spite of his criticism, in doing so Karatani has helped revive interest in the sphere of the economy among contemporary Marxists, arguing for the irreducibility of either politics or economics to the other.⁴

To Kant scholars, the Kant-Marx connection should be even less disconcerting, albeit being somewhat relegated to the outskirts of research. In the recent decades, important studies have argued that Kant's often neglected philosophy of history is in important respects materialistic,⁵ while others have drawn attention to the underappreciated degree to which Kant embraced the French Revolution.⁶ In both cases, authors have carefully traced important continuities and discontinuities with Marx's positions on those points. The link goes at least as far back as Marburg neo-Kantianism, key representatives of which explored the socialist potential of Kant's thought and even dubbed Kant "the veritable and actual originator of German socialism".⁷

The main focus of this article is an astounding passage that occurs towards the end of the *Third Critique* (§83):

Skill cannot very well be developed in the human race except by means of inequality among people; for the majority provides the necessities of life as it were mechanically, without requiring any special art for that, for the comfort and ease of others, who cultivate the less necessary elements of culture, science and art, and are maintained by the latter in a state of oppression, bitter work and little enjoyment, although much of the culture of the higher class gradually spreads to this class. But with the progress of this culture (the height of which, when the tendency to what is dispensable begins to destroy what is indispensable, is called luxury) calamities grow equally great on both sides, on the one

3 Karatani 2003.

4 Žižek 2006, p. 55-56.

5 Wood 1998, 2006.

6 Especially Ypi 2014, but also Kouvelakis 2003.

7 Cohen 1914, p. 112 (first published 1896).

side because of violence imposed from without, on the other because of dissatisfaction from within; yet this splendid misery is bound up with the development of the natural predispositions in the human race, and the end of nature itself, even if it is not our end, is hereby attained.⁸

Is Kant, in those two sentences, formulating the groundwork for a theory of history as driven by the class struggle between unskilled labour and an exploitative class enjoying leisure and engaged in creativity, a struggle fraught with increasing suffering, but bearing the potential for the actualization of freedom? Several authors have briefly glossed over the passage, but it is yet to receive the attention it merits.⁹ Kant's words are dense and seem to stand solitary in his textual corpus with the claims they make. Nonetheless, I believe that we can start making sense of them if we extract them from the "Methodology of Teleological Judgment", where they are but a fleeting remark, and if we put them in their proper conceptual context: Kant's philosophy of history and his scattered remarks on labour.

Kant not only recognized that history is pivotal to what humans are and that it needs manifold material preconditions: he saw history as driven by struggle.¹⁰ Using the very term *Antagonism*, he argued that much of whatever progress we have witnessed in the past and we can hope for in the future is due to an oftentimes violent clash of divergent interests. This view stands in striking tension with the usual legalist and reformist views imputed to his political philosophy. In the first part of the present article, I will lay out this important strand of Kant's thought and relate it to Kant's position on the French Revolution. This will set the backdrop against which, in the second part of the article, I will analyse the 'class struggle' passage from the *Critique of Judgment*.

The allusion Kant makes to the mechanical labour of the working class summons the concept of mechanism – a key determination that he sought to overcome in both the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" (with his notion of taste) and the "Critique of Teleological Judgment" (with his notion of the organism). Marx's *Capital* is on its turn replete with the imagery of the mechanical and machine-like employed to put

8 Kant 2000, p. 299. I shall be using the Cambridge Kant edition, at times emending the translations.

9 Major neo-Kantian scholar Vorländer 1911, p. 12 has tellingly remained the most explicit among them.

10 By far not too much attention has been given to the fact that the last section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is entitled "The History of Pure Reason". That in the first introduction Kant calls metaphysics a *Kampflplatz* is more familiar.

into relief the nature of industrial labour. As it has turned out, a post-Kantian revival of the notion of creativity permeates an important part of current neoliberal discourse on the rejuvenation and reimagining of post-industrial capitalism into something like a creative economy.¹¹ In the third part of the article, I will discuss how, when defining creativity in the *Third Critique*, Kant both drew and made problematic a distinction among different categories of human productivity. As Marx has shown, the conditions for the possibility of a political economy include claims as to just who is productive, and a critique premised on class struggle involves, among other things, a struggle on this issue.

Looking back, it is easy to appreciate that turning to Kant has – for different reasons – been expressly used to undermine the Marx-Hegel connection. What might be even more vexing for some is that the neo-Kantians’ move, in particular, was part of and influenced the wide current of German social-democratic reformism.¹² In full acknowledgement of this fact, this article takes up the opposite task: to contribute to uncovering a not-so-reformist Kant open to what might be viewed as radical politics. In its turn, an either/or stance on Kant and Hegel has, it is hoped, long become as outdated as it is unproductive.

The background aim of this piece is thus twofold: (1) To wrest away Kant from the hands of newer liberal theorists, in this way reclaiming the progressive potential of a figure appropriated as canonical for liberalism.¹³ (2) To retrace part of the story as to how creativity came to feature in economic thinking, together with the conceptual tensions involved and the material contradictions implied.

I. Kant on Social Antagonism and Revolution

Kant articulated his view of social antagonism as a driving force for historical progress in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784), a short study in which he explored the justification we have for thinking that human history is going in the direction of improvement, taken to mean a condition of greater justice. What strikes the reader from the outset in Kant’s overall strategy is its apparently amoralist bent: more or less, it consists in attempting to show how unjust actions, taken *en masse*, lead to justice in the long run.

11 Literature in the field – both academic and popular – is burgeoning and concepts are yet fluid.

12 Bernstein 1899 raised a self-styled „Kant wider cant“ slogan, which was however turned around against him by Plekhanov 1901, who argued that Kant was in fact much more progressive than Bernstein ever was.

13 For a brief (and somewhat paradoxical) remark on Kant as anti-liberal, see Losurdo 2011, p. 178-9.

To do this, Kant employs the language of ‘aims or ends of nature’ within human history, a precursor to his more developed teleology in the *Critique of Judgment* (of which §83 is part). Since Kant’s natural teleology is notoriously controversial as regards to its contemporary relevance, its exact standing in his thought, and its very content, I shall keep my discussion of it to a minimum.¹⁴ Nevertheless, I shall suggest that it is crucially important that Kant sets his discussion in the language of ‘nature’.¹⁵ Kant’s philosophy is of course notorious for its extreme anti-naturalism. However, with the introduction of ‘nature’ in his philosophy of history, Kant is already setting the stage for a materialist move: a redirecting of his analytical focus to the issue of how historical change involves something different from the unfolding of pure principles attainable by a priori reasoning.¹⁶ What is more, one of the most challenging and under-studied claims of Kant’s philosophy, one looming especially large in his thinking on history, is that whatever pure faculties human beings possess need to be developed or cultivated through historical experience. In this way, Kant’s philosophy of history comes strikingly close to Hegel’s – and to some extent Marx’s – master problem of actualizing freedom.¹⁷

The first sections of the *Idea for a Universal History* demonstrate some of those points. Kant argues that humans bear the potentials [*Anlagen*] for rational thought and free action, though far from being completely formed, these capacities need to be developed in the course of practice.¹⁸ The term *Anlage* is significant in that Kant will later often use it to imply a theory of what he called “epigenesis”, or development contingent on interaction with surrounding material, in contrast with a theory of preformation or pure actualization from within of a pre-existing telos.¹⁹ It is significant that here Kant does not say much more about the content of the named *Anlagen* than they constitute the remarkably non-essentialist capacity of humans to be the authors of what they genuinely are. He moreover stresses that this is a task not to be achieved by single individuals but rather one pursued by all of humanity collectively.²⁰

14 Hegel, for one, famously praised it and made ample use thereof, not only in his philosophy of nature.

15 Compare Marx’s invocation of ‘natural history’ and Darwin at key places in *Capital I*: Marx 1976, p. 92, 101, 461, 493.

16 Cf. the introduction to the *Idea*: Kant 2007, p. 108-109.

17 For a similar diagnosis, see Yovel 1980, p. 6-7, 23-32, 74, 140 ff., 300-306.

18 Kant 2007, p. 109-110.

19 I am here simplifying for the sake of the argument a matter that is notoriously obscure; see Huneman 2007, p. 13-14, 51-74.

20 Kant 2007, p. 109-111

Kant is then swift to point to antagonism as the chief motor to this progressive movement in history:

The means nature employs in order to bring about the development of all its predispositions is their antagonism in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order. Here I understand by 'antagonism' the *unsociable sociability* of human beings, i.e. their propensity to enter into society, which, however, is combined with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to break up this society.²¹

Although far from being arcane, this passage may in its turn sound alarming, if we are accustomed to Rawlsian, Habermassian, or Arendtian readings of Kant's political thought.²² Combining Hobbes' and the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers' views on human interaction, Kant includes in his definition of antagonism not only unsociability, but also sociability itself. Thus his concept is not merely a stepping stone to a (liberal) theory imputing progress to something like competition, but rather signifies a force holding together a society's internal dynamics.

Kant's strategy is then to show how this struggle tends towards articulating ever higher levels of political organization. From the individual antagonism described above, Kant passes, in a move familiar from Hobbes and others, to antagonism between states. Kant's particular description is striking: states are in constant (preparation for) war, in a situation of ever increasing economic interdependence and spiralling financial debt.²³ Far from being ahistorical, the argument is thus informed by what Kant takes to be the defining features of his time, which as it turns out, lie to a large degree in the sphere of an antagonistic international economy. In this situation, he argues, no country can achieve a stable just constitution without all the rest achieving the same, uniting in a global ("cosmopolitan") whole that, in this way, will actualize justice and freedom much more fully than any separate nation is capable of doing.

A methodological note: the quoted passage, among other things, suggests how we can partially deflate or re-interpret the language of 'nature' in the *Idea*. Kant is not attempting to naturalize either antagonism or lawful order: his words can be read as just claiming that although

.....
21 *Ibid.*, 111.

22 Yovel 1980, p. 146-153 gives a fine, if brief, discussion of historical antagonism in Kant. The work is also one of the very few to take seriously the historical dimension in Kant's view of reason itself.

23 Kant 2007, 114, 117-118.

social antagonism is not a product of people's free choice ('nature' as contrastive to freedom in typical Kantian parlance) and although not intended as such, it is in fact conducive (a 'means') to attaining a state of lawful freedom ('end of nature').²⁴ In a way, Kant is delineating a precursor to the idea of the non-intentional self-organization of living things from §64-65 of the *Third Critique*. But he is also making an initial formulation of a big problem that stands behind so much of the *Critique of Judgment*: the issue of how what he called the "kingdom of ends" is capable of being actualized in the material world, or the territory of experience, "nature".

When envisioning the solution of this problem as a historical process in the *Idea*, as well as in the class struggle section of the *Third Critique*, Kant is writing from a practical viewpoint, or with regard to human agency. This brings a second respect in which the course of history for him is open-ended, and doubly so. Recognizing historical potential depends on the decision of the philosophical historian – actualizing the potential depends on the decisions of historical agents. However, for Kant those decisions can never be in any way voluntaristic: they are to be guided by what one envisions as constituting the universal interest of humanity.

We should remark that although the economy plays such central role in his argument, in the *Idea* Kant refers only to individual and international antagonism, and does not raise the issue of class division. As Allen Wood has noted, in a slightly later (and somewhat humorously allegorical) article on the "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786), Kant gives even more attention to the historical role of what can be termed different modes of production, presenting political progress as rooted in changing economic relations.²⁵ Something that strikes the reader is that in both texts Kant describes history as imprinted by *labour* and thinks labour as an integral part of history's antagonistic aspect. Moreover, he takes labour to denote not only human struggle to assimilate or subject nature in securing a living and in cultivating humanity, but also the struggle of human beings against other human beings. Thus in "Conjectural Beginning", Kant writes about a historical stage of "*labour and discord* [Zwietracht], as the prelude to the unification in society".²⁶ Here he should be taken to refer not only to a supposed

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24 The analogies between Kant's natural teleology and Hegel's cunning of reason made in the literature are too numerous to list here.

25 Wood 1998: 21-7. Wood further draws attention to similarities between Kant's sketch of the different modes of production and Marx's much more developed analysis. I shall touch briefly on just one aspect, which will be important in the subsequent sections. Even though Wood has later added social antagonism as part of the story (Wood 2006: 251-2), he has explicitly denied that Kant recognizes the importance of class struggle.

26 Kant 2007, p. 171.

archaic period of feuds prior to the transition to ancient organized society (which is the literal meaning of his text), but also to be alluding to the discord and antagonism within capitalist societies prior to the unification in a worldwide free and just condition, which he analysed in the *Idea*.²⁷

As we have seen, Kant viewed the actualization of the emancipatory potential in history as being far from pre-determined. After publishing the *Third Critique* (1790), *Perpetual Peace* (1795), and the *Doctrine of Right* (1797), he once again explored this issue in the *Conflict of Faculties* (1798), in a section entitled “Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?”. It is here that he made his famous bold move of singling out the French Revolution and especially outside spectators’ “wishful *participation* that borders closely on enthusiasm” as a sign demonstrating that a free condition is indeed to be eventually achieved.²⁸ It has been shown that Kant himself was vividly interested and strongly supportive of the Revolution.²⁹ It is impressive that in the “Progress” essay, Kant explicitly writes that Terror is not to detract from this involvement, and that the Revolution is “a phenomenon in human history [that] *will not be forgotten*” – precisely because of being deeply “interwoven with the interest of humanity”, because of expressing something truly universal.³⁰ Underscoring that here the Revolution obtains the status of an event, Foucault has noted that Kant is now using a strategy inverse to teleological explanation.³¹ To draw consequences for the future, Kant does not pretend to reconstruct the past as oriented towards a certain putative goal, but rather makes a prediction based on a singular occurrence in the present.³²

Although Kant’s full assessment of the French Revolution is notoriously difficult to sort out, it is merits attention that his words in the *Conflict of Faculties* come in fluid continuity with the central driving role he attributed to antagonism in history. In the *Idea*, he insists it is to be expected that progress will be achieved through a series of violent and

27 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 115, 173.

28 Kant 1996b, p. 302.

29 Ypi 2014.

30 Kant 1996b, p. 302, 304

31 Foucault 2008: 16-21. This can make Kant’s position more attractive for those who have long been rejecting both historical teleology and the historical determinism inherent in older ‘orthodox’ Marxism.

32 It is nevertheless significant that, in doing so, Kant again repeatedly uses the term *Anlage*, most importantly when arguing that enthusiasm for the Revolution demonstrates “a potential and faculty in human nature for something better” (Kant 1996b, p. 304). As I mentioned, this should be no problem, if an *Anlage* is an open-ended predisposition.

radically transformative upheavals or “revolutions”.³³ Thus, although Kant consistently casts his view of historical progress in ‘moral’ terms, his philosophy of history stands in a tension with the legalistic bent of the received version of his political philosophy, as articulated in the *Doctrine of Right* or *Perpetual Peace*.³⁴ The same can be said of the dilemma between revolution and reform: although the aforementioned texts have a distinctly reformist flavour, Kant’s philosophy of history is much more open to the possibility of violent progressive change.³⁵

Of course, Kant envisioned no abolishing of private property and state, even in the future cosmopolitan whole. As Vorländer soberly remarked, Kant was no socialist³⁶ (and, we might add, still less communist). Nevertheless, his antagonistic philosophy of history is such that it envisions abolishing (at least violent) antagonism. This is something that leaves its mark on Kant’s assessment of the progressive potential of the French Revolution, too. Kant saw the Revolution as a huge step forward to both peace and rule based on the people’s will, which for him were interrelated: a constitution approved by citizens, he thought, would be built on principles forbidding aggressive war. We should stress that Kant named the agent of this change “the people”, a figure featured prominently in the “Progress” essay.³⁷ We further find him accusing rulers of treating humanity at large as beasts of burden (again, the issue of labour) or as a mere tools³⁸ (a phrase echoing the admonition to rulers from the conclusion of “What is Enlightenment?” not to treat humans as machines). Even though Kant argues against subjection in general (and even though the French Revolution was in an important part a revolt against feudal subjection, something that Kant was aware of), the specific issue of machine-like work suggests Kant also has something to say about the subjection of society’s lowest members. To see what this might be, let us turn to the *Third Critique*, which intervenes between the essays on history and the *Conflict of Faculties*.

33 Kant 2007, p. 115, 118-9

34 On the other hand, van der Linden 1994 has re-affirmed Cohen’s merit of showing how Kant’s moral theory is not bourgeois but rather harmonious with Marxist teaching.

35 In largely not taking into account the antagonistic moment in Kant’s philosophy of history, the analysis in Kouvelakis 2003, p. 17-23, while acknowledging Kant’s strong sympathies with the French Revolution, leaves Kant with the usual moralist-reformist diagnosis; see esp. *ibid.*, p. 19.

36 Vorländer 1911, p. 32-34.

37 This observation belongs to Macarena Marey and was argued for in a yet unpublished conference talk of hers on Kant’s revolutionary populism.

38 Kant 1996b, p. 305.

II. Is Class Struggle a Driving Force of History, for Kant

Hanna Arendt has famously instructed us to look in the *Critique of Judgment* for clues to a political philosophy divergent from Kant's allegedly official position, articulated in the *Doctrine of Right*.³⁹ While Arendt argued that key structures of Kant's theory of aesthetic judging lie at what she took to be the heart of the political, I will draw attention to several passages in which Kant makes fleeting remarks on topics directly or implicitly related to political economy. These will help fleshing out Kant's view on society and history as antagonistic. The central passage for my argument, which I quoted at the beginning of the essay,⁴⁰ comes at a stage where Kant brings to the discussion of the *Third Critique* the topics of embodied freedom, historical progress, social antagonism and war, as well as the achievement of a world political union – all issues central to his writings on history.⁴¹ It is within that context that he raises the observation on the importance of inequality, the two main categories of labour, and the oppressive relations between them.

Let us first look at the character of the class division drawn by Kant. Kant himself uses the term *Classe*, though in his vocabulary it by no means possesses the social determinateness present in authors such as Marx. The distinction he makes is not precisely that between proletarians and capitalists, but it definitely is one between people of lowly hired labour, of “bitter work and little enjoyment”, on the one hand, and people who to a much greater degree can enjoy “comfort and ease”, from which they can take up creative pursuits. What is more, Kant stresses that the leisure of the upper class is made possible by the toil of workers, who, for that end, “are maintained [...] in a state of oppression”. The relation between the two classes is not only antagonistic, but, we might say, organically so: much as in Marx, the working class produces the upper class by supplying it with goods and relieving it from the need to labour, while the latter produces the working class by means of subjection. What is missing is capital as a universal system producing both. But in Kant, as in Marx, neither class is possible outside this asymmetric power relation, which constitutes each as a class.

Thus, second, the antagonistic *Zwietracht* we encountered in Kant's earlier writings on history is now explicitly described as class inequality.⁴² Social antagonism in the *Idea for a Universal History* appears to be

39 Arendt 1992.

40 See n. 8.

41 Kant's overall goal in those sections is the apparently hopelessly outdated issue of whether humans can be considered as the “final end of nature”. Discussing that topic is not in order for the present paper.

42 There is a precursor to this in “Conjectural Beginning”: Kant 2007, p. 170-173.

premised on the strife between more or less equally placed individuals, and thus can be read in line with classical liberal views. But here, Kant is speaking of a division in two vast groups based on structurally different levels of (dis)advantage stemming from the nature of their work and its political underpinnings, i.e. by relations of production. Social inequality is explicitly described not only as legal or political, but also, first and foremost, as relating to type and content of labour and access to free time. Political and economic arrangements here serve to reinforce each other. Although he might be remembered for arguing in support of formal equality, which seems to classify him as a liberal,⁴³ Kant here shows that he was far from being insensitive to the preconditions and effects of material inequality. In addition, he had his own sarcastic (and on their turn largely neglected) points to make about the illusory character of formal rights.⁴⁴

In a move that, as we have seen, is typical for his thinking on history, Kant presents material inequality as necessary for progress, for the development of what he calls *Geschicklichkeit*. Readers of Marx and students of classical political economy are well aware that 18th and 19th century texts in the subject are replete with arguments seeking to justify social and economic inequality as an instrument necessary to economic progress. In fact, Marx singled them out among the defining features of the practical working and ideological defence of capitalism. Yet, Kant on his part suggests that inequality is merely a (deplorable) means that ultimately ought to be abolished – much as violent antagonism in general is to be abolished in the condition of perpetual peace.

Kant's deep commitment to egalitarianism in his later years is well-attested, but a note on Rousseau waking him from a certain elitist slumber puts into sharp relief his stance – in particular, on the rightful relation between menial and ‘intellectual’ labour:

I am an inquirer by inclination. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge, the unrest which goes with the desire to progress in it, and satisfaction at every advance in it. There was a time when I believed this constituted the honor of humanity, and I despised the

43 For a clear-cut argument directed specifically against hereditary privilege and claiming that equality in law is consistent with inequality in possession – an argument pleasing to the bourgeois, see Kant's article ‘On the Common Saying: That May be Correct in Theory, but It is of No Use in Practice’ (1793): Kant 1996a, p. 292-4.

44 E.g. the following passage from the *Anthropology*: “a political artist, just as well as an aesthetic one, can guide and rule the world by deluding it through images in place of reality; for example, *freedom* of the people (as in the English Parliament), or their rank and *equality* (as in the French Assembly), which consist of mere formalities. However, it is still better to have only the illusion of possessing this good that ennobles humanity than to feel manifestly deprived of it”: Kant 2007, p. 291.

people, who know nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This blinding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honor humanity, and I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that my investigations can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of humanity.⁴⁵

The presumed splendour of the most subtle knowledge – so Kant – is worthless if it cannot make a contribution to the emancipation of other types of labour, usually considered lowly. The rights of – again – “the people” are to be upheld by the scholar, not just on the side, but as part and parcel of her very work. In a way, the researcher (a member of the upper class free from hard labour) emerges as a potential ideological ally of workers.

But here comes my third point, which refers to what I think is both the most interesting and most problematic moment in Kant’s *CJ* §83 observation on class. Although he admits to some degree a version of the trickle-down argument (“much of the culture of the higher class gradually spreads to [the lower] class”), Kant insists that, after all, not only is inequality inevitable as an instrument for progress, but also progress itself in turn reinforces and deepens inequality. To quote again: “with the progress of this culture [...] calamities grow equally great on both sides, on the one side because of violence imposed from without, on the other because of dissatisfaction from within”. Ignoring for a moment the worries of the allegedly dissatisfied upper class, we should observe that Kant’s diagnosis expressly states that with the unfolding of this politico-economic set-up, oppression for the working class is likely to increase. Having opened his *Wealth of Nations* with an analysis of the effects of the division of labour, including the creation of a class of “working poor”, or “common labourers”, when he studied wage dynamics Adam Smith remained optimistic that overall, given economic progress, the condition of that working class will improve.⁴⁶ In stark contrast, what Kant paints here is hardly a stable, sustainable direction for development; it much more appears to be setting in store one of those eruptions that Kant saw as endemic throughout history.

Another note on the broader politico-economic context. Whereas Kant’s diagnosis on inequality is easy to make sense of given the influence of Rousseau, themes from whom pop up so often in the *Third Critique*, I suggest that it should also be read in the light of seminal politico-economic observations from the Scottish Enlightenment. Here, in addition to Smith, I mean foremost his friend Adam Ferguson, who in

45 Kant 1996a: xvii.

46 Smith 1976, p. 96-100.

his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* was among the first to analyse in detail the social processes peculiar for the emerging capitalist mode of production. Ferguson was greatly impressed by the effects of the deepening division of labour, which for him included the creation of a business and intellectual elite and a mass of mechanical workers. While he saw this result as the condition for progress of what he called “commercial societies”, he was worried about the elite’s propensity to wanton luxury and the mental and physical destitution threatening workers.⁴⁷ When tracing the generation of the working class as he encountered it in the England of his day in *Capital I*, Marx repeatedly referred to Ferguson, especially with respect to the production of an unskilled labour force.⁴⁸ As we saw, this is a point also explicitly made by Kant: the working class is not only toiling and oppressed – its work consists of almost mechanical operations that need no special skills. This remark on the dehumanizing aspect of common labour of course resonates strongly with subsequent Marxist thought.

If Ferguson, alike Smith, was in the end optimistic, arguing that a vigorous social sentiment is bound to perdure even in a mercantile epoch, Kant, as we have seen, was much more uncertain about a progressive outcome, at best giving only hints as to how it is even possible to think that the given circumstances might lead to emancipation and a state of equality and justice. In *CJ* §83 he leaves readers at a loss to wonder how an increasing “culture of skill” can obtain without an ever deepening inequality. He only alludes to his already familiar threat of all-out war and the possibility for establishing perpetual peace, the only hope for an eventual “happiness for the people”.⁴⁹

With all their inconclusiveness and lack of elaboration, Kant’s cursory remarks on class, read in the light of his philosophy of history, can thus be seen as both rooted in and transforming the politico-economic theoretical environment in which he was working. They not only add a class dimension to his theory of social antagonism, but also shed light on his later radical pronouncement on the French Revolution. The subjection which, he thought, the Revolution gave a promise to overcome was not only one of political privilege, but also one of economic oppression.

As we have seen, Kant’s cosmopolitan idea of perpetual peace, from its outset in the *Universal History*, was drawn to a great extent from materialistic grounds relating to the emerging economic and financial

47 For key sections of his analysis, see Ferguson 1995, p. 172-83, 235-248.

48 Marx 1976, p. 219-220, 474, 482-4.

49 Kant 2000, p. 300. (The Cambridge translation reads “happiness among nations.”)

interconnection of countries throughout the world. In the classic text formulating the idea, when discussing the outrages of colonialism, Kant claims that, given this situation, “a violation of right on *one* place of the earth is felt in *all*”.⁵⁰ In his Smith-influenced theory of money in the legalistic *Doctrine of Right*, when discussing the conditions of labour in colonies and metropolises, Kant remarks that “toil always comes into competition with toil”.⁵¹ Thus for him the increasing oppression of workers in a single country cannot fail to have effects in others. We have underscored how in the *Conflict of Faculties* Kant recognizes the French Revolution as expressing the interests of all of humanity; he further adds that “its influence [is] widely propagated in all areas of the world” and that it thus constitutes a promise not only for a specific country, but for all peoples.⁵²

III. A Political Economy of Productivity

We have so far been able to see that Kant deeply appreciated that inequality is not merely a matter of abstract right but also of economic relations, which, for him, actually work to entrench that inequality. In what remains, I will explore the meaning and implications of Kant's description of the lower class's “bitter work” as conducted “as it were mechanically, without requiring any special art”.

Kant uses the term *Kunst* in its older meaning (much broader than the aesthetic one, which became current only in the 19th century) as referring to any skilled practice intentionally aimed at producing something. When he gives his famous definition of the narrower aesthetic term (*schöne Kunst*) in §43 of the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant makes use of a contrast between the specific practice that term denotes, on the one hand, and craft and industry (also ‘arts’ in the older meaning), on the other. The passage is useful here not only because for Kant craft is an instance of mechanical work, but also for the economic language it employs, including a passing definition of labour. We will leave its purely aesthetic implications on the side, using it as a gateway for elucidating the two types of work referred to in the class struggle passage.

Art is also distinguished from handicraft: the first is called liberal [*freie*], the second can also be called remunerative art [*Lohnkunst*]. The first is regarded as if it could turn out purposively (be successful) only as play, i.e., an occupation that is agreeable

50 Kant 1996a, p. 330.

51 Kant 1996a, p. 435. (The Cambridge edition presents a strikingly different choice of translation.)

52 Kant 1996b, p. 304.

in itself; the second is regarded as labor, i.e., an occupation that is disagreeable (burdensome) in itself and is attractive only because of its effect (e.g., the remuneration), and hence as something that can be compulsorily imposed.⁵³

Kant's usual theory of *Kunst* in its non-aesthetic meaning is that of an activity whose proper end is not itself, but rather its product or outcome. In the case of what he calls *Lohnkunst* (wage-craft), he adds two further specifications. As labour, it is not only not an end in itself, but is furthermore inherently unpleasant and burdensome. What is more, the external end that makes it rational to engage in such activity is not its product (e.g. a chair), but rather a remuneration for that labour. The product is not even mentioned in the definition. Thus, although Kant is ostensibly talking about *Handwerk*, his discussion can easily assimilate manufacture and industrial labour, or wage labour in general. Although not a piece of political economy, the passage is spectacular in the entanglement between the key political (‘freedom’) and economic (‘labour’, ‘wage’) concepts it deploys. What distinguishes this wage-craft from fine art is not that the artist cannot make money from her product, but rather that the artist (if she is to produce ‘genuine’ art, it is assumed) cannot take orders to produce such-and-such a thing. In contrast, wage labour is such that it can be imposed on the worker by someone else and is thus unfree. Furthermore, not only does the worker not choose what she will produce – her disagreeable work makes sense for her only because it has a certain exchange value she gets in return. In contrast, fine art is also free in the sense that it is meaningful as an activity in itself and thus (allegedly) transcends the relations of exchange value.

It is significant that Kant uses here the term ‘play’, mirroring his famous definition of aesthetic experience as free play between the imagination and the understanding in the judgment of taste.⁵⁴ The economic and political references in Kant's aesthetic theory might be so fleeting as to be easily overlooked, but the same cannot be said of Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1795), published several years after the *Third Critique*. Schiller famously built on Kant's aesthetic play, making it the object of a *Spieltrieb* central to human experience, and in doing so, he articulated the play/labour distinction in an explicitly socio-historical context with its own materialistic component,⁵⁵ laying the groundwork for a theory of modern alienation that

53 Kant 2000, p. 183.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 102-104.

55 I have explored the politico-economic implications of the play/labour distinction in Kant, Schiller, and onwards, in my article Kassabov (2016).

was to influence Hegel:⁵⁶

we see not merely individual persons but whole classes of human beings developing only a part of their capacities, while the rest of them, like a stunted plant, shew only a feeble vestige of their nature [...] enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being.⁵⁷

Even more ostensibly than by the issues of abstract wage labour, the aesthetic utopia of the *Letters* was conceived and motivated as an answer to the French Revolution and the Terror.⁵⁸ Schiller's peculiar reformist move was to demand a "total revolution [...] in the whole mode of perception" before any intervention in the outside world.⁵⁹ This internal revolution, he argued, is to be achieved through the play-drive's re-integrating free activity in what he called "beautiful appearance" (the realm of the aesthetic).⁶⁰ But in coupling play and appearance, he conversely bonded labour and reality, suggesting that alienating labour and political subjection might never reach an actual *Aufhebung*. Nevertheless, Schiller's ideal of harmonious, non-alienated human productivity transcending the labour/play distinction and freely actualizing the human creative potential – not reducing the worker to any particular type of work – can be heard to resonate in Marx's notes on the possible future transformation of work. This is true not only as relates to, e.g., the famous passage on communism from the *German Ideology*, but also of the recurring, if tamer, references to the future universal development of individuals in *Capital I*.⁶¹ While in *Capital III* we get the following Kantian-sounding formulation:

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For a fine account of part of the story, contextualizing Schiller against British political economy, see Dickey 1987, p. 254-263.

57 Schiller 2004, p. 38-40.

58 On the contrast between Schiller's aesthetic reformism and Kant's support for the Revolution, see Losurdo 1983, 191-194 and Kouvelakis 2003, 16.

59 Schiller 2004, p. 132.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 75 ff., 125 ff.

61 Marx 1976, p. 447, 635, and especially p. 614-618, concluding with the following remarkable words: "That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labour required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn."

The kingdom of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external purposefulness ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. [...] The true kingdom of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond [the realm of necessity], though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis.⁶²

On his part, after introducing the notion of fine art as free, Kant made a special point of upholding to some measure the dignity of mechanical work vis-à-vis the productive claims of artistic creativity, even arguing for the indispensability of some mechanism in the very production of artworks.⁶³ If we return to the class struggle passage, the free artist of §43 can be comfortably placed within the upper class, "who cultivate the less necessary elements of culture, science and art". The putative craftsman however stands in some contrast to the unskilled, artless lower class. So it turns out that in §83 Kant is alluding to a special type of mechanical burdensome work devoid not only of creative freedom, but also of the craftiness of mercenary artisans. Whereas the latter may possess a certain degree of productive autonomy insofar as their activity is a skill they cultivated, the former are almost literally reduced to the mere machine-like work Kant abhorred.⁶⁴ Their labour is even more unfree and for it to be carried out, they have to be held "in a state of oppression".

Distinguishing between different types of productivity was an important feature for traditional political economy, especially for systems upholding a labour theory of value. Adam Smith paid special attention to the differing roles of different types of labour in producing wealth, but made the interesting suggestion that the distinction between skilled and unskilled labour is actually relative to the specific context of production in which they are employed.⁶⁵ Marx, on his part, traced the increasing degradation of industrial workers to machines to parts of machines⁶⁶ and from there even to mere material for machines.⁶⁷ Marx's analysis depends not only on incisive empirical observations on the changing conditions of work, but also on conceptual commitments regarding just what agency is

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Marx 1981, p. 958-959.

63 Kant 2000, p. 183; see also p. 189, 197.

64 For an extensive discussion of the converse deprecation of common labour as machine-like in some currents of classical liberalism, see Losurdo 2011, p. 83-122, 181-187, 243 ff.,

65 Smith 1976, p. 118 ff.

66 E.g. Marx 1976, p. 457 (where he even employs a hidden quote from Ferguson 1995, p. 174), also p. 469.

67 Marx 1976, p. 517-527.

and who or what constitutes the focal point of the process of production. The conclusion is to be understood as expressing the continuation of the process of working skills relativization Smith had observed. Labour is now reduced to bare labour.

Thus we find Marx arguing, in *Capital IV*, that in the capitalist mode of production, the productivity of labour no longer depends on its specific content. As it turns out, Kant's strange choice to define artistic freedom by distinguishing it from wage labour stands in a fine theoretically productive contrast with Marx's famous recap of that argument:

*The same kind of labour may be productive or unproductive. For example Milton, who wrote Paradise Lost for five pounds, was an unproductive labourer. On the other hand, the writer who turns out stuff for his publisher in factory style is a productive labourer. Milton produced Paradise Lost for the same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of his nature. Later he sold the product for £5. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig, who fabricates books (for example, Compendia of Economics) under the direction of his publisher, is a productive labourer; for his product is from the outset subsumed under capital, and comes into being only for the purpose of increasing that capital.*⁶⁸

Marx's Milton is a Kantian 'free artist' who composed a great epic poem as "an activity of his nature", in contrast with the literary proletarian, a Kantian 'mercenary artist' writing "under the direction" of someone else for a wage. But whereas Kant draws his distinction based on the experience of the producer, the distinction Marx is aiming at is one defined by the turnover of the product. With the emancipation of exchange value as universal equivalent, the point of view of capital has now taken the lead in determining just what productivity is. One and the same activity can be (un)productive depending on the degree it contributes to making profit for the one who commissioned it.⁶⁹ But the rhetorical force of Marx's argument contains more than that. By choosing to give the example he does, he is playing on the (post-Kantian) intuition that the products of artistic creativity are not something to be reduced to exchange value.

We need not inquire whether Marx's theory subscribes to that specific intuition; nonetheless, among its central commitments is

68 Marx 1968, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/add1.htm#s12d>>

69 So, given a favourable market, Marx's literary proletarian need not be confined to churning out compendia of economics and might be ordered instead to produce epics of man's first disobedience.

the view that the use value of human labour power as such – not only artistic creativity – cannot be reduced to its exchange value. It is the latter view that in *Capital I* often supports the key claim of the class struggle component of Marx's critique of political economy: that it is not capitalists, machines, not capital itself, but rather workers who ultimately produce value.⁷⁰ What is more, labour on his analysis seems to stem from a human power that is not merely productive, but *creative* in a stronger sense. Labour thus obtains the status of something alike an originary life-force – in contrast with capital, rhetorically painted as dead, or worse, as an undead preying on human energy. Lest this quasi-vitalist terminology sound alarming, we should attend to a typical sample of Marx's own words:

The property therefore which labour-power in action, living labour, possesses of preserving value, at the same time that it adds it, is a gift of nature which costs the worker nothing, but is very advantageous to the capitalist [...]

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. [...] Suddenly, however, there arises the voice of the worker [...]: 'The commodity I have sold you differs from the ordinary crowd of commodities in that its use creates value, a greater value than it costs. That is why you bought it.'⁷¹

My concluding suggestion is that might be worthwhile to think in this light the ongoing interest in the broader role of creativity in the economy – in topics such as innovation, entrepreneurship, start-ups, creative industries, classes and cities, the creative economy, and so on. Of course, all of this has not remained confined to the realm of the rhetorical: it has produced palpable economic value and has begun to shape in new ways the categories in which we think about productivity. It has pushed towards short-circuiting the intuitive contrast between, on the one hand, the putative value of creative work as fulfilling for the worker and, on the other, the exchange value of her product: for we are made to believe that it is precisely the innovation of creative businesses that is most effective in increasing capital. And whereas Marx argued for the creativity of bare unskilled labour, recent theories of economic creativity are in effect returning the notion to its older elitist significance, relegating it to the activity of the capitalist.

70 See e.g. Marx 1976, p. 425-426, 508 ff., and especially the crucial passage at p. 677-679.

71 Marx 1976, p. 315, 342, respectively; cf. 323, 755.

Marx and, subsequently, critical theorists have shown how art production can be subsumed by capital. The recent insistence on the role of creativity as a driver for growth has opened up an uncanny affinity between capital as self-perpetuating drive and aesthetic experience in a Kantian-Schillerian vein: a self-inducing play with no end external to itself.⁷² What is missing from the story is the lingering indispensability of mechanical, 'non-creative' labour for the whole process, something that even Kant was apparently aware of.

IV. Conclusion

In sum, I hope to have shown that Kant's view of historical progress as driven by social antagonism can be upgraded by a latent theory of class struggle in his texts, including a sensibility to the interests of the emerging proletarian class. The issues of (1) how this can be reconciled with the mainstream reformist and legalist bent of Kant's political thought, (2) how it can contribute to current Marxist theory, and (3) how it can uncover in more detail the contradictions of creativity talk in present neoliberal political economy are the matter for further research.⁷³

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72 This aesthetic link may throw more light on the Lacanian interpretation of capital as 'fiction': Žižek 2006, 57-60.

73 An early version of this paper was presented at a Sofia University philosophy conference meeting in 2015; I thank participants for the heated discussion. Further gratitude goes to Christo Stoev and Macarena Marey for the impetus they've given to my work on the problem.