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The Weimar Republic and its Return: Unemployment, Revolution, or Europe in a State of *Schuld*

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A spectre is haunting the post-2008 economic crisis – the spectre of the Weimar Republic. This spectre is polymorphous: it appears in a range of different forms and circumstances, and inhabits a transnational space.

First of all, it comes as a powerful image: the synthetic, quintessential image of the ‘crisis’. From the pictorial archive of world history, Weimar Germany has made its way into Western collective imagery as the most recognisable visual repertoire of social malaise. Photographs shot in Germany during the period of hyperinflation (1919–23) – those portraying children building paper castles out of packs of worthless banknotes, or the long lines of unemployed workers waiting for the dole at the beginning of the 1930s – offer themselves as familiar references to a recognisable history. In its excessively iconic quality, in its intrinsic memorability, such a history is nevertheless unknown: the phantasmatic past of the economic crisis, a past that was evoked more and more often in newspapers, on television and on the internet as the depression established itself as a social reality, is less an index of historical accuracy than a *memento* – a way to turn memory into a warning.

The spectre of the Weimar Republic, in fact, is not evoked accidentally: its resurfacing acquires specific political connotations according to the different contexts in which it is invited to operate. Returning to the start of Marx and Engels’s *Manifesto*, we could suggest that most ‘powers of old Europe’ seem to ‘have entered into a holy alliance’ (2012: 33) regarding this spectre, but this time not in order to *exorcise* it (as was the case with the spectre of communism in 1848), but rather to establish it at the centre of a common discursive arena.

How come?

A starting point in understanding this scenario may be the visual repertoire mentioned above. On closer observation, we notice that recognisable images of Weimar Germany are themselves haunted. They are, in fact, not only a visualisation of the crisis in its distant yet tangible reality, grounded in bodies and spaces other than ours. They are also, and inevitably, images pregnant with a future that today has already happened: a future in which the materiality of poverty, social malaise and unemployment constituted the basis of the takeover by National Socialism in Germany. Such a future haunts the past of these images, which, for their part, unwittingly provided a prelude to it. Similarly, that future haunts spectators who encounter the images and, for whatever reason, decide to return to them.

Hence, the spectre of Weimar Germany returns not only as an immediate signifier of 'crisis'. It brings with it a peculiar temporality: one of anticipation, and – seemingly – of an ineluctable fall towards the future. That is, from the standpoint of the future, the Weimar hyperinflation of the early 1920s appears to be *always already* a prelude to the 1929 Wall Street Crash: the climax of the biggest financial crisis of the twentieth century. Likewise, the fragile democracy of the Weimar Republic survived in the collective memory first and foremost as a prelude to the rise of a populist, anti-democratic force, and eventually to the establishment of Hitler's dictatorship, which made its way into the Reichstag during the final Weimar years and grounded its consensus in the crisis that Germany's first democracy had proved unable to solve.¹

In the following pages, I shall interrogate the phantasmatic return of the Weimar Republic in light of the peculiar temporality that it calls forth: a projective temporality par excellence. I suggest that the logic according to which the Weimar Republic 'returns' today is one that establishes a tension between the present and an imminent future: a future to which the present necessarily seems to be a prelude. As I hope to demonstrate, it is precisely on the terrain of this projective temporality that different politics of use, for this return, are taking place.

Which projective temporality?

In a sense, the projective temporality that the spectre of Weimar brings into the discursive arena of the post-2008 crisis doubles the intrinsic temporality of crisis itself: a time dispossessed of a future and yet projected towards – and marked by – a horizon of potential, forthcoming failure and collapse. Alternatively, this horizon has recently been termed 'state bankruptcy', 'ultimate credit crunch', or exclusion from

majoritarian economic and monetary unions (such as the Eurozone). According to this logic, the 'return' of the crisis functions as a vector of the definition of time, doubling and validating the present.

We shall consider this temporality as a form of *political temporality*, insofar as it affects both the individual and the collective body by imposing a continuity of time perception: defining the present as a perpetual falling towards its end. In another respect, it is a political temporality in that it propels political consequences: namely, projecting on the present 'the end of the story' (the economic collapse, the advent of political terror, the danger of the war, and so on) is a way of making the present more responsible for its own events, and at the same time subject to political fatality. It is a way of affirming that it is necessary to reach compromises with the present, *if we do not wish the future to return*. As we shall see, in the wake of the European debt crisis, the projective temporality of the Weimar Republic is employed in conservative discourses precisely to foster or to defend political choices, in the present, as the only possible way of preventing the reappearance of the past.

Weimar's projective temporality, however, can also be regarded as a different form of political temporality. A projective temporality, in fact, is also one of the defining features of revolution: revolution conjures a time yet to come, to which the struggle will lead and for which the struggle shall endure. The temporality of revolutionary songs, for instance, is projective, encouraging the listener to persist in the struggle and moving her to action, imagining another world yet to come – and, in so doing, starting to construct this different future, to establish its rhythm.² Bertolt Brecht's political ballads, in this respect, are exemplary: their tune expresses a projection towards the future of the possible in the actuality of the struggle. They inhabited theatre – but also film, or the written page of poetry – as the space of this struggle, looking forward to revolution.

Interestingly, the years of the Weimar Republic, in which Brecht composed his most famous political songs, are also pregnant with images of revolution. The Republic itself was born out of a revolution – the revolution that, between November 1918 and August 1919, put an end to Germany's imperial government. Furthermore, from the start, the history of the first German Republic was marked by the memory of aborted socialist revolutions: the Spartacist Uprising in January 1919, followed by the murders of the two political leaders Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht, as well as the attempt to establish a socialist republic in Bavaria that had been instigated by, among others, Kurt Eisner, Ernst Toller and Erich Mühsam (1918–19). Overall, the intense twelve

years of the Weimar Republic are profoundly informed by the horizon of a revolution 'about to come': the socialist revolution in Germany that Soviet Russia thought would follow the 1917 Bolshevik one; the revolution that the German Communist Party (KPD) kept preparing until its final defeat with the advent of Nazism; the revolution that we find conjured up in many political pamphlets, songs and intellectual and artistic works from the Weimar era (see Willett 1996).

Returning to these works, to that horizon of revolution, is also a form of haunting: it is a way to conjure the potentiality of a revolution that never happened in the 1930s, but was conceived as possible. It means welcoming in the present reflections and forms of solidarity long forgotten, and that may be called upon to sustain the struggle in the present, in a different projective temporality, in a new logic of anticipation of the future. As Simone Weil noted insightfully in an article written in summer 1932, early 1930s Germany was a nation in *a state of waiting*: the crisis had precipitated its population into a state of suspense that opened up the potentiality of questioning the very structure of society, looking forward to the future. The future, as it were, had not yet been determined; on the contrary, 'the situation', according to Weil, 'seemed to perfectly meet the definition of a revolutionary situation' (1960: 104), although revolution, in the final stages of the *Republik*, remained latent and never actualised. If history repeats itself, however, this time the 'end of the story' might be imagined as being different: in other words, it is licit to imagine a future in which the hopes of revolution, and the forms of solidarity experienced in the Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, may also return.

Hence, the return of Weimar might indeed be regarded as a more complex phenomenon than it seems at first glance. Or at least I am interested in suggesting that alongside the slanted employment of the Weimar spectre on the part of conservative political parties, there is also a possibility of mobilising this spectre, and the projective temporality it embodies, and reclaiming it for a radically different politics of use – one in which the anticipatory logic of revolution inhabits the present territory of the potential. In what follows, I shall look at the scenario of Weimar's return, investigating first of all the distinctive rhetoric of crisis that informs contemporary politicians' and journalists' discourses in which the Weimar Republic is employed as a powerful analogy for various national contexts. Secondly, I shall turn to the possibility of imagining a different politics of use for such 'return', taking as a starting point an interesting example: the art/research project entitled *Red Channels Meets the Red Megaphone – Kuhle Wampe Revisited*. This took

place in Berlin in July 2011, was organised by the New York-based collective Red Channels, and was hosted in the art space OKK/Raum 29. The project, whose subtitle, significantly, was *Suicide or Solidarity*, was conceived as a collective research work around the movie *Kuhle Wampe*, which had been made in Berlin in 1932 as a collaboration between several artists including Slatan Dudow, Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler. The film, which premiered in Berlin on 30 May 1932 and was banned on 23 March 1933, was a political reflection on unemployment, labour and solidarity, portraying working-class Berlin life in the Republic's crucial last year. The project proposed by Red Channels was an invitation to 'reimagine, retrace, remix, reenact, and reload *Kuhle Wampe*' (Red Channels 2011).

After discussing how the return of Weimar is performed on the stage of international politics, I shall look at this experiment as a way of reflecting on the position of Berlin in contemporary discourse on the crisis: interestingly, in fact, in such discourses Berlin (and Germany overall) seems to exist only as a spectre, and not as a direct protagonist in today's history of the 'crisis'. While, on the level of decision-making, in contemporary discourse Berlin's position appears absolutely central, such prominence is radically detached from the Weimar spectre, which is evoked so often when discussing other European countries. Intercepting the proposal that Red Channels made to the project's participants in 2011 – to bring back *Kuhle Wampe* and the historical moment in which the movie was made as material for study, but also as the possible basis for playful enactment – we shall discuss the characters of a potential re-appropriation of such return, in a logic of anticipation of a revolution that may, indeed, already be starting to happen – most likely *elsewhere*.

The Weimar syndrome

A brief tour of the landscape of the international press from the last five years offers diverse examples in which the Weimar spectre is called upon in explicit dialogue with contemporary politics, functioning as a strobe light that illuminates portions of the present and projects features, attributes and omens upon those portions.

On 5 October 2012, for example, in an interview with the German newspaper *Handelsblatt*, the Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras compared the recent scenario of Greek democracy with the Weimar Republic: according to him, the country was not only confronting an unprecedented unemployment peak, but the social unrest engendered

by the economic situation was key to the rise of dangerous populist movements of extreme left and right,³ which had even made their way into parliament (2012). Samaras employed the powerful image of pre-Nazi Weimar to present his own government as a crucial opportunity not only to restore the national economy but also to 'save' Greece from an imminent destiny of political chaos. In this scenario, Germany's support to Samaras's commitment to maintain Greece's position in the Eurozone was presented as vital for preventing both economic collapse and the 'return' of extremist politics in the heart of Europe, today bastion of an established social democracy, whose success Germany's wealth is at pains to exemplify (*Zeit Online* 2012).

A few days after Samaras's statements, the comparison between Greece and the Weimar Republic appeared again on the German news, this time in the context of an analysis by the 'Eurozone expert' Wolfgang Münchau (2012). According to the economist, Greece in 2011–12 found itself in a very similar condition to Germany in the 1930s, insofar as the country confronted a situation of high debt (like Germany after World War One, because of heavy war reparations), deflation and the impossibility of exiting the impasse by devaluing its currency, which was tied to a fixed exchange rate. What the rigid link to the gold standard represented for the Reichsmark in the early 1930s, the adoption of the Euro represented today for Greece: a connection to a fixed value that prevented national banks from responding to the economic emergency with a politics of greater monetary flexibility, rather than austerity. Therefore, in polemics with Chancellor Merkel's determination to enforce austerity measures in Europe as a solution to the recession, Münchau's article advised Germany to learn one more lesson from its own history: that the Weimar Republic ended in such economic and political catastrophe after 1929 above all because of its rigid adherence to a standard monetary value. The same mistake, Münchau concludes, should not be repeated today, positing the Euro's value as a heavy burden that all European national economies should carry on the back of their social and political bodies.

Interestingly, a few months later in the *Financial Times*, Münchau evoked Weimar Germany again in relation to another European context. Commenting on Italian politics, shortly before the elections of February 2013, Münchau compared the economist and newly appointed Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti⁴ with Heinrich Brüning, the longest-serving chancellor of the Weimar Republic (2013). Just like Mario Monti, Brüning was an expert in finance, and he led a highly unstable governmental coalition between March 1930 and May 1932

that pursued a policy of heavy cuts to public spending and salaries (a reduction of more than 30 per cent in two years), claiming that retrenchment would save Germany from high levels of deficit and debt to the US; meanwhile, living conditions in the country worsened unimaginably.⁵ While Italy avoided financial crisis during Monti's tenure in 2011, Münchau rightly suggests that his politics of rigor provoked the growth of the economic crisis in the country.

The comparison between Monti and the 'Hunger Chancellor' had appeared earlier in an analysis by Joseph Halevi, published in the leftist newspaper *Il Manifesto* (2012). Here, too, the reference to Brüning pointed to Monti's inability to realise in time the negative effects of his austerity politics, especially in the absence of a strong demand for symmetrical adjustments among all countries participating in the single European currency. As Maria Grazia Turri points out, the uncanny resemblance between the Italian scenario and the 1928–31 Weimar Republic, however, acquired its most striking features after the most recent national elections (2013). The 2013 electoral results led to conditions in which governance was difficult, since no party achieved a majority: the Five Star Movement, an anti-Europe populist movement (led by a charismatic leader, and refusing to adopt the label of 'party', as did National Socialism at the beginning), gained enormous consensus among those voters disappointed with traditional political parties.⁶ Furthermore 'for the sake of the nation', the 84-year-old President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano was asked by the main political parties – Partito Democratico and Popolo della Libertà – to renew his mandate as an extraordinary measure aimed at strengthening presidential powers and to back a large government coalition led by the democrat Enrico Letta, gathering together both centre-left and right-wing parties. The same logic had characterised the re-election, in 1932, of the 84-year-old German President Paul von Hindenburg, who backed the wide coalition led first by Brüning, then by Franz von Papen and Kurt von Schleicher. Shortly afterwards, this coalition collapsed, leaving the stage to Hitler's first chancellorship, which von Hindenburg reluctantly endorsed.

These comparisons, which vary in their political connotations, are all symptomatic of what sociologists Charles Derber and Yale Magrass have defined as the 'Weimar syndrome', which they summarise as consisting of the following elements:

1. A severe and intensifying economic crisis
2. A failure by majoritarian liberal or Left groups to resolve the crisis

3. The rise of right-wing populist groups feeling economically threatened and politically unrepresented
4. The decision of the conservative political establishment to ally with and empower these right-wing elements, as their best way to stabilize capitalism and prevent the rise of progressive movements against corporations or capitalism itself. (2012)

The use of the term 'syndrome' (designating a group of symptoms that together characterise a specific disease) is significant in the specific context we are observing: curiously, in the public discourse, the European crisis often appeared to be associated with metaphors of plague and illness (spreading across Europe from one country to another), and the related predicament was that the collective body of the continent urgently needed treatment. In this discursive logic, austerity itself was depicted as a necessary medication, able to arrest the imminent contagion.

Interestingly, however, Derber and Magrass develop their analysis of the 'Weimar syndrome' in the context of a reflection on contemporary American politics, when, following the 2012 election, Mitt Romney's Republican Party became increasingly dependent on far right-wing components such as the Tea Party in order to gain electoral consensus. Their definition of the 'Weimar syndrome' suggests yet another remarkable aspect that we should consider: the flexible spectre of Weimar Germany has distinctive transnational characteristics. Not only does Germany today play on the stage of the international debt crisis the part performed by the US in the 1930s, but North America itself, to a certain extent, re-enacts 1920s Germany, as do all the European countries described using Weimar metaphors in the articles mentioned above.

Overall, the comparison of the current crisis with the one preceding and culminating with the 1929 Wall Street Crash, which had severe consequences for the German economy, utilises the legendary German depression but eludes the actual social scenario of the Germany of today. The *return of the crisis* – so to speak – is staged in Germany by means of an image of Germany (currently one of the European countries less affected by the economic impasse) but is happening elsewhere: for instance, in Greece and Italy, but also in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Bulgaria and other countries – and even in the US. But this is an elsewhere that is strongly linked to Germany, not least because in most cases it participates in the European collective body that German international politics is at pains to defend – or, to be more precise, to define. It is an elsewhere that, in its variety, makes up a European project and

a relationship with the US that post-reunification Germany seemed, on its part, to *prelude*. Hence, to a certain extent, the return of the Weimar spectre also performs on the stage of Germany's elaborate process of national identification, playing a complex *détournement* in terms of time and space in the country's imagining of itself.

The austerity politics strongly encouraged by Chancellor Merkel – especially after the 2012 treaty establishing that all Eurozone countries have to incorporate into their constitutions a deficit limit modelled on the German *Schuldenbremse* (debt brake) – seems to legitimise Germany's view that its political body is greater than itself. In a sense, the *Schuldenbremse* marks the legacy that Germany – and German history – performs toward the other European countries, and also to the capitalist US.

As Walter Benjamin pointed out as early as 1921, the 'demonic ambiguity of the word *Schuld*' (1996: 289) in the German language is worth stressing here: in German, *Schuld* also means blame and guilt, as much as debt. The semantic landscape encompassed by this word is a conceptual connection too – perhaps the most significant insight into what Benjamin described as the functioning of capitalism as religion: 'the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement. [...] [A] religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction' (1996: 288–9). Such a predicament, in a sense, expresses the gist of the peculiar temporality imposed by the economic crisis.

As economists Sebastian Duller and Ulrike Guérot explain, Germany's long tradition of ordoliberalism, or social market economy, is more suggestive of the German approach to the Eurozone crisis 'than the much-discussed historical experience of the hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic on the one hand and simple national interest on the other' (2013). The specific form of capitalism that contemporary Germany performs embodies almost literally Benjamin's analysis of a cult 'that makes guilt pervasive' (1996: 288) – so pervasive that it exceeds national boundaries. In a sense, the predicament with which all European countries have to comply is one established by Germany according to its own internal regulations, entailing a governmental stability (at any price), a strong social democracy with a free market economy, and an internal system of organising the members of the nation, understood primarily as an economic entity.

In this context, it is relevant to recount another passage from Benjamin's 1921 notes:

It contributes to the knowledge of capitalism as religion to imagine that the original paganism certainly and most proximately grasped

religion not as a 'higher' 'moral' interest but as the most immediately practical – that it had with other words been aware of its 'ideal' or 'transcendent' nature, just as today's capitalism is, but saw the irreligious or individual of different faith as infallible members of its community, in precisely the same way the modern bourgeoisie [sees] its non-earning members. (1996: 290)

The 'Weimarisation of Europe' staged in the German and international press seems to correspond to a simultaneous affirmation that all European citizens are members of the same community, 'in precisely the same way [as] the modern bourgeoisie [sees] its non-earning members' (Benjamin 1996: 290). The *Schuldenbremse*, in other words, can be considered the dogma that the 1920s capitalism-as-religion described by Benjamin had not yet fully elaborated: it is its theology and teleology, implying political consequences. It increases and regulates the despair in which the horizon of the future keeps its members – however faithful (or unfaithful) to the capitalist cult – in the impossibility of reaching that future without 'worries'.⁷

It is perhaps according to this logic that the 'Weimarisation of Europe' has, at least on a rhetorical level, reached Germany itself. During the 2013 electoral campaign, Bernd Lucke, the leader of the newly formed 'Eurosceptic' party Alternative für Deutschland, was attacked during a speech in Bremen by (in his words) 'far left activists'. Commenting on the episode, Lucke associated it with the violence of the *Schlägertruppen* (goon squads) during the Weimar Republic (*Die Welt* 2013). Significant in this context is the fact that the populist movement Alternative für Deutschland, which has identified itself with a radical nationalist and 'anti-Euro' politics, emphasising the disadvantages of Germany's participation in the common European currency, also draws on the 'Weimar repertoire' to address social and political unrest in Germany, according to a logic that similarly places the economic crisis at the centre of a supposed historical re-enactment.

To a certain extent, the fact that Weimar 'returns' to be evoked in Germany by the leader of a party advocating the dismantling of the Eurozone – and one associated with right-wing and nationalist sentiments – reflects the growing feeling of insecurity that Germany itself is facing, while its economy is still offering itself as a *last resort* against the hardships experienced in the Southern European countries – the countries most clearly suspended in a state of *Schuld*. Indeed, the crisis has started to inhabit Germany too, especially because Germany today is a territory of encounter for many citizens from different

European countries, and from the rest of the world. It is a place whose economy still offers possibilities of labour, leisure, study and productive work. Indeed, it is a transnational space where different 'immigrants' from other 'European Weimar Republics' take refuge, at least temporarily, but not without consequences.

In general, Germany's inhabitants, old and new, face a different context of unemployment than the one portrayed in *Kuhle Wampe*: unemployment here meets the discontinuous horizon of precarious labour and flexibility, which is central to the social market economy. In the increasingly neoliberal system of competition, in which all kinds of labour – including artistic and intellectual production – are regulated in the German social democracy, unemployment has ceased to be visualised as an empty waiting on the streets (as Weimar Germany would have it), but it is still present and is increased by the arrival of many more jobseekers in the country, from *elsewhere*.

The jobseeker is the emblematic figure of the crisis, and certainly the quintessential figure in which the Weimar Republic spectre is crystallised. The jobseeker – or precarious worker – is someone disposing of an unregulated amount of labour power, which coincides with her very bios: her time is not used productively but is suspended between deadlines, potential opportunities, and a search for wages that consumes her own free time. Not surprisingly, in the creative economy of the Berlin art scene, the overlap between free time and precarious work is impressive: for example, voluntary participation in arts projects is an undeniable arena for jobseeking, in a precarious condition in which the German social democracy provides basic support for temporary survival as well as the lure of a forthcoming job. Germany today is once again in a *state of waiting*: it embraces its inhabitants within the social space, which owes its existence to the country's own 'faithfulness' to capitalism, blurring free time and unemployment in a condition of precarious future.

However, today, as much as in the 1920s, the politics behind the use of free time is a matter of choice. Although it is suspended between the potentialities of work, free time can also be turned into a space in which one can imagine a different order of things – not as escapist fantasy, but as a form of study and as a form of pleasure.

***Red Channels Meets the Red Megaphone*: rehearsal for revolution**

When I first started searching for information about the project *Red Channels Meets the Red Megaphone: Suicide or Solidarity*, I could find little

more than the materials gathered on the website launching the project: a series of texts offered as historical and theoretical readings around the movie *Kuhle Wampe*,⁸ a programme of the activities proposed by Red Channels during their stay in Berlin,⁹ and a statement offered as a starting point:

How is it possible to invent new forms of solidarity in times of imposed capitalist absurdity? How can we define new spaces of struggle against the suffering of budget cuts, mass unemployment and nationalist threat? And not what is to be done, but how is it to be done? [...] For the week following our screening of *Kuhle Wampe*, we will be based out of okk/room29 in Berlin-Wedding. We hope to facilitate a collective response to the film, open to all. Using video as our primary means of documentation, we invite everybody to collaborate with us on this research project, which is open to any media or practice. (Red Channels 2011)

After the Berlin project, the collective Red Channels dissolved, and the work realised in 2011 was never followed up. A potential outcome, however, was never planned, nor was it considered essential by the organisers themselves. As I discussed with two former members of Red Channels, Martyna Starosta and Matt Peterson, the mobilisation of a collective response to *Kuhle Wampe* was, in a sense, the whole point of their project. The strategy they proposed – using film to foster discussion and collective political reflection – was one that Red Channels had experimented with before. They described it in a 2010 interview in the following terms:

You might see participation in classrooms or reading groups, but these are contained, private exchanges. We're after something both public and participatory. This is the rehearsal for revolution. [...] We should be creating more autonomous spaces for dialogue and exchange through our work and organizing. (Squibb 2010)

I am interested in picking up on this idea of 'rehearsal for revolution' in order to reflect on what it means to take a week to watch an old movie, with strangers, and to visualise some of the nodes that are crucial in interrogating the present, and to do this in the transnational space of contemporary Berlin – a point from which economic consequences radiate out to the rest of Europe, and a space where free time constantly overlaps with precarious work.

It is relevant, for this analysis, that the Red Channels' project was not funded by any art institution and took place in the participants' free time: their current positions (supported by fellowships, part-time jobs, private investments, or other income sources) allowed them the 'privilege' of spending time in Germany outside a work structure. In fact, organisers and participants were mostly temporary inhabitants of Berlin, in transit to some 'elsewhere', as is so often the case. In Berlin, the group that gathered around Red Channels mainly discussed ways to follow up the movie, which never became artistic products. They shot some film, which was never edited; they collectively wrote a script, *Fritz and Annie*, which was neither put on stage nor filmed; and they repeatedly visited the Brecht Archive, trying to gather materials on the censored sequences of the movie,¹⁰ with a plan in mind to re-enact them and edit the film with the new scenes.

None of this was realised. Indeed, as Natalie Gravenor, one of the participants, told me in an email: 'Collective film re-enactment is very worthwhile for the processes it sets in motion, not for any finished product that might result [from] it.'¹¹ In fact, what interests me about this project is not so much what happened during that week of free time, but the potentiality it opened up for those who decided to spend their free time thinking about *Kuhle Wampe*. To some extent, it was indeed a 'rehearsal for revolution', especially if we consider the number of political uprisings that, in the immediate future, would take place all over the globe, and which had already started in 2011 with the so-called Arab Spring and continued shortly afterwards with Occupy Wall Street. In general, the protest movements around the globe claimed and posed to the present the same questions that appeared in the statement of Red Channels: demands for solidarity, for autonomy from the given conditions of capitalist absurdity, for the re-appropriation of futurity.

While in national politics the spectre of the Weimar depression is projecting on tomorrow a catastrophic horizon, and enhancing the urge for political compromise, another part of the world has been employing the projective temporality of revolution – which was also elaborated during the Weimar years – in order to affirm that the end of the story is not, in fact, 'the end of history'.

As Bini Adamczak pointed out:

When Francis Fukuyama announced 'the end of history' in 1992, he simply meant that there was no alternative to liberal capitalism – forever. [...] The hope for a better future was replaced by the fear that the present would become worse. And this present, which

continuously degraded the lives of the majority, would expand, it seemed, forever. Now the end of history is itself history. Seen from the future that has already started, this historical era will have begun in 1991 and will have lasted exactly 20 years until the Arab Spring. As if history were shrewdly trying to find the most effective stage for a comeback, its return has taken the beginning, of all places, in that region of the world that both colonialism and the new world order have deemed ahistorical, or backwards at best. (2013)

Revolution challenges the idea of the end of history, understood as the ever-growing cult of capitalism, and questions the very structure of those societies that have imposed, and then blamed, Weimar-style economic depression: Weimar's memory of *Schuld*. It imagines a different world, a world yet to come. This imagining is not immediately recognisable, however: in tracing 'the end of the end of history', Adamczak observes that 'revolutions in general raise not only the question of their predictability but also of their recognizability once they have started to begin'.

The idea of rehearsal, in this case, resurfaces as a useful conceptual tool with which to read the discontinuous and simultaneous revolutionary moments that have punctuated both the European and the wider international scene since 2011: if not proper beginnings, these moments could at least be considered as rehearsals for revolution. The urge to ask questions such as those posed at the end of *Kuhle Wampe – 'Wesser Morgen ist der Morgen? Wesser Welt ist die Welt?'* ('Whose tomorrow is tomorrow? Whose world is the world?') – connects these moments; some are more incisive, some more pervasive, but they are 'common in their unlikeness' (Adamczak 2013).

Overall, I suggest, the ensemble of these different moments of protest and international solidarity can be considered as the rebuilding of a culture of revolution, in which images, words and habits are rehearsed and tested again in the present, even if they have no immediate or precise political outcome. Taken together, these moments, these rehearsed revolutions, can be considered an interesting response to the task attributed by Brecht to the domain of culture:

Culture, that is, superstructure, is not to be seen as a thing, possession, result of a development ... but rather as a self-developing factor and above all as a process. [...] The expression of the cultural needs of the masses are the ways of life that steadily develop under economic and political pressure and, in our time of the class-conscious proletariat, acquire a revolutionary function. (1992: 570)

Vorwärt und nicht vergessen: forward-thinking solidarity and the return of revolution

In the last part of this essay, I shall be a latecomer participant to the Red Channels project, picking two sequences of *Kuhle Wampe* that resonate for me as counter-images of the Weimar spectre: images of work (and non-work), of blame and despair, of free time and solidarity, and, finally, of liberated work. I will focus on the two poles identified in the Berlin project as the alpha and omega of *Kuhle Wampe*: suicide and solidarity.

Kuhle Wampe's first sequence, underscored by Hanns Eisler's anguished staccato music, offers one of the most striking visualisations of unemployment in the competing struggle for work under capitalism. The unemployed are a nameless crowd of cyclists, first idly standing in the streets of Berlin's working-class district of Wedding, then launched in a desperate rush towards work possibilities once the newspaper, with its advertisements of job offers, is distributed among them.

One of them, the young Bönike, is followed eventually by the camera into the space of his family, haunted by the misery of depression and by the sense of blame – *die Schuld* – that Bönike's parents express towards their son. Following a scene set around the family table, the movie portrays the suicide of the unemployed boy through a mechanical



Figure 1.1 Image of unemployed on bikes. Courtesy of Praesens-Film AG

sequence of acts, including the removal of a watch from the boy's wrist, as if to measure the abandonment of time, the final exit from the empty time of unemployment.

In Brecht's analysis of the suicide scene, he points out that the young Bönike's suicide does not portray an individual tragedy but stands for the destiny of a whole class.¹² It is a suicide devoid of any heroism: one of many, each provoked by an unjust system of beliefs and work. It is also the sort of suicide, one might add, that Benjamin considered distinctive of the 'collapse of the market for human commodity' (1994: 306) that corresponded to the post-war unemployment of the 1920s: a suicide no longer relating to a power of resistance to the existing world. The figure of the unemployed is central to the constellation of Benjamin's thought, since, as Rolleston suggested, she is 'an individual enduring a not-yet-defined universality of suffering' (1996: 39). In the singularity of such a condition, the unemployed individual comes to epitomise the disposability of time and labour under capitalism, in a logic according to which the possibility to produce, hence to consume, is crucial to existence itself. In this scenario, the figure of the unemployed becomes conflated with the very category to which Benjamin devoted his research on nineteenth-century capitalism: the discarded commodity. The figure of the jobless is one that, just as the discarded commodity does for the products of fashion, contributes to the disappearance of the gap between being 'employed' and 'unemployed': it constitutes the shadow of suffering, guilt and hopelessness (in a word, the state of *Schuld*) that characterises work under capitalism.¹³

As a counter-image to this predicament, we could think about Benjamin's interest in Charles Fourier's utopia of a future of liberated work, a future that can already be imagined in the present: not by chance, as Benjamin notes (2003b: 5), as an example of a *travail non salarié mais passionné*, Fourier used to offer the revolutionary gesture of building barricades, very familiar to those who, like him, were writing in the France of the late nineteenth century. In other words, against the backdrop of Fourier's socialist utopia of an emancipated future, we can perceive the empty time of the unemployed as a potential space in which to imagine another world, as well as the space for passionate activities acting as a prelude to revolution.

In very much the same spirit, in the last sequence of *Kuhle Wampe*, Brecht and Dudow decide to stage a sports festival in which the spectator is confronted with a radically different organisation of labour, competition and joy than the domain of work haunting the anguished jobseeking of the movie's beginning. The last part of the film is a



KUHLE WAMPE ODER WEM GEHÖRT DIE WELT - Deutschland 1932 Regie: Slatan Dudow
Quelle: Deutsche Kinemathek

Figure 1.2 Still from *Kuhle Wampe*. Courtesy of the Deutsche Kinemathek

re-enactment (realised with the active participation of 3,000 voluntary members of Fichte, the umbrella organisation of Berlin's workers' athletic clubs) of the mass sports gatherings that in the summer of 1932 were actually taking place in Berlin, and constituted a concrete horizon of 'another world' in contrast to the hardship of depression and unemployment.¹⁴ As the film sequence emphasises, these festivals were indeed a space in which a *travail non salarié mais passionné* could be experienced first-hand as an image of the future rehearsed in the present. They were a space in which competition was turned into joyful collaboration, and in which the despair of unemployment could be turned into class-conscious solidarity.

In her lucid notes on 1932 'Germany in a state of waiting' – suspended between the potentiality of revolution and the advent of fascism – Simone Weil made an explicit reference to the joyful characteristic of the sporting gatherings organised by young German proletarians (employed and unemployed), indicating that this joy was a symptom of the potentiality of imminent revolution, which still remained



KUHLE WAMPE - Deutschland 1932
 Regie: Stellan Dudow
 Quelle: Filmmuseum Berlin - Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Figure 1.3 Still from *Kuhle Wampe*. Courtesy of the Deutsche Kinemathek

completely plausible in the scenario of the Weimar Republic's last year (1960: 112). And in the summer of 1932, *Kuhle Wampe* was screened for the first time, crystallising this joy in images that remained, surviving the subsequent Nazi ban, and being delivered, afterwards, to the future.

The sports festival in *Kuhle Wampe* culminates and concludes with the collective singing of the Brecht/Eisler song *Solidaritätslied*, whose most remarkable line is itself an invitation to enter the future, an invitation – as it were – for the future to begin: ‘forward and don’t forget’. It is a song that remained emblematic of a notion of solidarity, which, in the early 1930s, was simultaneously pervasive and strongly connected to a political demand to question the existing order of things, to look forward to a different future. The construction of such a future, however, could not be based on forgetfulness: to a certain extent, this significant line from *Solidaritätslied* resonates with the words of a 1915 pamphlet by Karl Liebknecht – the incitement to ‘learn everything, and not forget anything’ (1952: 300) which played a part in the construction of that language of revolution which Brecht and Eisler themselves learned and pursued fifteen years later.

In a sense, Liebknacht's incitement – in dialogue with and resonating with the notes of *Kuhle Wampe's* final ballad of solidarity (at least for this particular spectator) – seems to seal, from a radical perspective, the return of Weimar's projective temporality, and to entice a strategic appropriation of the use of the Weimar spectre as a memento. Learning from Weimar also means conjuring up in the present a forward-thinking solidarity, along with the joy that it entails; it also means reconceiving free time as a space in which it is possible to imagine and to engage with a different horizon of work; it can be a space – to echo Red Channels' words – in which to rehearse revolution, in a legacy of solidarity with old spectres – such as Brecht, Liebknacht, Benjamin and Fourier – but hopefully also with new comrades, present and future.

Notes

1. Most titles of historical surveys devoted to the Weimar Republic (which remained neglected in the German academic debate until 1973, when the first important conference on the topic was hosted in Bochum) are quite telling with regard to the terms in which the logic of anticipation, which I discuss here, has characterised the narrative of Weimar history for a long time, and still does today. Suffice to mention a few major studies, published in different periods, that incorporate in their titles a terminology attributing the role of 'prelude' to the Weimar Republic: Brecht (1968); Dejonge (1978); Weitz (2007).
2. On the peculiar temporality of revolution songs, see Palladini and Ridout (2013).
3. In this interview, Samaras implicitly associated the Coalition of the Radical Left, Syriza (today the party leading the Greek parliament), with the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which achieved alarming electoral results in the 2012 elections.
4. Mario Monti was nominated prime minister in November 2011 by Italian President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano, with the mandate to lead a government of technocrats for implementing emergency austerity measures to restore Italy's financial stability.
5. In November 2011, in the wake of the Greek debt crisis, the figure of Brüning was evoked in comparison with Lucas Papademos, another economist and prime minister of Greece between 2011 and 2012. This comparison accompanied the association, proposed by Fabian Lindner, between contemporary Germany and 1931 United States, as both were in the position of being the beneficiary of the crisis countries' debt (2011; 2013).
6. The comparison between the Five Star Movement and 1920s National Socialism was referred to in the media during 2013, and certainly drew on the same logic of comparison with the Weimar Republic I am analysing here. Although it is undeniable that some specific forms of rhetoric, as well as the aggressive style employed by the movement's leader, the comic actor Beppe Grillo, are uncannily resonant with Hitler's pre-1933 populist rhetoric (especially in the visceral anger towards 'the system'), I would be careful in

stressing further this comparison outside a more rigorous historical analysis (especially since this comparison was much emphasised by Italian right-wing journals; see Sacchi 2013). In 2014, however, during the campaign for European elections, such an association once again became a matter of discussion, as a result of a statement made by Grillo during a speech: namely, 'they compare me to Hitler, but I am beyond Hitler'. This provocative statement addressed precisely the way in which the comparison had been employed by the media. This time, however, such a comment appeared to be particularly uncanny, especially in the wake of the European electoral results, which saw the rise of extreme right parties in many European countries. Prominent among these parties was the United Kingdom's xenophobic UKIP, a party that made no secret of its 'Euroscepticism' and that, precisely on this basis, found a terrain of dialogue with Grillo and the Five Star Movement. In 2014, the two parties formed a common grouping in the European parliament.

7. It is worth noting that in the same text Benjamin defines 'worries' as 'a mental illness that suits the capitalist epoch' (1996: 290).
8. Among the preparatory readings for *Red Channels Meets the Red Megaphone* were *Reading Capital Politically* (Cleaver 1979) and 'Pre-fascist Period: To Think and To Want: *Kuhle Wampe*' (Luppa 2009).
9. Activities included a session of screening and discussion on the movie, following sessions of collective research and editing work, as well as walking tours retracing historical spots of radical left politics in Berlin.
10. *Kuhle Wampe* had two complete bans and several cuts before the film could be released.
11. 'RE: *Kuhle Wampe*', email to the author, 3 September 2013.
12. Brecht reports the censor's quote, which accuses the authors of having made a political point by means of their characterisation of the unemployed: 'You have not depicted a human being, but let's say it, a type [...] Your unemployed worker is not a real individual [...] He is superficially portrayed, as artists pardon me this strong expression for the fact that [*sic*] *we learn too little about him*, but the consequences are of a political nature [...] Your film has the tendency to present suicide as typical, as a matter not of this or that (morbidly inclined) individual, but as the fate of a whole class' (1974: 46).
13. This view on unemployment appears especially evident in Benjamin (2003a).
14. Emblematic, in this respect, is the figure of Fritz (played by Ernst Busch), who has just been fired from his job and joins the sports festival almost by chance, following his class-conscious girlfriend Annie, and in the space of the gathering seems to overcome the singularity of his suffering in the collective attempt to elaborate a new political subjectivity.