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Seeking New Classics in a Crisis: Modernity as Ancient History in German Thought¹

1. Introduction

It is perhaps, as Zhou Enlai is supposed to have remarked, ‘too early to tell’ the true significance of the French Revolution² – or, indeed, of the revolutionary movements and social changes which followed in its wake. One response would be to issue only a provisional verdict, acknowledging that we are still in the slipstream of those movements and changes, unable to come anywhere near understanding how they fit into world history. A particular tradition in German thought has attempted a bolder response: that of trying to understand the long-term significance of modern social and political developments by studying them with some of the skills and perspectives of the archaeologist, classicist or ancient historian.

According to an important strand of this tradition, this method is not simply an arbitrary circumvention of the difficulties in understanding still quite recent history: it also corresponds to something in the subject matter itself. In particular, nineteenth- and twentieth-century utopian projects, oriented to the future, are seen to be, like classical antiquity itself, deeply alien yet full of meaning for contemporary debates. This calls for the skills of archaeologists, classicists and ancient historians in excavating deeply submerged societies and ideas, and then bringing them to bear on contemporary political and ethical debates.

The most explicit recent champion of this approach is the critical theorist and film director Alexander Kluge. In his nine-and-a-half-hour 2008 documentary *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike* ('News from Ideological Antiquity'), inspired by Marx's *Capital*, he seeks to understand the early history of German and European socialism by treating it as a modern 'antiquity', a remote epoch which invented new forms of humanism and utopianism that lie at the root of contemporary society. According to Kluge and other thinkers discussed here, the rich lessons for our present can be uncovered and effectively analysed only through methods and approaches normally reserved for periods which are much more chronologically distant, especially classical antiquity. These include, in particular, painstaking philological and archaeological study of all surviving details. For Kluge and even more so for the other thinkers, such minute study must be combined – perhaps paradoxically – with sweeping historical interpretation of (part of) modern history as a distinctive epoch (Kluge's 'antiquity') with its own character and lessons.

For the thinkers surveyed here, these respectively extremely microscopic and extremely synoptic methods are rooted in the classical scholar's extreme distance from the material under study. This distance makes it necessary to examine closely any scrap of scarce and alien surviving evidence, while simultaneously opening up a broad vista for grand overarching interpretations, which can underpin more general ethical and political teachings. This distance is often conceived as even enabling impartial assessment of an epoch or impartial discernment of universal human truths (see further below, especially pp. 5–6, 8 and 14, including criticisms of claims to universality).

¹ I am very grateful for help and feedback to the editors and to Carol Atack, Christa Gray, Hans Kopp, Alexandra Richter, Mathura Umachandran and Albert Wu, as well as the participants in the 2016 'Classics and Revolution' London workshop. I undertook much of the research while a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung at the Humboldt University in Berlin.

² Compare Judt with Snyder 2012: 393, on the implications of this quotation for modern historians.

I focus on Kluge's approach in his 2008 work, interpreting it as a response to an extended crisis of the post-1989 Left in Germany and beyond: puzzled by the Left's lack of vigour in challenging post-Cold War capitalism, by 2008 showing the first signs of its own acute financial crisis, Kluge set out to 'excavate' an earlier period of socialist utopianism. I then place Kluge's approach in the broader German tradition which seeks to understand and harness modern history by approaching it through the classicist's or ancient historian's lens. This tradition includes other responses to German reunification, but also a set of responses to an earlier, more well-defined crisis: the fall of the Weimar Republic. In an approach directly influential on Kluge, theorists including Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch tried to understand modern history by self-consciously approaching it in the guise of a classicist, ancient historian or archaeologist – or by trying to estimate what meaning it would have in the far future, when it would be part of the legitimate domain of ancient historians.

The tradition studied here thus 'classicses crisis' in a different way from most of the case-studies in this book: its response to crisis is not to look to (ancient) classical models, but rather to seek 'classical' paradigms and warnings in modern history itself, which can be revealingly studied and interpreted using the methods and perspectives of professional classicists. Accordingly, I sometimes make use in this article of a distinctive sense of the word 'classical', always marked with inverted commas: not merely 'canonical' or 'archetypal', but suitable for the type of study undertaken in university Classics and Ancient History departments.

2. Kluge's 'ideologische Antike'

Alexander Kluge started making films in the 1950s, when he was already closely involved (partly as legal adviser) with the Frankfurt School (or Institute of Social Research), now returned to Frankfurt after exile from fascism. He has since combined directing films with writing not only fiction, but also collaborative works of sociology in the Critical Theory tradition. As a director, he was a key participant in the development of the 'New German Film', alongside directors including Fassbinder and Schlöndorff, with whom he collaborated on the 1978 *Deutschland im Herbst*, a collective response to the Baader-Meinhof crisis. This work is already known to specialists in Classical Reception because one section uses Sophocles' *Antigone* to address the contentious question of the terrorists' burial (see Steiner 1984: 150–1). Kluge also directed his own dramatic films, but since the 1980s has concentrated on his other longstanding focus: documentaries for television and now internet. These exploit a distinctive style of montage, juxtaposing archive footage, role-play by actors, discursive interviews with cultural and political thinkers and often enigmatic intertitles drawn from poetry, philosophy and beyond.³

His 2008 film *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike*, my focus here, uses these techniques to examine Marx's *Capital* and its influence, partly in tribute to an abortive plan by the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein to film *Capital* in the late 1920s. The central conceit is to dissect Marx's *Capital* as if it were an 'ancient' work, subjecting it to the same painstaking analysis more commonly applied to ancient classics.⁴ This is dramatised in a scene in which actors role-play two GDR-soldiers preparing themselves for a qualifying examination for junior officers. The two cadets puzzle over one particular complex sentence of Marx, reading it out together and then discussing its possible meanings. Kluge suggestively entitles this section 'Marx-Latin, or preparation for the examination for the training programme for junior officers in the People's Army' ('Marx-Latein oder

³ For Kluge's life, compare D. Fore's editor's introduction to Kluge and Negt 2014.

⁴ On the role of antiquity in the film: Powald 2009.

Vorbereitung auf die Prüfung zum Unteroffizierslehrgang in der Volkarmee', DVD I, part 14). The implication is that Marx's work is as alien and forbidding for later students as a classical Latin work, where each word has to be parsed and every sentence analysed in order even to begin to recover the author's meaning.

The choice of East German cadets for this role-play might seem to associate this neo-philological exercise with a particular historical context, no longer attractive even to sympathisers with Marxism. However, it is precisely this philological approach borrowed from Classics, reverent but also rigorously questioning, which animates Kluge's handling of Marxist texts and their language in the rest of the film, in collaboration with his interlocutors. Towards the end of the film, for example, he has the cultural theorist Joseph Vogl probe in detail key terms from Marx's thought now unfamiliar to many, or substantially changed in meaning, including 'ideology' and 'alienation' (DVD III, part 14, 'Stichworte: "Ideologie", "Entfremdung", "Vitalität der Dinge", "Gibt es ein Menschenrecht der Dinge?")'. The film's best example of close philological analysis of a whole text is Kluge's discussion with the poet Durs Grünbein, over the telephone between Munich and Berlin, of Brecht's hexameter re-working of the *Communist Manifesto*. Kluge and Grünbein speak almost like philological commentators on Brecht's poem, its style and its context. They draw out, for example, how Brecht seeks to write as a Lucretius to Marx's Epicurus, transforming the leading materialist philosophy of the age into hexameter verse (DVD III, part 7, 'Brecht's Hexameter zum *Kommunistischen Manifest*').

To some degree Kluge is here extending a long-established philological approach to Marx's works, perhaps more pronounced than for most other modern authors: for example, the tradition of meticulous collection and editing of Marx's manuscripts and published works, from Engels' own editorial work to that of the major German and Russian collected editions;⁵ and also the tradition of exhaustive commentary on Marx's texts, including by theorists such as Althusser (*et al.* 1965) and Harvey (2010). Kluge's approach brings out well how this approach to Marx's work assimilates him to a 'classical' author, in a different category from most authors working in modern languages.

It is not only texts which receive this kind of close examination, respectful and scholarly, in Kluge's film. Kluge dedicates similar attention to the physical, as well as the textual, monuments of modern German socialism, commemorating and probing them as relics of a fallen civilisation of enduring interest. One of the film's closing sections presents time-lapse film of the monumental Marx-head statue in the Saxon industrial centre of Chemnitz (formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt), in the process of renovation (DVD III, part 15, 'Der große Kopf von Chemnitz'). An earlier section of the film has already explored another famous Marx statue, his tomb monument in Highgate Cemetery. On-site investigation reveals that Marx's actual grave is not on this famous site, but in another, less prominent part of the cemetery (DVD II, part 3, 'Das Denkmal und das wahre Grab').

In a film dedicated to excavating the 'ideological antiquity' at the root of modern society, this painstaking investigation of often hidden or threatened modern socialist material culture recalls the classical archeologist's on-site investigation, recording, conservation, contextualisation and analysis of monuments. The archaeologist's sensitivity to concealed or neglected evidence and precision about topographical details – such as the true site of Marx's grave – are accompanied by broader investigation, also reminiscent of archaeological

⁵ On the history of editing of Marx's works, and its formative influence on his corpus, see recently Nippel 2018a: esp. 124–6.

research, of the role of monuments in constructing orthodox socialist imagery and ideology, replicated from East Germany to north London and beyond. The analogy between ancient and modern material culture is made explicit in an early section of the film which surveys a panorama of factories and machinery, explicitly called a ‘landscape with classical heavy industry’ (DVD I, part 5, ‘Landschaft mit klassischer Schwerindustrie’). In the same way as a classical archaeologist surveys and analyses not only artistic monuments but also the remains of whole cityscapes of the ancient Mediterranean, in order to gain a synoptic understanding of classical culture, Kluge examines in depth the characteristic material landscapes of industrial labour and society, one of the keys to understanding modern life as a whole.

Kluge’s co-option of the methods and perspectives of the classical philologist or archaeologist to study some of the remains of modernity is justified theoretically on p. 8 of the film’s accompanying booklet:

In der gegenwärtigen Praxis des Films und der Wissenschaft ist mir keine mit dem Projekt Eisensteins oder mit dem Werk von Karl Marx vergleichbare Anstrengung bekannt. Es ist deshalb ein Vorzug, daß Eisenstein, das Jahr 1929, in dem er vermutlich seine Dreharbeiten durchgeführt hätte, sowie das Werk von Marx (und die Beispiele, die er vor sich sah, als er schrieb) für uns so fern sind wie eine Antike. Sie rücken nicht zu unserem Sumpfgelände hin, sondern zu Aristoteles, Ovid und anderem sicheren Boden, über den die Menschheit verfügt.

In the practice of film and research of the present time, I know of no great effort comparable to the project of Eisenstein or the work of Karl Marx. It is therefore an advantage that Eisenstein, the year 1929 – in which he would probably have carried out his work on the film – and also the work of Marx (and the examples which he saw before him when he wrote) are as distant for us as an Antiquity. They do not tend towards our current swamp, but towards Aristotle, Ovid and other firm ground to which humankind has access.

According to Kluge, both Marx himself and the communist film-making of Eisenstein, and their respective social contexts, belong to a qualitatively different epoch from our own: one of heroic intellectual and creative effort, which created rich resources for future generations of humankind in their attempts to understand themselves. Here and elsewhere in the booklet, Kluge does not make explicit use of the word ‘classical’, speaking merely of the ‘Antike’. He does, however, make clear that he associates antiquity with superior, unchanging cultural and intellectual products: both the original antiquity and the new one of Marx and Eisenstein contribute to humankind’s ‘firm ground’ (and the former, as he claims on p. 4 of the booklet, quoted below, offers ‘the best texts of humankind’).

In line with Kluge’s method throughout his career, he leaves a lot unspoken or undeveloped; the reader or viewer has to extrapolate from enigmatic statements like this, and accompanying images in montage. In this case, the connection Kluge draws with the antiquity of Ovid and especially Aristotle might encourage the reader to deduce that the ‘firm ground’ for all humans yielded by the heroic labours of early socialists such as Marx and Eisenstein consisted in humanist ideas and art, of value well beyond their original context. The discussions of Marx and Marxists across the whole film make clear that these ideas include fundamental reflection about, and experimentation with, concepts of (for example) equality, exchange, solidarity, society and social change. Kluge does not spell it out, but the combined effect of booklet and film might encourage readers and viewers towards the

conclusion that the modern Left's 'antiquity' (of, say, 1848 to 1933) rivalled classical antiquity as a period of fundamental innovation in the analysis of human life and society, comparable to ancient literature and social thought in ambition and long-term resonance.

As Kluge (2008, booklet: p. 31) goes on to say, it was partly because modern mass, industrial society was then in its infancy that Marx was able to undertake foundational innovations:

Die Widersprüche im Geburtsjahr von Marx, 1818, oder zur Zeit der Publikation des ersten Bands des Kapitals im Jahr 1867 waren sicher nicht geringer als heute. Die objektive Möglichkeit, die damals unfertigen gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse zu verändern, war aber deutlich größer. Das trennt die ideologische Antike von unserer Gegenwart.

The contradictions in Marx's birth year, 1818, or at the time of the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 were certainly not lesser than those of today. But the objective possibility to change social conditions, which were then very fluid [or 'unfinished'], was clearly greater. That is what separates ideological antiquity from our present.

The fact that Kluge here explicitly invokes 'ideological antiquity' in offering this synoptic interpretation of nineteenth-century conditions invites the reader to reflect on the parallel with classical antiquity as another highly malleable period, in which human civilisation was similarly open to radical innovation. By reading this claim alongside the film's images of 'classical' heavy industry and discussions of socialist art, Kluge's audience can begin to piece together a coherent modern 'antiquity' with interlinked material, political and cultural dimensions, unified by heroic striving to shape the flux into lasting new forms.

As well as reflecting about the character of modern 'antiquity', Kluge also gives some theoretical hints about how contemporary thinkers must approach it. According to Kluge (2008, booklet: p. 4), the world of Marx and Eisenstein is distant from us, not least because of the widespread disappearance of revolutionary hopes and even of confidence in humans' ability to shape history. This means that the turbulence ('Unruhe') and haste ('Eile') which accompanied *Capital*'s second edition (1872) or Eisenstein's plan for his film of *Capital* (1929) have now subsided. This distance benefits interpretation: it makes us, for Kluge, 'unbefangen'. This word is difficult to translate in this context, because it has connotations of both impartiality and innocence, or lack of self-consciousness. With this 'impartial' or 'unselfconscious' mentality, we can 'excavate' ('ausgraben', the archaeological metaphor again) both Eisenstein's unfulfilled plans and Marx's own works. Kluge here (p. 4) makes explicit that he sees this 'Unbefangenheit' as directly analogous to the stance of the classicist, far removed from the emotions and controversies of his or her subjects:

Wir können uns wie in einem Garten mit den fremden Gedanken von Marx und dem seltsamen Projekt von Eisenstein auseinandersetzen, weil sie Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike darstellen. So unbefangen, wie wir mit dem Altertum umgehen, das doch die besten Texte der Menschheit umfaßt.

We can engage with the alien thoughts of Marx and the strange project of Eisenstein as if in a garden, because they represent news from ideological antiquity. Equally as impartially [or 'unselfconsciously'] as we deal with the ancient world, which nonetheless incorporates the best texts of humankind.

This ‘Unbefangenheit’ of free, detached contemplation of ancient and modern ‘antiquities’ is, however, no antiquarian escape from the contemporary world. On the contrary, Kluge (2008 booklet: p. 7) goes on to argue that it should be directed at contemporary problems: under the heading ‘Why ideological antiquity?’, he claims that every present period (‘Gegenwart’) needs a theory, ideally based on points of orientation (‘Bezugspunkte’) which lie outside current events.

Kluge does not spell out exactly how the work of Marx and Eisenstein can offer such ‘points of orientation’, but his sustained analogy with classical antiquity suggests that they represent generative archetypes of the good economy or the good film, parallel to ancient archetypes of, say, democracy or tragedy. Like their classical forerunners, these archetypes are of enduring influence and value, but nonetheless in need of excavation and exegesis. This helps to explain why Kluge considers the early socialist ‘Antike’ to be, as classical antiquity is itself often held to be, both ‘distant (fern)’ or ‘alien’ (‘fremd’, ‘seltsam’) and simultaneously of urgent relevance: it can even offer the ‘news (Nachrichten)’ of the quotation above and the film’s title.

A revealing application of this broad method comes in Kluge’s interview with the experimental science-fiction author Dietmar Dath, on the literary and narrative qualities of Marx’s writing (DVD I, part 18, ‘Kann das Kapital “Ich” Sagen?’). This interview includes discussion, in the traditional style of Classical Reception Studies, of Marx’s engagement with classical works and motifs. Examples include, in particular, Marx’s doctoral thesis on Democritean and Epicurean atomism, as competing varieties of ancient materialism; and his appeals, especially in his 1844 manuscripts, to Aristotle’s argument that a human being’s function (*ergon*) is rational activity, which plays a key role in Marx’s theory of meaningful labour and the barriers to it posed by capitalist exploitation and alienation.⁶

Nonetheless, Dath and Kluge here also transcend the normal methods of Classical Reception Studies by seeking to interpret Marx using categories drawn from antiquity or classical scholarship, even when their focus is not Marx’s conscious classical allusions. For Dath, Marx was in sensibility (or ‘Haltung’) not only an Epicurean, but also a Stoic, Sceptic and Sophist. Dath’s and Kluge’s exchange about Marx as ‘Sophist’ exemplifies their use of ancient and scholarly categories to put Marx’s work in a different light:

Dath: Und der letzte Punkt: Sophistik. Ähm, er hat also nicht, er hat keine Angst davor, der Sophistik geziehen zu werden, sondern er sagt, lieber sozusagen ein bisschen sophistischer werden, lieber sich in ein Argument verrennen und dann in den Manuskripten sagen, aber lassen wir den ganzen Quatsch wieder, ich habe jetzt mal vier Seiten gerechnet, aber das führt nirgendwo hin. Ähm, also sozusagen ...
Kluge: Wie ein Anwalt.

Dath: Genau, wie ein Anwalt, der einfach diesem Ding mal nachgeht und sozusagen keine Angst hat, sich im Grunde selber ins Kreuzverhör zu nehmen. Wie ein Sophist eben, so, aber nicht als Pejorativ, als was Böses, sondern er sieht sozusagen in der Sophistik im Grunde eine mächtige Waffe auch der Aufklärung. Also in der Fähigkeit – er nennt es dann Dialektik – aber in der Fähigkeit sozusagen, die Dinge drei- und vier- und fünfmal umzudrehen.

⁶ For other recent discussion of Marx and classical antiquity, with earlier bibliography, see Hudson 2018, ch. 2; Nippel 2018b; Vlassopoulos 2018. The essays in McCarthy 1992 investigate Marx’s relationship with ancient Greek philosophy; see especially Depew 1992 on Marx and Aristotle.

Dath: And the last point: the Sophists. He is not afraid of being accused of being a Sophist – rather he says, better as it were to become a bit more sophistical, better to get carried away with an argument and then say in the manuscripts – let's put all this nonsense to one side, I have now been calculating for four pages, but it leads nowhere. So, as it were....

Kluge: Like a lawyer.

Dath: Exactly, like a lawyer, who simply pursues this thing and so to speak has no fear, basically to subject himself to cross-questioning. Just like a Sophist, but not in a pejorative sense, as something evil; rather he sees in the Sophistic approach basically also a powerful weapon of enlightenment – that is to say, in the ability – he calls it dialectic – to turns things over three, four or five times....

Reading Marx's argumentative style as that of a 'Sophist', always interrogating different possible logical or rhetorical moves and rejecting all foundations, helps to distance him from the contemporary world; it casts him more as an ageless 'ancient' thinker than as an ephemeral journalist or economist. As in Kluge's account of his approach, this use of classical categories pushes Marx closer to the world of Aristotle and Ovid and further away from contemporary uncertainties and day-to-day debates. Dath makes the same move with respect to the Spartacist revolutionaries of 1918–1919, perhaps the most famous case of representatives of the German Left explicitly seizing on ancient history. Rather than stress their conscious classicising, Dath paints them as not simply tragic figures but themselves 'tragedians' in the ancient sense: Rosa Luxemburg, for example, traced the inescapable contradictions of modern society, to which she foresaw a violent ending. This move makes the Spartacists, like Marx, not so much localised political agents with their own *ad hoc* posturing as general *exempla* of forms of thinking and acting which can aid political and moral reflection in a wide variety of contexts.

Dath's Marx is no simple neo-classical thinker, but rather applies in innovative ways – and to a new object of analysis, modern mass industrial society – an unusual combination of classical sensibilities or 'Haltungen' (Epicurean, Stoic, Sceptic, Sophistic) not known from the ancient world itself. This diverse and internally contradictory set of 'Haltungen' helps this Marx to carve out new archetypes for political thought and practice. The task to which Dath's and Kluge's dialogue here contributes is to look back, as in Kluge's explicit theory, to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as much as or more than to the ancient Mediterranean itself, to find the buried, familiar yet unfamiliar roots of contemporary social conflicts and crises, and of possible responses to them.

3. Kluge's film in the context of the crises of the post-1989 Left

Kluge's approach chimes with the thinking of other left-leaning intellectuals seeking a response to the crisis of the post-1989 Left. Speaking at a Berlin event to mark the centenary of the October Revolution, Kluge's interlocutor Dietmar Dath referred to the abortive attempts of the 1968-generation to 'excavate' ('ausgraben') the 'buried knowledge' ('das verschüttete Wissen') of pre-WWII Marxists.⁷ For his part, the American Marxist literary theorist F. Jameson (2009: 116–17, discussed in Leonard and Prins 2010: 2–3) finds in Kluge's film a new way of approaching the modern Left's morally ambiguous history:

For the concept of antiquity may have the function of placing us in some new relationship with the Marxian tradition and with Marx himself – as well as Eisenstein.

⁷ Dath 2017.

Marx is neither actual nor outmoded: he is classical, and the whole Marxist and Communist tradition, more or less equal in duration to Athens's golden age, is precisely that golden age of the European left, to be returned to again and again with the most bewildering and fanatical, productive and contradictory results. And if it is objected that it would be an abomination to glamorize an era that included Stalinist executions and the starvation of millions of peasants, a reminder of the bloodiness of Greek history might also be in order – the eternal shame of Megara,⁸ let alone the no less abominable miseries of slave society as such. Greece was Sparta as much as Athens, Sicily as much as Marathon; and the Soviet Union was also the deathknell of Nazism and the first sputnik, the People's Republic of China the awakening of countless millions of new historical subjects. The category of classical antiquity may not be the least productive framework in which a global left reinvents an energizing past for itself.

Jameson values Kluge's classicising approach as a pragmatic strategy for revivifying a moribund movement, but also as an analytical technique for exposing the deep contours and contradictions of the 'classical' Marxist and Communist tradition. Jameson's exegesis of Kluge places particular weight on a traditional dimension of modern approaches to Greco-Roman antiquity also evoked by Kluge in his ideal of the 'impartial' ('unbefangen') classicist: the more or less conscious and explicit tendency among professional and lay classicists to study examples from ancient history, both attractive and troubling, as an aid to moral and political thinking with a claim to long-lasting, cross-cultural (even 'universal') validity for humanity.⁹ This tendency has endured in Classics, not least in the name of the discipline, in spite of the challenge to universalism posed in the modern world by a thoroughgoing historicism which insists on the contingent, particular character of successive historical periods, which unfold into an open future (e.g. Koselleck 1979).

Jameson implies that trying to gain the classicist's purported analytical distance from more recent history might make it possible to weigh up, dispassionately and synoptically, the modern epoch's moral gains and losses and their mutual interdependence. The appeal of such transference of supposedly detached 'moral history' from the ancient to the modern world has not been restricted to Marxists. It has also been attempted by post-1989 liberal and social democratic thinkers seeking to identify the deep moral and political lessons of the twentieth century, including the mixed fortunes of its ambitious social and political experiments.¹⁰

Kluge's approach itself also draws on earlier responses to the crisis of the German Left after 1989–1990. One figure particularly likely to have influenced Kluge is another of his interlocutors, the East German playwright Heiner Müller (1929–1995), with whom Kluge conducted a series of interviews from 1989 until Müller's death.¹¹ In the later years of the GDR and the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Müller was already beginning to construct the early idealistic years of German socialism as a lost age of particular *gravitas* – now in ruins. His play *Der Auftrag*, written in 1979, already presents the great European revolutionary 'mission' of the title, inaugurated in 1789, as by now a failed, closed heroic

⁸ Perhaps Melos is meant, though Jameson might also associate the Megarian decrees with 'eternal shame'.

⁹ See, for example, Nippel 2008: ch. 8, on nineteenth-century German academic ancient history, and chs. 4–7 and 9–12 on the use of classical examples in wider modern debates about the moral and political status of democracy and liberty; compare Morley 2008: esp. ch. 3.

¹⁰ Compare Glover's (2001) 'moral history of the twentieth century'; or Judt with Snyder 2012: 392–3, calling for a detached weighing up of the gains as well as horrors of twentieth-century history, not predetermined by the perceptions of contemporaries.

¹¹ The videos of these interviews are collected at <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/mueller> (accessed 22.2.2019).

experiment. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, at the end of his 1991 poem *Herakles 13*, Müller leaves Herakles – a frequent symbol of the revolutionary working class in his writing¹² – unconscious among the ‘ruins of columns’ (‘Säulentrümmer’) of the house he has destroyed in the madness in which he has killed his own wife and children (H. Müller, *GW* 1, 237–40, quotation from 240).

Müller explored his own relationship with the ruined socialist system in his 1992 poem *Mommsens Block*, which treats the legendary inability of the nineteenth-century Berlin ancient historian T. Mommsen to write the fourth volume of his *Römische Geschichte*, which would have covered the Roman imperial period. At the end of the poem, Müller sets up a parallel between Mommsen’s position and his own. As the poem has already explored, Mommsen had succeeded in recovering for his own age through extensive research and voluminous writings the history of the Roman Republic. However, when he tried to turn to later Roman history, he experienced a form of writer’s block, born of disgust at the decline of Roman society and morals in a new world dominated by court intrigue. Müller, by analogy, had spent most of his life exploring in plays and poetry the complex moral and political problems of an ambitious socialist society, far from unproblematic but still worthy of detailed analysis and even of sober literary memorialisation. It is only in post-1989 Berlin, in which he observes unscrupulous capitalists plotting profits while ‘the poor attack the poorest’ on nearby streets, that Müller can understand Mommsen’s writer’s block (‘Schreibhemmung’) (H. Müller, *GW* 1, 257–263, quotation from 263).¹³ The clear implication is that the new Germany and the new Berlin represent a lapse from exemplary *gravitas* and world-historical importance comparable to the Roman transition from republic to empire.

Even though Müller was anything but an apologist for German Communist history, especially its later stages, he does in this poem dignify it as something like a submerged ‘classical’ age. It is telling that Müller fixes here on the figure of Mommsen. He could have chosen to cast himself as a modern Tacitus, the subject of one of his interviews with Kluge from 1989:¹⁴ a contemporary observer of moral decline (from ‘republic’ to ‘empire’). Instead, by identifying with a modern ancient historian, he distances himself radically from the two societies he has spent his life writing about: he suggests that, both before and after 1989, he has been a distant observer, like a professor from posterity. He thus emerges, though himself poet rather than historian, as something like a classical scholar of the modern Left, who would put into practice the principles of Kluge’s later film. Kluge himself had already described Müller in their April 1989 Tacitus discussion, in response to Müller’s analysis of a work by the Soviet novelist Alexander Bek, as ‘at work in the ruins of morality’ (‘in den Ruinen der Moralität tätig’).¹⁵ Kluge does not yet say ‘the ruins of modernity’, but he does imply a need to come to terms intellectually with the destruction of an earlier, more moral age.

4. Responses to the crisis of the Weimar Republic which prefigure Kluge

Kluge’s most important forerunners and influences are, however, some intellectual interpreters of the crisis of the Weimar Republic, writing in its final years or from exile, who

¹² Compare especially his early play *Herakles 5*. Kluge and Müller discuss the role of Herakles in Müller’s work in their discussion ‘Auf dem Weg zu einem Theater der Finsternisse’ (<https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/film/120>, accessed 22.2.2019).

¹³ The whole poem is translated into English in Weber 2001. For recent analysis from another angle: Freeland 2013.

¹⁴ <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/mueller/film/1871> (accessed 22.2.2019).

¹⁵ <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/mueller/film/1871> at 19 minutes 15 seconds, with English transcript at <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/mueller/film/1871/transcript> (both accessed 22.2.2019).

were, like Kluge later, associated with the Frankfurt School.¹⁶ While Kluge tries to sketch the classical philology, archaeology and ancient history of the Left in particular, these earlier thinkers sought to focus the classicist's or ancient historian's methods and perspectives on modern society in general. I intend to explore these earlier predecessors of Kluge's approach in more detail in a broader project, but offer a brief sketch here.

An important figure was the literary critic Walter Benjamin. Different levels of time, and corresponding varieties of historiography, lie at the heart of the sprawling unfinished work which dominated his 1930s exile in Paris (though already begun and set aside in the late 1920s), the *Passagen-Werk* or 'Arcades Project', a vast collection of quotations with Benjamin's own commentary. This work was itself partly an attempt to identify the origins of the crisis of Benjamin's generation. In it, Benjamin finds in the primitive shopping arcades of nineteenth-century Paris the germ of the modern urban, commercial way of life which had since become characteristic of the age. To capture the relationship of this germinal phase with his contemporary present, Benjamin interprets it as very distant ancient history: in his case, not civilised 'classical' history, but rather 'Urgeschichte'. This is often translated into English as 'primal history' (see Eiland and Jennings 2014: e.g. 288, 325), though as a German academic discipline it corresponds to English Pre-History (i.e. the study of the earliest phase of human history, which can be reconstructed only through archaeology).

The translation of 'Urgeschichte der Moderne' as 'primal history of modernity' evokes well Benjamin's attempt to pinpoint the very earliest (or even 'primeval') steps in the creation of a new type of human and a new type of human society in the nineteenth century, as a guide to the fundamental essence of those new forms.¹⁷ It also captures Benjamin's interest in the raw dreams and fears which those first nineteenth-century steps bequeathed to the present, and its 'collective unconscious' (compare Eiland and Jennings 2014: 491, 600–601). Benjamin thought that some of these primal dreams and nightmares (including that of a classless society) were inherited from true 'pre-history', humankind's early past (see Steiner 2001: 70–72). Nonetheless, he insisted that the meaningfulness of his concept of the 'Urgeschichte der Moderne' also relied on the more paradoxical idea that the nineteenth century created its own 'originary form' ('originäre Form') of 'Urgeschichte' which configured primal images and myths (of, for example, beasts, ghosts, magic or the apocalypse) in radically new ways (Benjamin, GS V 2, 1034, compare I 579, also 496). These went on to shape further foundational innovations of the twentieth century, perhaps especially cinema and Surrealist art (Steiner 2001: 81; compare Lindner 1984: 27).

Although the 'primal history' translation helps to convey Benjamin's meaning, he was also interested in the formal methods of technical 'Urgeschichte' (Pre-History), especially the archaeologist's stripping away of overlying layers and reconstruction of whole societies and ideologies from surviving material traces and enigmatic images. Elsewhere Benjamin applied this 'archaeological' metaphor to personal memory: even remembering one's own experiences is a question of excavation and cataloguing, including of the intervening layers (Benjamin, GS IV 1, 400–401, 'Ausgraben und Erinnern'; cf. Lindner 1984: e.g. 45).

Applied to nineteenth-century society more generally, this 'archaeological' approach, an artificial distancing of recent history (Lindner 1984: 48), is the closest link between Benjamin's method and Kluge's. It is important not to downplay important differences between writing 'pre-history' and writing 'ancient history' of the nineteenth century.

¹⁶ On the Frankfurt School and Classics: Hudson 2018.

¹⁷ Goethe's concept of the 'Urphänomen' probably lay in the background: Steiner 1986: 29–30.

However, Benjamin himself (*GS* V 1, 595, 1129) did explicitly link ‘Urgeschichte’ with the ‘archaic’. He also repeatedly referred in the *Passagen-Werk* to the complex presence of the ‘archaic’ in modern society and thought (*GS* V 1, 142, 576, 969). This must have been in part a response to contemporary discussions among Nietzscheans of the special qualities of archaic, as opposed to classical, Greece (compare Most 2001). Moreover, Benjamin also included texts alluding to classical Rome to illustrate Paris’ urban development (*GS* V 1, 209, 253). The scholar Richard Faber (1986: esp. 67–8; compare Steiner 2001: 71, 73) even takes Benjamin’s work as a starting point to develop his own ‘metacollage’ of Paris as the ‘Rome of the nineteenth century’, by Benjamin’s day a ruined prototype in need of excavation. Even though this goes beyond Benjamin’s own words, Benjamin himself was certainly interested in the concept of the ‘ruins of the bourgeoisie’, nineteenth-century buildings and monuments superseded by advancing capitalism, which his contemporary Surrealists could tackle with the same passion as Renaissance Humanists studied classical antiquities (*GS* V 1, 59, 146, 188, 1236).¹⁸

These features of Benjamin’s theory of modernity were much discussed among fellow members and associates of the Frankfurt School in exile. For example, in a critique which could also apply to Kluge’s project, Theodor Adorno urged Benjamin to take more account of the role of the contemporary observer in constructing the nineteenth century as ‘Urgeschichte’: it was principally the twentieth-century rush to modernise further which cast its own origins as primitive.¹⁹

These discussions seem to have prompted the philosopher Ernst Bloch to launch his own reflections about the complex layers and confusing distance of recent history.²⁰ In a late section of his *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (*Legacy or Heritage of Our Times*), his work of the late 1920s and early 1930s, first published in 1935,²¹ Bloch too emphasises the alien yet familiar character of the nineteenth century for the twentieth ('closer than childhood, more distant than China') by assimilating it to ancient history: its remains, such as its characteristic furnishings or early photographs, are 'hieroglyphs of the nineteenth century', which reveal their meanings only now that they have fallen victim to 'shock and decay' ('Chok und Zerfall') and must be recovered from a 'field of ruins' ('Trümmerfeld'). Bloch explicitly distances these 'modern antiques' from the 'secrets of Greece', evoking instead pre-modern Egypt, Rome, China and Mexico; they are remnants not of classical rationalism, but rather of visceral passions which offer a foundational point of reference for modern Surrealists, who find in the nineteenth century their 'sensitivity [Empfindlichkeit], field [Acker] and Colosseum' (Bloch 1962, second edition of 1935 book: 381–7, esp. 386–7). This sense of disruption of normal chronological rules fits well with Bloch's well-known theory, developed in this same work (especially part II), of the 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen' (the 'contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous'): the co-existence of multiple historical layers at any moment, not least in fast-moving modern society.

Another, related preoccupation of *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* is the crisis of bourgeois civilisation in the Weimar Republic, unable to harness or contain the inherited dreams which fed the

¹⁸ Faber (1986: 66–7) also discusses Benjamin’s portrayal of Baudelaire, in his monograph on him, as an author who wanted to be read as, and by Benjamin’s day had already become, an ‘ancient’ writer.

¹⁹ Benjamin-Adorno, *BW*, esp. the letters from Adorno of 5.4.1934 (pp. 52–5), 5.12.1934 (pp. 82–6) and 2.–5.8.1935 (pp. 138–152). Compare Steiner 2001: 74.

²⁰ Eiland and Jennings 2014: 478–80.

²¹ English translation: Plaice and Plaice 1991.

atavism of the new German nationalism of ‘Saxons without forests’ (Bloch 1962: 49–52).²² Bloch is, however, confident (1962: 15) that this period of crisis is ‘giving birth’ as well as in decay (‘Die Zeit fault und kreißt zugleich’): it carries within it the seeds of a future, alternative civilisation and culture, which will have to be recovered by generations to come. Bloch does not seem explicitly to imagine his epoch as future ancient or classical history, though he does dignify it with the *gravitas* of the word ‘Erbschaft’: Brecht, Stravinsky and the Expressionist painters, the revolutionary character of whose art he discusses in detail (Bloch 1962, esp. 230–78), are a foundational ‘legacy’ for the future. Bloch makes it easy to imagine future generations piecing together these modernists’ ideas and new artistic forms from the ruins, as Bloch portrayed them and himself doing with the ‘Hieroglyphs of the nineteenth century’. Interestingly, however, Bloch thinks that he can already anticipate what this ‘legacy’ will look like.

Some of Bloch’s Weimar contemporaries do seem to have taken the leap of explicitly describing their age as a foundational ‘classical’ one: some reportedly expected that future generations would look back on it as a ‘new Periclean age’, presumably of artistic and intellectual innovation under a radical democracy. The fact that this claim is attributed to different figures from diverse fields – the historian Peter Gay (1968: xii, with n. 2) reports it with approval, having heard from the political theorist Hannah Arendt that the sociologist Karl Mannheim had said it to her, while the conductor Bruno Walter attributes it to the theatre critic Alfred Kerr – confirms it was in general circulation and appealed to many, either at the time or when they (like Pericles’ eulogist Thucydides) were in exile, their ‘Periclean’ democracy now sunken. This line of thought, on the part of Bloch and these other Weimar thinkers, is perhaps the most direct example of ‘classicising crisis’ I have discussed. Faced with Germany’s acute economic, political and cultural crisis, these thinkers took the bold step of claiming ‘classical’ status for the new styles of philosophy, art and science provoked by it. Their world was not, in fact, merely disintegrating, but also assuming a marmoreal quality as moral lesson and intellectual inspiration for the distant future.

This ‘classicising’ approach to understanding the culture of the Weimar crisis had a determinative impact on those looking back at the period after 1945, once that Germany had literally been ruined. The Weimar avant-garde eventually came to be treated by some art historians and literary scholars as ‘classical modernity’ itself. This is clear from two textbooks whose gestation coincided roughly with Kluge’s film: a 2010 textbook on the Weimar Republic’s literature (Delabar 2010) was entitled *Klassische Moderne*; the term was also used in the title of a 2009 textbook (Schneede 2009) on modernist art in the broader period 1880–1960. The concept serves partly to distinguish modernity from post-1945 ‘postmodernity’, but it also elevates modernist art and thought to a foundational position (for the present and perhaps also the far future). As Habermas (1981: 4) argues, the concept of the ‘classical’ here breaks from its chronological moorings in antiquity, to include the non-ephemeral art and thought of the modern period too.

A more sceptical approach to this concept, with echoes of Benjamin and Bloch, was pursued by the radical social historian D. Peukert in his 1987 book on the Weimar Republic, subtitled *Crisis Years of Classical Modernity* (an interesting explicit pairing of the ‘classical’ with ‘crisis’). Peukert adapts the concept of ‘classical modernity’, which he says was already then common among art historians (Peukert 1987: 11), to refer to a distinctive later nineteenth-century civilisation of ruthless, technological rationalism and utilitarianism, which he

²² On the work and fascism: Rabinbach 1977.

portrays as driving the German catastrophe of the 1920s and 1930s. Peukert's 'classical modernity' is no longer a utopian phase of new humanism, but a period of fundamental innovations which were generative of inhumanity, exploitation and totalitarianism: Germany's modernity contained the seeds of its own crisis. One might even extrapolate to view this as a modern-day 'decline and fall', which reduced this flawed new civilisation to ruins.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has revealed what is partly a distinctively German tradition: a response to the radical breaks of twentieth-century German history. Those left-leaning intellectuals, such as Kluge, who have tried since 1989 to excavate as 'ancient history' a lost, ruined socialist world stand in a long tradition. Not only after the end of the Cold War, but also after the end of each World War, some German intellectuals sought to come to terms with the destruction of the pre-war world by conceptualising their relationship with it as like that of the classical scholar or archaeologist with the fragments and ruins of ancient culture and society. This approach does, interestingly, seem to have mainly been confined to the left of the political spectrum: perhaps those on the right have been less willing to see anything 'classical' in modern mass society, mass culture and egalitarianism.

Exponents of this approach associate their own versions of 'modernity as antiquity' with varied tropes about the ancient world itself: from archaic mystery and terror to classical heroism and discovery, a flourishing period before a steep decline into ruins. Some (including Kluge himself) have treated the previous era as a source of new 'classical' paradigms useful for addressing the current crisis. Others, meanwhile, have looked to an earlier era as the submerged source of the current crisis itself (Benjamin, Bloch).

Nevertheless, the thinkers considered here all share a concern to import into interpretations of modern history some of the characteristic techniques and perspectives of classical scholarship and ancient history. This involves, as noted in my introduction, painstakingly rigorous attention to the details of all available sources, as if they were as scarce as genuinely ancient ones; and, at the same time, grandly synoptic historical and moral judgements about the essential character of modernity, and its foundational relationship with the present.

It is this methodological dimension which makes the approaches surveyed here of wider interest for Classical Reception Studies. Scholars of Classical Reception tend understandably to focus on explicit uses of ancient texts and artefacts by modern figures. Such study requires the methods of the modern historian or modern literary scholar at least as much as the traditional tools and mindset of the classicist, ancient historian or archaeologist. The German approaches studied here suggest ways in which the distinctive skills, disciplines and perspectives taught in Classics and Ancient History departments might themselves help to further understanding of the modern world.

Most of the thinkers discussed here have sought to celebrate certain modern thinkers or achievements as 'classical' in an evaluative sense, almost as timeless paradigms which can be interpreted *sub specie aeternitatis* by modern scholars who somehow achieve a detached impartiality. This sounds many alarm-bells concerning the wider applicability of their approaches; a theoretically aware development of their ideas would have to steer clear of this ahistorical tendency.²³ There are, however, several ways in which classicists and ancient

²³ On reactions in the modern era against ahistorical universalism, see e.g. Koselleck 1979: esp. 38–66; Hartog 2009.

historians could apply their methods to the modern world without showing reverence or claiming impartiality towards it.

First, the kind of fine-grained philological exegesis of modern texts and archaeological attention to the physical ruins of industrial modernity adumbrated by Kluge could be intensified – into, for example, systematic epigraphic studies of modern cities, linking technical precision and exhaustive coverage with broader interpretive questions about public writing, literacy and politics. Second, classicists can also, as some of the thinkers surveyed here suggest, offer distinctive scholarly methods for studying brands of utopianism and humanism (such as ‘classical’ socialism or liberalism), which were rhetorically cast at the time as of universal appeal but have now become anachronistic – as well as retaining urgent contemporary resonance. Moreover, classicists can also, with the aid of the developing methods of Classical Reception Studies, help to illuminate the other side of the construction of ‘classical’ paradigms. They can help to analyse, or deconstruct, the search for stable, generative roots which has provoked the most varied attempts through history to cast a previous age as a foundational ‘classical’ one, including Kluge’s own portrayal of early socialism as a timeless antiquity which he can contemplate without the burden of immediate political choices.

Third, classicists and ancient historians who are used to studying several centuries at once – looking for deep continuities and innovations from Homer to Sophocles, from Thucydides to Livy, or from the Rome of Polybius to the Rome of Tacitus – might be able to assist in developing alternative, synoptic interpretations of the sweep of modern history, as well as bringing into focus the difficulties of reaching any such broad perspective. Such broad synoptic interpretations might yield a different perspective on modern history, even (or especially) if they are acknowledged to reflect the partial view of the scholar concerned. In one example from a historian of the modern world, himself deeply influenced by the German Left tradition, Eric Hobsbawm (1962: 14) points out that a historian of AD 3000 would be less interested in differences between nineteenth-century Britain and France than in a single north-west European industrial/political revolution.

As part of this third approach, classical scholars and ancient historians can make a particular contribution to the ultra-long-term study of the development of political ideas and ideologies, an approach of current interest in the field of intellectual history (e.g. Armitage 2012). They can help in reconstructing the long-range development of ideas within the modern period itself, as well as their ancient roots.

This approach of outlining modern history with the broad brush of the ancient historian would fit into its own long tradition. Indeed, as influential studies have shown (McCarthy 2002; Morley 2008: esp. ch. 1), many leading German thinkers across the ideological spectrum (Nietzsche and Weber as much as Marx) who have sought to examine the fundamental character of ‘modernity’, even while living in the thick of it as an everyday reality, have focussed precisely on comparison with the classical template, in order to develop synoptic interpretations of the deep contours of modern life and thought.²⁴ Even though they are perhaps rarely explicit about it, these thinkers rely on the fact that they (presume to) know what fundamental ideas, styles and *Weltanschauungen* from the ancient world turned out to help define their age and to have extremely long-term resonance. Identifying classical analogues then helps to locate the right level at which to seek deep

²⁴ Compare Leonard 2005 for similar trends in French thought.

modern changes in human habits and self-understanding with far from merely local or temporary importance, with the potential to last centuries or millennia, even when the day-to-day cut-and-thrust in which they are expressed has long lost its urgency. If classicists are skilled in exposing what is familiar and of contemporary interest in the alien ancient world, they could help to do the opposite for the modern world: to expose characteristics which might be ‘alien’ to us but could define it for future ancient historians.

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