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Figure 1.1 Berlin S-bahn driver giving his signature in support of DWE's referendum
(*Source:* Rory Grubb)

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It always seems impossible until it's done.

Nelson Mandela, a peaceful revolutionary

Only we take you exactly as you are.

Berlin Public Transport Company (BVG)

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TAKING THE TRAM HOME

Prelude to Change

It was an impulse. Henryka Krzywonos was still hesitating when she saw her hand reach out and press the brake. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' she shouted, at the top of her voice, 'This tram is not going any further!' She feared the passengers would lynch her, but Tram 15 burst into applause! Following her lead, two buses stopped in the opposite lane. It was 15 August 1980. The Regional Transport Company had joined a wave of strikes that were rolling across Poland in response to the rising costs of living – and the political repression of the strikers.

The authorities cut the phone lines to disable communication between the striking companies. And so, the next morning, Henryka Krzywonos showed up in person at the Gdańsk shipyard – one of the most powerful centres of the strikes – to share her news. To her dismay, she learned that, just as the Regional Transport Company was joining the strike, the shipyard workers had decided to end theirs. The management of the shipyard had met its workers' demands.

But Henryka Krzywonos couldn't take this news back to her colleagues at the tram depot. Everyone was counting on the shipyard's support! Furious, she leapt up onto a forklift truck. 'You mustn't end the strike now!' she yelled. 'The authorities won't take on the shipyard, because it has power – but we can't cope on our own! My trams can't take on their tanks! They'll squash us like insects!' A man with a moustache walked up to her. His name was Lech Wałęsa. 'All right,' he said. 'We'll make this a solidarity strike.' And that was how Solidarność began: a social movement that overthrew authoritarian communism in Poland and cracked the Eastern Bloc open.

Clutching your coffee in the usual weather, you wait sleepily at your tram stop for the everyday repetition of everything. One

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day – maybe it is drizzling – a tram of history arrives. It is never the case that *everyone* jumps aboard. Some people hate mass transit and would only ever travel by car. Others are used to walking in the drizzle. But this is the magic of democracy as a means of public transport: if enough people get on board, everyone is taken to the future (Figure 1.1).

I remember waiting, excited, at the Danziger Strasse tram stop in Berlin. It was a sunny Sunday. On 26 September 2021, the city shimmered in the Indian summer – and 1 million people decided to take €36 billion worth of housing away from big finance. A total of 59.1 per cent of Berliners voted 'Yes!' in a referendum to expropriate more than 240,000 apartments owned by stock-listed, multi-billion-euro corporations. Most of these apartments were once publicly owned; they were privatised for knockdown prices in the noughties. Now, Berliners want to 'socialise' them – to turn them into a democratically managed commons.

Imagine this: 240,000 investment properties will be withdrawn from corporate asset portfolios and restored to their primary function: as people's homes. A new public institution will distribute and manage this housing in a democratic way, catering to the needs of all Berliners, not just the current tenants. The city will compensate the corporations for their property, but at well below current market prices. The rents must be affordable.

Expropriating multi-billion corporations might sound like a revolution – but no one is storming the Reichstag. The social movement Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen (DWE) won the referendum by following established democratic procedures. The 1 million YES! votes for socialisation came from across the political spectrum. The weapon with which Berliners will expropriate the stock-listed corporations is peaceful but powerful. It's the German Constitution – *das Grundgesetz*.

This revolution is radically legal. It is powered by the law. Etymologically, 'radical' means 'proceeding from the roots', and DWE is challenging global financial capital by going back to the roots of Germany's legal system. Among the fundamental rights laid out in the *Grundgesetz* there lies a forgotten clause: Article 15. It allows land, natural resources and means of production to

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be expropriated and turned into public property for the purpose of 'socialisation' (*Vergesellschaftung*).

The constitutional purpose of socialisation is to foster *Gemeinwirtschaft* – a form of economic enterprise (or an entire system) that prioritises social good over financial profits, and is governed in a democratic way. *Gemeinwirtschaft* is closest to the English term 'solidarity economy'.[1] However, *Gemeinwirtschaft* has a much longer tradition: together with socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*), it is part of the legacy of the German Revolution of 1918–19.[2]

Socialisation and *Gemeinwirtschaft* were first introduced as legal concepts by the Weimar Constitution. From there, they made it into the *Grundgesetz*. After the Second World War, socialisation was considered an important tool to prevent a 'misuse of economic power' against democracy – as happened when industrial monopolists funded Hitler's project of destroying the trade unions. With *Gemeinwirtschaft*, conservative and socialist parties alike expressed their aspiration to democratise the economy. However, after the German 'economic miracle' of the 1950s, *Gemeinwirtschaft* was largely forgotten. So was Article 15: no government ever based any legislation on it.

The roaring 'Yes!' of those 1 million Berliners awakened the right to socialisation from its decades-long slumber in the safe folds of the *Grundgesetz*. Berliners have asked the law to constitute a future in which everyone can afford to live. Legally, such a future is possible. But is it possible in reality?

Of course not. A system in which housing is beautiful, ecologically sustainable and universally affordable is utterly impossible … just as women's rights were once 'impossible', or taking down the Berlin Wall. The purpose of the 2021 referendum was to stop the tram from proceeding along its customary route of ever-increasing rents. But even as Berliners pull the lever to switch the tracks towards *Gemeinwirtschaft*, powerful people are trying to stop them. They want to return the tram to an old depot with 'there is no alternative' written above its gates. Do not underestimate them. These people only like democracy until they realise it is a means of public transport.

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In the popular imagination, revolutions are sharp turns of history. Events flip from the impossible to the inevitable, bypassing the improbable. These accounts underestimate the courage and persistence necessary in order to enact change. When Henryka Krzywonos pressed the brake on her tram, she wasn't planning to bring about the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. She listened to her inner sense of justice, and implemented her freedom. And the shipyard workers, though satisfied with their own success, did not dismiss her anger. They saw it for what it was: a call for solidarity. Between stopping the tram in Gdańsk and the start of Polish democracy there lies a decade of work by Solidarność, with medium-sized victories and major defeats along the way. Even now, Solidarność's democratic revolution remains unfinished. And your democracy? Is it already *democratic enough*?

The tram of history has left the Berlin depot with 1 million people on board. It is heading towards the future – but many different levers may still be pulled along the way. Each chapter of this book is like a stop that the tram has already passed, or that is coming into view on the horizon. After jumping on the tram here, at Tram Stop One, you'll be joined by other Berliners at the stops that follow, and will get to know the city.

At Tram Stop Two, you will find out why the tram is setting out from Berlin, and why now. Immanuel Kant appears on a horse at the Constitutional Court to explain why property is important for freedom. The Berlin housing system functioned as practically as German chocolate, and provided people with homes. Suddenly, a choir announces the arrival of the corporate landlords. Like the Jabberwock, these corporations only exist as fictions – which gives them real power.

At Tram Stop Three, the fictional Jabberwock is haunted by real ghosts. Dressed up in bedsheets, these spectres of expropriation are ordinary, hard-working people. They use the law to push the boundaries of what is politically possible. Albert Einstein supports them, but the lobbyists push back. DWE wins the referendum, but has to prepare for another one.

Departing from Tram Stop Four, we take a detour through history. The tram speeds like a rollercoaster through the past.

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Hitler is fundraising. The Parliamentary Council writes the *Grundgesetz*, obsessing about checks and balances. Article 15 turns out to be less controversial than gender equality. In a century-defining boxing match between a conservative and a social-democratic jurist, globalisation declares itself the winner. Democracy loses against debt. All state power derives from the people, but the people struggle with impostor syndrome.

At Tram Stop Five, things get curiouser and curiouser. A Berliner takes us into a future that was notably absent from the FUTURE PropTech conference in London. Bruno Taut pioneers palpable utopias, and a centenarian writes a book in the hope of saving them. With Kant's horse and David Bowie on board, the tram arrives at a sexy new institution that manages socialised housing and democratic disputes. At last you can relax with a glass of wine – and legislate well-balanced compensation for the expropriated corporations.

At Tram Stop Six, the rule of law is having a midlife crisis. A Berlin judge plans to storm the Reichstag, riding on a cloud of free-floating rage. All the skeletons tumble out of the closet: it turns out that everyone has *feelings*. Democracy embraces difference, and engenders conflict. In an effort to stay rational, DWE activists explore their anger and write a law. The sponsor of the Nine Dots Prize realises that his Berlin assets might be affected, and mulls over a plan to stop my ideas from spreading.

In the Epilogue – Tram Stop Seven – a Berghain bouncer opens the gates of the law to Franz Kafka. Kafka's K. meets other letters of the alphabet, and joins DWE's cheerleading team outside the Reichstag.

The events described in this book are brought to you by the number 15, and by a whole alphabet of letters. Both the iconic Solidarność tram and the constitutional article that makes socialisation possible bear the number 15. Maybe 15 is democracy's lucky number. The DWE activists who appear in this book have asked to be represented only by their initials. This is because, while all are equally important, it is simply not possible to name all the activists involved: over time, more than 3,000 people have contributed directly to the movement. Their

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individual contributions may differ in character and quantity, but democracy needs all of us: an alphabet of people who write the future by repeatedly coming together.

In writing this book about the DWE alphabet, I hold a double position: I am the author, and I am one of the letters. I am a scholar-activist. I am an urban sociologist at the University of Cambridge, and I have spent the last decade researching the ways in which democratic movements use the law to bring about radical social change. I joined Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen in 2019; before that, I worked with housing movements in Warsaw. My research topic was not an accidental choice. I, too, once struggled to find an affordable home.

I am a Berliner – but the story of how I became a Berliner begins in Poland, with Solidarność. Over the course of this book, I will show you how I have travelled from one story to another: jumping on the tram of history, hoping it will take me home.

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