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Kuhle Wampe and 2021 in the United States, or, "Where Are We Now?"

At the time of writing this paper, a dark and dismal fog seems to swallow the entire world in the form of unchecked late-stage capitalism, growing fascism and other forms of authoritarianism, climate change, and the as-of-yet unknown aftereffects of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic. In studying slightly fictionalized depictions of Europe between the World Wars, I can't shake the feeling that we as people have been here before. The current real-world conflicts present in the United States align perfectly with fictionalized events from 1930s Germany like those depicted in the film *Kuhle Wampe* (dir. by Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow), such as mass unemployment and rising suicide rates. However, this time with the sheer popularity of communism and similar branches of leftist thought among the rising generations, we may have a chance to revolutionize our society before it is too late.

Economic depression is settling inside the United States much like it was all over the Western world ninety years ago. While we are doing better than last year when the coronavirus pandemic was at its height - The New York Times casually reports this now as "more than 20 million people [losing] jobs in the span of two months and the unemployment rate [jumping] to nearly 15 percent" (Casselman, *Cutoff of Jobless Benefits*) - there are still masses and masses of Americans who are without jobs, whether because of pandemic circumstances or by their own choice (Casselman, *Workers Quitting Their Jobs*). The working theory of many Republican

states has been that ending unemployment benefits would lead to more workers being hired, a theory which quickly fell apart once they actually put it into practice (Casselman, *Cutoff of Jobless Benefits*). All of this - especially the mass walkouts and resignations - is to be expected from a country that hasn't even raised its federal minimum wage in twelve whole years (U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division). The coronavirus pandemic isn't even over, much as we'd like it to be - only slowed.

While Germany, as far as I know, did not experience a massive and explicit health crisis such that we are experiencing now in the U.S. and across the world, the core struggles that German society faced are the same as the ones we Americans are facing in the present day. The film *Kuhle Wampe*, my historical analog for the purposes of this paper, opens with a nearly ten-minute sequence of eligible, healthy young men searching for jobs, only to return home empty-handed (*Kuhle Wampe* 0:00 - 7:00). This rings incredibly true for those in our situation. While American employers and corporations are attempting to play the victim card and blame government stimulus checks and unemployment benefits for the worker shortage, the personal experiences and tribulations of job seekers beg to differ (Casselman, *The Economic Rebound is Still Waiting*). Over the course of this past September, one Floridian man, for example, sent in two job applications a day to employers in his area and came back at the end of the 30 days with one entire interview for a position that initially wanted to pay him under the minimum wage (Reuter). And yet, just like in the film (*Kuhle Wampe* 9:06 - 10:13), job-seekers are the ones derided as lazy.

Another catastrophic effect of late-stage capitalism that we are seeing not only repeat itself, but grow worse, is that of suicide rates in the U.S. In 2019, the rate of deaths by suicide per 100,000 Americans was nearly 14% (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention). While

this is a slight drop from 2018, it is undeniable that the trend of American suicides has only been growing since 2010, when the rate per 100,000 was barely 12%. It is unclear as of right now how the coronavirus pandemic and its fallout is going to affect these numbers in the coming years, though what we know of 2020's numbers are indeed better than 2019's, coming in at "44,834 deaths in 2020 from 47,511 in 2019. It is the second year in a row that the number has fallen, after cresting in 2018" (Rabin). The article here also calls attention to the potential that suicide rates may have actually risen last year in communities mostly made up of people of color (Rabin), but that it could also just be a fluke of certain demographics and locations that do not point to a national trend. We won't know anything for certain until there is further distance from the start of the pandemic, but despite the lack of information from last year we can still clearly observe these disheartening trends.

Kuhle Wampe effectively throws itself into the topic of suicide in Weimar Germany shortly after the start of the film when the main character's brother - the one seen job-hunting to no avail in the scenes prior - throws himself out of a window (*Kuhle Wampe*, 12:11 - 13:20). His death is barely recognized even as a tragedy, but merely another unfortunate event on top of all the other unfortunate circumstances surrounding the family and their neighborhood. While efforts are being made in the present-day United States to aid in the understanding of mental illness and the prevention of suicide, I can personally attest that the overall reaction to such deaths, especially if they are the direct result of joblessness, houselessness, or any other specific capitalist circumstance, is much closer to the ambivalence of the crowd seen in this film (*Kuhle Wampe*, 13:48 - 14:40). This neighborhood response to the suicide speaks to a combination of resignation and a desire for some sort of morbid spectacle with which to take their minds off their own problems.

This isn't to say that there isn't hope. When doing the research for this paper, I came across an article by a German scholar specifically about German suicide as depicted in *Kuhle Wampe*. He mentions that while “Between 1929 and 1932 the German suicide rate rose by 11.9 per cent, undoubtedly symptomatic of mass employment and welfare cuts” that it was “more ‘typical’ of the German unemployed to muddle through in sectors . . . or to take part in the political struggles of the period” (Föllmer, p. 196). Indeed, with the fact that overall suicide numbers in the U.S. have fallen since 2018, and with the George Floyd uprisings and outpouring of mutual aid networks that 2020 wrought, it seems as if this is true for our rising generations as well. If despair is not grabbing us by the neck, those of us entering adulthood in these tumultuous times do seem committed to anti-fascist and social-anarchist organization more than ever before.

So where *does* this leave the masses growing up in the present-day U.S.A? The truth is that we don't know. With so much economic uncertainty as a result of this most recent late-capitalist depression, the effects and after-effects of the coronavirus pandemic and steadily climbing suicide rates, so much about the future is unclear and frightening. However protests, social-anarchist organizing, walkouts and labor strikes are only growing in popularity as we see every single day in the news. Is it possible that we in the U.S. can avoid a fascist regime from taking root after so much strife and death, unlike *Kuhle Wampe* and 1930s Germany? Or will history repeat itself as this decade unfolds? Unsatisfying a conclusion though it may be, the answer only lies with time.

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