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The case for a political reading

One of the images of Kafka propagated by Kafka criticism, and supported by a much-quoted remark Kafka made in his diary, is of the solitary writer whose subject matter is his own ‘dreamlike inner life’ (6.VIII.14; *D2*: 77). Occasionally Kafka’s diary entry on the outbreak of the Great War four days earlier is cited as proof of his distance from the political world: ‘Germany has declared war on Russia. – Swimming in the afternoon’ (*D2*: 75). But the interpretation sometimes placed on these words, that they belong to a writer far removed from the great events of his time, warrants investigation. Do they or do they not articulate emotional or intellectual distance, unconcern, even aloofness? In contrast, another diary entry, from the previous year: ‘Don’t forget Kropotkin!’ (15.X.13; *D1*: 330) has attracted relatively little critical attention, even though Max Brod recalls that the memoirs of this nineteenth-century Russian anarchist were amongst Kafka’s favourite books. Where it has been commented on it has often been played down. Here, too, the elliptical form of the diary entry itself does not help us make up our minds. What are we to read into these words: an intellectual or emotional commitment, a special indebtedness – or simply a note on an overdue library book?

Setting out to write about ‘Kafka’s politics’ one is reminded of a famous piece of advice from Kafka himself: ‘Give it up, give it up!’ (*GCW*: 183). However, an attempt at a systematic study of Kafka’s relation to politics has recently been published in German.¹ The very notion that he is in any sense a political writer, let alone a writer offering a radical critique of social institutions and conditions, is still somewhat contentious in Kafka scholarship. There are two major problems. First, to pose the question in the case of a writer like Kafka effectively means asking what we mean by ‘the political’, and how political interpretations of his work can legitimately be arrived at. He is obviously not a political writer in the way Bertolt Brecht and Heinrich Mann are. He never wrote anything of a campaigning nature, with a message, a programme for change; Kafka’s writing in contrast to Brecht’s and

Heinrich Mann's is not underlain by an ideology. Neither his writings nor what we know about his biography provide us with much evidence of political commitment, let alone a set of political beliefs. The second problem is that it is very unlikely that we can talk about Kafka's position on political issues without differentiating between the different phases of his life and literary production. Political readings rarely engage with Kafka's works produced before 1912, for example, thus helping to reinforce the idea that 'The Judgement' marks a major turning point in his work.

'Political' readings of Kafka need to take into account the particular qualities of his poetics and especially his relationship to realism, or at least to the ethical and social concerns of the realist tradition. At a key conference on Kafka held in Liblice in Communist Czechoslovakia in 1963 Roger Garaudy pleaded for a redefinition of the then orthodox Marxist definition of realism in literature, which, he claimed, was blinding Soviet Bloc critics to the powerful social criticism and hence underlying critical realism of Kafka's work. It is worth recalling Garaudy's words:

Kafka is not a revolutionary. He awakens in people the consciousness of their alienation; his work, in making it conscious, makes repression all the more intolerable, but he does not call us to battle nor draw any perspective. He raises the curtains on a drama, without seeing its solution. With all his might he hates the apparatus of repression and the deception that says its power is God-given.²

Garaudy's argument, which would have made Kafka accessible to Marxist criticism, was seen as a heresy by the Soviet cultural establishment, and was crushed along with the Prague Spring of 1968 in which it participated. Meanwhile, critics in the West were already working out similar approaches, in their case in opposition to a different critical orthodoxy, that of the religious, metaphysical, solipsistic Kafka. Today, some would actually go beyond Garaudy's cautious statement that Kafka 'does not call us to battle nor draw any perspective'. Enlarging our sense of 'the political' is for these critics a task comparable to the enlarged sense of 'realism' which Garaudy called for then.

In the traditional 'left/right' political model, Kafka has often been perceived by those who read him 'politically' as a writer with underlying strong sympathies for the political left. There is some biographical evidence to support this view, though it is disconcertingly slight and fragmentary. The reliability of some of it has also been questioned, and some is almost certainly fabricated. What is certain is that Kafka's diaries and letters register his awareness of socialist and 'anarchist' figures such as Lily Braun, Alexander Herzen, Peter Kropotkin, and František Soukup. A sketch in the notebooks

from 1918, 'The Propertyless Working Men's Association' ('Die besitzlose Arbeiterschaft'), has attracted particular attention from those interested in establishing his left-wing and even anarchist sympathies. Most intriguing perhaps are Kafka's remarks on the Bolsheviks in letters to Milena Jesenská from 1920, which suggest his strong approval for their cause. However, controversy surrounds his alleged attendance at meetings of the radical-anarchist *klub mladych* in Prague between 1909 and 1912, evidence for which is provided principally by one of its members, Michal Mareš. His testimony influentially shapes Klaus Wagenbach's biographies of Kafka and much of the secondary literature on Kafka's putative sympathies with radical politics,³ but has been dismissed as a fabrication by Hartmut Binder and Ritchie Robertson.⁴ To muddy the waters even further, Mareš's version of events appeared to find independent endorsement in Gustav Janouch's second edition of his *Conversations with Kafka*, but it is now widely accepted that this second, 'enhanced' edition contains fabrications.⁵ Thus, some of the most promising biographical evidence in support of Kafka's sympathetic interest in the radical politics of his time needs to be handled with caution. These doubts concerning certain witnesses may have dented the case for a radical political reading, but they do not necessarily invalidate Wagenbach's broader conclusions. Other evidence (such as Kafka's remarks on the Bolsheviks) remains to be explained. In any event, one might argue, it is to Kafka's *texts* that one should look for the real evidence.

The evidence of the works themselves is, predictably, given Kafka's literary method, far from straightforward. Here, 'political' readings often appear to compete with other interpretive approaches, and must justify themselves by the quality of their insights, their compatibility with the biographical evidence, and most importantly, their fidelity to the text. There is a perhaps inevitable temptation on the part of critics to find what they set out to look for. Kafka criticism abounds with hobby-horse interpretations which fail to do justice to the structural complexity and semantic and semiotic richness of the fiction, reading into it excessively partial religious, existential, psychoanalytic, and other frames of meaning. It would be surprising, therefore, if the same did not hold for 'political' readings. Historically, much of this 'political' reading of Kafka has been engaged in the task of rescuing him from the aura of a *homo religiosus* with which Brod influentially announced him to the world, and with establishing his credentials as an author of critical enlightenment who belongs to the liberal canon. Recent feminist criticism, however – for example, Elizabeth Boa's study – has begun to ask searching questions which are beginning to modify this rather comforting consensus.

Of all Kafka's fictional works, it is those composed in 1912 which most obviously contain a substantial vein of social and political critique. One reason for this is that the religious and metaphysical themes prominent in later works are less pronounced in 1912. *The Man who Disappeared* precipitates Karl Roßmann, a Prague adolescent, as an innocent abroad into the world (from the perspective of Prague in 1912, a futuristic world) of laissez-faire American capitalism. This is encapsulated in the working conditions at the Hotel Occidental, the tragic story of the orphaned Therese (who seems to have stepped out of Dickens's London), the bewildering scale and pace of the modern metropolis, the radical division of labour under the modern Taylor System with its resulting alienation of workers from the products of their labour, the erosion of the distinction between workers and machines, all juxtaposed with the opulent life of the leisured, capital-owning class. Kafka himself noted the Dickensian template underlying this novel, in a remark which points up an indebtedness to Dickens's basic picaresque structure (8.x.17; D2: 188). But there is also a good case for seeing a strong vein of Dickensian social criticism in the novel. In the opening chapter Karl's disembarkation is delayed when he is drawn into the case of the stoker whose semi-articulate claims of injustice degenerate into incoherence and confusion when he nervously tries to put his case in the captain's quarters. Alfred Wirkner's study of Kafka's sources demonstrates his borrowings from the account by the Czech radical thinker (an 'anarchist', in some accounts) Dr František Soukup, whose lecture on America Kafka attended in June 1912.⁶ Amongst the illustrations in Soukup's book on this subject, which presumably also featured in his lecture, there is a schematic cross-section of an ocean-going steamer. This shows the structure of the ship to be a microcosm of the social hierarchy. The well-heeled passengers occupy the spacious first-class quarters with their dining and recreation facilities on the uppermost decks. Beneath these are the cramped steerage quarters, and further down still, in the keel, the boilers fuelled by stokers in shirt sleeves. At the very top of this structure is the bridge, the captain's domain. Kafka picks up this symbolic topography and develops its implicit social critique in an evidently sympathetic way to depict the absolute gulf, in social class, in language, and perhaps also in standards of justice, between the world of stokers and the world of captains. Karl's future in the New World seems to be symbolically in the balance between these two extremes. It turns out that he is extremely well connected; rightly or wrongly, however, he sides instinctively with the stoker in his ill-defined but strongly felt sense of injustice, and it is the fate of the stoker which foreshadows his own. Though set on the other side of the globe, it seems reasonable to infer that the novel also works as a futuristic projection of the

social and economic conditions in industrialising Bohemia as Kafka encountered them in the course of his work for the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute.

'The Metamorphosis', although it pointedly breaks with a realist aesthetic in its famous opening sentence, in many ways continues this social critique. The narrative focuses in great detail on the material conditions in which the Samsa family live. The affinities between Kafka's fictionalised world and Marx's analysis of capital find only occasional reference in the critical literature, and even then tend to be dismissed or played down. Robertson, for example, remarks that 'the analysis of Gregor's work and its effect on him is certainly unsparing, but would not be easily accommodated in a conventional Marxist view'.⁷ Remarks such as these give the impression that the juxtaposition of Kafka and Marx is a critical taboo. One of the few critics to take the notion seriously is Walter Sokel, who finds the correspondences 'exact': 'Gregor's profound self-alienation corresponds, with uncanny precision, to Marx's definition of the "externalisation" of work under capitalism.'⁸ That the alienation at the centre of 'The Metamorphosis' is discernibly material and social, and intimately connected with the nature and conditions of employment, is indisputable. The case for a material reading of alienation at any rate seems much stronger than that for a religious or metaphysical interpretation. Indeed, Gregor's half-articulated resentments concerning his job clearly reveal the emotional and psychological damage his economic bondage has inflicted, and, despite moments of what Marxists would call false consciousness ('He felt restored to human company', *TOS*: 86) are not without a certain analytical power – for example his description of his situation as one of 'the constant stream of changing faces with no chance of any warmer, lasting companionship' (77).

If the essentially sympathetic adaptation of Marxian and 'anarchist' social perspectives is a feature of *The Man Who Disappeared* and 'The Metamorphosis', it is less obviously central to 'The Judgement'. This story seems constructed rather on Freudian themes such as the return of the repressed, and the Oedipus complex, and it is to Freud, 'of course', that Kafka acknowledges a debt here (23.IX.12; *DI*: 276). A 'political' reading of this story, such as that advanced by J. P. Stern, takes power as the story's underlying theme and views it as a study in the workings of psychological domination. Stern argues that in this story Kafka 'endows a partly arbitrary ("subjective") law with the validity and power of a wholly objective law, and shows that this is what he is doing' (Stern's emphasis).⁹ This is a crucial point. Kafka is a critical observer and exposé of power, not a helpless, passive, unreflecting victim; his fictions are designed to have an effect on us, his readers. Stern is essentially stating a point which unites most critics who see Kafka as a 'political'

writer, namely that his texts are not unreflecting expressions of disorientation and despair, but finely observed critiques of power which are presented in an understated, yet provocative manner which in principle affords the reader the possibility of critical orientation. The unobtrusiveness of Kafka's method should not blind us to its ultimately provocative intent. His poetics make particular demands on us, his readers, to read attentively. As Herbert Kraft, one of the more controversial perhaps of the political readers, stresses: 'the decisive role is intended for the reader'.¹⁰ In making this point, Kraft is merely elaborating Kafka's own programmatic declaration to Oskar Pollak in 1904 on what literature should be: a 'blow on the head' of the reader, an 'axe for the frozen sea inside us' (27.1.04; *LFFE*: 16).

If there is a respectable and familiar case for a socially engaged edge to Kafka's writing in 1912, this case is somewhat harder to sustain for the later works, and here the argument for a 'political' Kafka becomes more subtle. The mounting urgency of religious and metaphysical questions in the works written in 1914 certainly poses considerable problems of interpretation for 'political' readings. Undeniably, religious, existential, psychological, and biographical readings of *The Trial* and 'In the Penal Colony' need to be acknowledged, though it is a moot point whether the religious motifs in these works qualify them as religious. Brod's notion of Kafka as a religious writer effectively precludes socially critical interpretations – witness Brod's hostility to the early political 'misinterpretations' of *The Trial*, for example by Siegfried Kracauer.¹¹ Seeing him as a religious or metaphysical rebel, on the other hand, has a quite different effect. It is important to see that a 'radical' reading depends on a particular understanding of Kafka's literary method, and in particular on the role of irony and travesty, which 'political' readings tend to argue characterise the implicitly religious or metaphysical elements in these two works. The extreme point of a political reading of *The Trial* is the thesis, argued for example by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, that Kafka is engaged on a radical questioning of idealist metaphysics, that the novel is engaged in 'the dismantling of all transcendent justifications'¹² for the Law that condemns and ultimately executes (or, as Kraft insists, murders) Josef K.¹³ On this reading, any claims to a 'higher' truth, religious or ethical, which the Court may appear to have actually exposed during the novel as the psychological and ideological tools of a secular power, and its central theme is not guilt, or sinfulness, or conscience, but injustice and oppression, the social psychology of power. A more differentiated view is put forward by Peter Beicken, who argues that the novel is constructed as a naked, degenerated power struggle between two antagonistic principles, equating to indictment and justification, without a clear victor emerging.¹⁴ A similar debate surrounds 'In the Penal Colony'. An example of a materialist,

political reading is that by Roy Pascal, who relates the story, despite its exotic tropical setting ‘half a world away’, to the moral dilemmas posed for liberal intellectuals – such as Kafka – by the Great War in Europe, and specifically to the ‘ideas of 1914’, the unquestioning, xenophobic celebration of ‘Gott, Kaiser, Vaterland’.¹⁵ Pascal’s ‘political’ reading of this story proceeds from a fine-grained study of the narrative perspective, and was also amongst the first to insist that the central, problematical, figure in this story is not the officer, but the traveller, whose vacillations in the face of such brutality and fanaticism provide the ‘painful element’ to which Kafka famously referred in a letter to his publisher Kurt Wolff (II.X.16; *LFFE*: 127). That Kafka’s interest in penal settlements is also not purely as a source of exotic metaphor but as exemplars of real political phenomena such as colonialism, terror, and repression (with undertones of a possible Austrian solution to the ‘Jewish problem’) is argued forcefully by Walter Müller-Seidel in his study of Kafka’s sources for this story.¹⁶

Certain interpretive approaches have tended to compete with this kind of political reading, and the debate about what might be called the referential value of Kafka’s fiction (the nature of the reality, or experiences, with which his texts engage) continues. Some strands of criticism seem to point us away from an engagement with the outside world, towards an introverted meaning system, and can produce good evidence in support. Malcolm Pasley has pointed out the existence of ‘semi-private’ references in some works, such as ‘Eleven Sons’, which refer to Kafka’s own works or to the act of writing.¹⁷ This self-referential dimension has been developed especially by critics who see the act of writing itself and Kafka’s reflections on his position as a writer as major underlying themes of his fiction. Pasley argues, for example, that ‘the metaphor *horse* for story, and *horse-rider* or *horse-trainer* for writer, run through the whole of [Kafka’s] writing’.¹⁸ Other commentators have shown particular interest in references to writing implements such as the writing machine in ‘In the Penal Colony’. The demonstrable existence of such veins of meaning in Kafka’s writing appears, as I have said, to point towards an introverted meaning system, and thus to question the notion that Kafka engages in some substantial way with an external, social world. Taken to an extreme, this can suggest a picture of Kafka as a solipsist, and some critics tend to endorse this view by reading, for example, *The Trial* and ‘In the Penal Colony’ substantially as extended metaphors for the trials of writing in general, and writing the work in question in particular. Stanley Corngold’s discussion of both these works and Mark Anderson’s treatment of ‘In the Penal Colony’ seem to me examples of this tendency.¹⁹ The impatience of some critics at this line of argument is exemplified by J. P. Stern’s dismissal of it as a ‘less than riveting’ explanation of *The Trial*.²⁰ If this is the key to

Kafka's work, Stern implicitly asks, why should it be worth reading? One answer to this question could be that the metaphor of writing translates into an array of objective correlatives with which readers can identify: the search for truth or at least an understanding of one's situation, the quest for a form which is one's own, the struggle for control of experience, the sacrifices and moral dilemmas involved in such effort. But even so it is difficult to imagine such an interpretation of the work in which engagement with a particular, empirical world of experience plays no part. And logically, there is no reason why 'self-referential' and 'political' readings should not complement one another as part of a comprehensive interpretation. To admit this possibility is to open oneself up to the complexity and richness of Kafka's fictions, and to a certain extent to the arbitrariness of the division between 'interior' and 'exterior' worlds. For example, it is possible to see in 'In the Penal Colony' elements of Kafka's agonising over his private crises and a profound contemplation on the Great War and the ambivalence of intellectuals like himself in their response to it. The private and the public are closely intertwined, and Kafka criticism needs perhaps to focus more on the interconnectedness of these worlds, taking its lead from Kafka's own remark to Wolff on the painfulness of 'our general and my particular time' (II.X.16; *LFE*: 127).

Mention has already been made of Kafka's work as an insurance assessor in the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, and its possible role as a source for his imaginative fiction. Indeed Brod thought it self-evident that, as he put it, 'whole chapters of the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* derive their outer covers, their realistic wrappings, from the atmosphere Kafka breathed in the Workers' Accident Institute'. He also recalls Kafka's anger at the meekness of workers mutilated in avoidable industrial accidents, who approached the Institute as supplicants instead of storming it and smashing it to bits.²¹ To this we might add Kafka's experiences of the family businesses, the fancy-goods store owned by his father and the asbestos works in which he was for a time a partner. Undoubtedly, these provided him with first-hand experience of industrial relations, practices, and conditions. In 'Letter to his Father' Kafka recalls Hermann Kafka's 'tyrannising' way with his employees, whom he regarded as 'paid enemies', to which Kafka adds that his father was in turn their 'paying enemy'.²² In his diary he expresses his sympathy for the women in the asbestos factory whose work threatens to turn them into dehumanized, exploitable objects before they escape at the end of each shift (5.XI.12; *DI*: 231). His professional duties brought him into contact with industrial enterprises in and around Prague, with the devious ways of employers unwilling to pay the appropriate accident insurance premiums for their workers, and often with the complicity of workers themselves. And he

was himself, of course, also an employee, familiar with the uncertainties and frustrations of his class. It has only recently been realised that, in 1912, as Anthony Northey reports:

Kafka the insurance agency employee was also involved in the creation of an Association of Officials of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, the closest these white-collar workers could come to forming a union: Kafka was treasurer of the Association for a brief period. Thus, Kafka occupied the two conflicting positions of factory-owner and union leader at the same time.²³

He was evidently underpaid for his level of qualifications, and as a Jew was lucky to find employment at the Institute – he happened to know the President in 1908, Dr Otto Příbram, himself a converted Jew. In 1917, Kafka wrote to Brod that the Institute was now ‘closed to Jews’ (13.XI.17; *LFPE*: 165). His professional experiences undoubtedly inform his fictional presentations of technology, for example in *The Man who Disappeared* and ‘In the Penal Colony’. They are also reflected in the detailed attention to conditions of employment imposed on K. in *The Castle*. Andrew Weeks has traced the parallels between this novel and the protracted struggle of Habsburg civil servants (the white-collar ‘trade union’ to which Kafka belonged) for a code of service, illuminating the connections with a class struggle very close to Kafka’s heart.²⁴ Issues of status, of autonomy and dependence, are already present, for K. at least, ‘between the lines’ of the letter which seems to confirm his appointment as the Castle’s land-surveyor, but in which he perceives a threat to reduce his existence to ‘life as a worker. Service, foreman, work, conditions of pay, duty, worker, the letter was swarming with it’ (*DS*: 35). K. is fearful that such a life, planned for him by the Castle, will be one of subjugation, effectively nullifying the threat he poses, in his own mind, at least, to the established order.

One of the texts which has often been cited by ‘political’ readers is ‘Die besitzlose Arbeiterschaft’ (translated as ‘Guild of Workmen without Possessions’ and ‘The Propertyless Working Men’s Association’).²⁵ However, this is not a revolutionary tract in the conventional sense. It consists of a balance sheet of ‘rights’ and ‘obligations’ for some hypothetical community of labourers and workers. Written in 1918, it dates from a period when Kafka had begun to immerse himself in Jewish culture and history, in Zionism and the possibility of emigrating to Palestine (following the Balfour Declaration of 1917). As Binder points out, the immediate context is Jewish, not party political.²⁶ In drawing up a balance sheet of the rights and obligations of the members of what is clearly a commune of some kind (of no more than 500 *men*, be it said), Kafka focuses on the ethical dimensions of membership, stressing that the relationship between worker and employer is a ‘relationship

of trust' which should never be regulated by the courts. That comment is found, interestingly, under the 'obligations'. Under 'rights' Kafka notes that working life should be 'a matter of conscience and faith in one's fellow man'. There is also provision for a 'council' to negotiate between the commune and the 'government', and recognition that 'capitalist enterprises' also exist. As Binder remarks, this does not read like a socialist pamphlet. However, it arguably does reveal the ideological affinities between the utopian strain of Zionist social philosophy and utopian or Romantic anarchist thought – one thinks of Kropotkin's anti-Darwinian invocation of the natural principle of 'mutual aid', which Kafka very probably knew.²⁷

This interest in a politics and social order based on ethical rigour, self-discipline, and commitment to one's fellow human beings, evident in this later phase of Kafka's life, may also explain his forthright praise of the Bolsheviks in two letters to Milena in August and September 1920. He sends her a newspaper article by Bertrand Russell on the situation in Russia. Russell praises the selfless commitment and industriousness of the communist 'who genuinely shares the Party's belief that private property is the root of all evil' and who lives a life of self-denial, working long hours even though he is in a position of power. Russell compares Lenin to Cromwell, saying that both men were driven by a combination of religious faith and democracy, but that military dictatorship forced both to sacrifice democracy to the imperatives of the religion. The article ends with some expressions of concern that these high principles will be corrupted by power. Kafka writes, however, that he has torn off this conclusion, as it contains 'accusations [...], which do not belong in this context' (*BM*: 238). In a subsequent letter, he returns to the article and tells Milena: 'What the author expresses reservations about is for me the highest praise possible on earth' (*BM*: 257). Kafka's comments are sufficiently cryptic to leave scope for speculation on how they are to be interpreted. On a certain reading, though, they challenge the comforting consensus of political readings which claim him for the liberal canon.

References to major political events of Kafka's lifetime are sparse in his diaries and letters and difficult to detect in his imaginative fiction. One finds little or nothing, for example, on the Balkan war of 1912, the founding of the Czech state in 1918, or the Balfour Declaration in favour of a Jewish state of 1917. The latter, however, may provide a useful context within which to read some of the short prose pieces from 1917, such as 'Jackals and Arabs'. Seeing the political events of the time reflected in Kafka's fictions is an inherently speculative, but fascinating exercise. As noted above, some critics have traced echoes of the Great War, and particularly of the debate over the 'ideas of 1914', in 'In the Penal Colony'. Links between 'The Judgement'

and a *cause célèbre* of the time, the anti-Jewish Beiliss affair (1911–13) have also been traced, suggesting that pogrom may be a subtext in the story. Mendel Beiliss had been accused of the murder of a schoolboy found in a cave on the outskirts of Kiev in the spring of 1911. He was accused, as Jews in Christian Europe had been since the Middle Ages, of using the blood of a Christian child for Jewish ritual. He was eventually acquitted but not until a frenzy of anti-Semitic feeling had been fomented by the Russian authorities, who brought him to trial after the identity of the true culprits was publicly known.²⁸ The turbulence in Russia is linked in ‘The Judgement’ to revolution, but also to the figure of the priest on the balcony in Kiev who cuts a cross into the palm of his hand and holds it up to the crowd. There is also a brief reference to the Russian Revolution (of 1905, presumably) in the story.

A more substantial, though oblique, reference to revolutionary Russia may be detected in ‘The Great Wall of China’, which was written only weeks after the February 1917 uprising. In a passage subsequently deleted in the manuscript, the narrator in this story recalls an episode from his childhood in which a beggar from a neighbouring country passes through his native province distributing revolutionary pamphlets. The beggar is ridiculed and sent on his way, but not before he has made a lasting impression on the young boy:

And although – so it seems to me in recollection – the gruesomeness of the living present was irrefutably conveyed by the beggar’s words, we laughed and shook our heads and refused to listen any longer. So eager are our people to obliterate the present.²⁹

In the context of a story in which the narrator sets out to be an ‘incorruptible observer’ of the mechanisms by which the ideology of nationhood is constructed (for which the Great Wall is a metaphor), it is plausible to suggest that this episode reflects, however obliquely, on the political culture of the Habsburg monarchy of which Kafka was a subject and the myths with which it sustained itself, albeit by ‘obliterating the present’. Read self-reflectively, this passage could even be a coded reminiscence of youthful encounters with revolutionary pamphleteers from this turbulent neighbouring state.

Perhaps the most influential critic to insist on Kafka’s radical credentials was Theodor Adorno. His essay from the 1950s rejects the religious or existential reception of Kafka as a comfortable artifice ‘which knowingly dispenses with the very scandal on which his work is built’. Adorno locates this ‘scandal’ in the material mechanisms of society: most of Kafka’s writing, he observes, is ‘a reaction to unlimited power’, power which is at once

patriarchal and socioeconomic; and the ‘shabbiness’ of Kafka’s work is an astute stratagem:

the cryptogram of capitalism’s highly polished, glittering late phase, which he excludes in order to define it all the more precisely in its negative. Kafka scrutinises the smudges left behind in the deluxe edition of the book of life by the fingers of power.³⁰

Dismissing Brod’s version of Kafka’s religiosity, Adorno insists: ‘Kafka’s prose sides with the outcasts, the protest of his friend notwithstanding.’ Adorno’s view is now substantially represented in the critical literature, and a secular focus on power as his enduring theme is now axiomatic. Elias Canetti regards Kafka as ‘the greatest expert on power’,³¹ and Herbert Kraft, in a comment which echoes Garaudy, reads the law in Kafka’s work not as a metaphor but literally, as codified social reality, as a way of depicting the workings of hegemony (*Herrschaft*). According to this reading, it is not divine justice and grace which are symbolised in the Court and the Castle; rather, these structures epitomise hegemony and expose its deeper workings.³²

Recent studies of the historical contexts of Kafka’s work have adopted the perspectives of critical discourse analysis and have begun to add important detail to our understanding of the political import of his work. A view is beginning to emerge of Kafka’s work as an oppositional discourse which absorbs, reflects, and subverts the dominant political discourses of his day, including those of gender, ethnicity, and Social Darwinism as the prevalent model of economic organisation. Mark M. Anderson has suggested how the polysemous concept of *Verkehr*, which means both ‘intercourse’ (social and sexual) and ‘traffic’, the multitude of ways in which words and goods are exchanged between people, enables Kafka to engage critically with the dominant forms of social interaction in economic and sexual life. Sander Gilman’s study on the ‘pathological Jew’ as an ideological stereotype of Kafka’s time surveys the interconnections between Kafka’s life and work and contemporary maxims about race, gender, and disease. He points out that ‘the Jew’ was invariably constructed in this public discourse as both male and pathological, while the intellectual was ideologically feminised and thus marginalised within the dominant patriarchal ideology. Gilman suggests how Kafka’s writing is entangled in these repressive discourses and is an attempt to control and counter them, albeit in parabolic and ironic fashion. For example, he believes that Kafka was highly sensitive to the charges of (homo)sexual excess, miscegenation (cross-racial sexual union), and ritual murder commonly made against ‘the Jew’. He points to the Beiliss trial in Kiev and the Tisza-Eszlar trial in Hungary (both concerning charges of Jewish ritual murder) as important moments impelling Kafka’s writing. Gilman also draws parallels

between another Jewish *cause célèbre*, the Dreyfus affair, where a French army captain of Jewish extraction was put on trial and sentenced to banishment for (allegedly) passing secrets to the Germans, and an array of themes in *The Trial*, 'In the Penal Colony', and 'The Metamorphosis'. He sees Dreyfus's fate echoed in the transformation of Gregor's body from 'the confident anatomy of the proud military man to the scarred and withered body of the stigmatized outcast'. Recontextualising these painful discourses in an ostensibly non-Jewish, 'universal' discourse, namely West European modernism, Gilman argues, was Kafka's way of confronting and controlling their power over him.³³

Recent feminist studies have adopted a similar discourse approach to the ideological contexts of Kafka's writings. Elizabeth Boa places Kafka within a tradition of literary modernism which is itself a symptom of 'a crisis in a militaristic age of decaying traditional patriarchy in which masculinity assumes a sado-masochistic character'.³⁴ Thus, Kafka lived and wrote in an age when established patriarchal structures (the social and sexual superiority of the male, the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition) were already fragmenting, and his own alienation was articulated in part in an anti-patriarchal, feminised discourse, which provided him with an oppositional perspective and rhetoric. She sees *The Trial* as a radical deconstruction of this problematical masculinity, though it is in *The Castle* that women characters take centre-stage and gain an authentic voice. Indeed, Boa finds a self-critical note in this novel in that K.'s claims to being a revolutionary are shown to be bogus – he is actually a patriarch in waiting – while it is Amalia who mounts the only genuine challenge to the power of the Castle. She pays the price too in being ostracised by both the patriarchal Castle and the other women, whose position of power within the patriarchal order is also threatened by her rebellion. It is his capacity for self-criticism and irony, Boa remarks, which marks Kafka out from the misogynistic discourses of his time. However, as Stephen Dowden has pointed out, feminist studies of Kafka are perhaps the only area of critical debate in which the idea of Kafka the exemplary liberal is treated sceptically.³⁵ Boa, whilst according Kafka 'a feminine core of critical marginality', also notes marked patriarchal and misogynistic features in the letters and in some at least of his works, such as 'The Silence of the Sirens'. Nor is this the only paradox she detects. She sees his writings as a way of escaping from the world of real gendered relations (real women) to a world in which he could exercise immense and arbitrary power over them. The later Kafka, however, from 1916 onwards, appears more mellow and contemplative in his (self-)critiques of the dominant discourses on gender, ethnicity, and nationhood. In his later works, in which he explores his own position as an outsider and artist, he shows increasing sympathy for the

female voice, and adopts a female persona for his last story, 'Josephine, the Songstress or: the Mouse People'.

A discourse on the Jews was of course also conducted within the Jewish communities, and Giuliano Baioni has placed Kafka's work within the complex demands of the Jewish cultural politics of his time, resistant to both Brod's separationist politics (Zionism) and Martin Buber's romanticising myths of Judaism. Kafka, Baioni believes, jealously defended his outpost of isolation as the 'most Western of the Western Jews', caught, as Kafka wrote to Brod in 1921, with his hind quarters stuck in the glue-trap of his Jewish ancestry while his forelegs found no footing in modernity (*LFFE*: 289). Baioni's reading of 'The Great Wall of China', for example, follows other critics in seeing it as a parabolic essay on Jewish identity, but he reads it as a rebuttal of Brod.³⁶ Kafka's fictions, he argues, the products of and motivation for his willed isolation, leave open the question of whether his life's work was marked by ethical rigour (the dog narrator of 'Investigations of a Dog') or diabolical narcissism (the prima donna starvation artist in 'A Fasting-artist'). In resisting both wings of Jewish cultural politics, Kafka reserved for himself the dubious 'privilege of traversing the world of the lie and soiling himself with all the dirt of the assimilation culture – in a word, of being the salvation of mankind in the "Western Jewish time"'.³⁷

These approaches to Kafka's texts as refractions of and (subversive) responses to oppressive historical discourses and ideologies have added importantly to our understanding of the way his writings engage with the 'political' themes of his time, though there is clearly still plenty of scope for different emphases and even disagreements within this paradigm, as indeed there was in the intense debate between Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. Brecht, though he regarded Kafka as a great writer, could not 'accept' him, regarding him as a 'failure', an exemplar of the petit-bourgeois class 'caught under the wheels', whose writings were characterised by 'mystification'. Benjamin, however, whose reading of Kafka combined political, Jewish, and mythological perspectives, noted:

it is necessary to clarify Kafka, that is to say to formulate the practicable suggestions that can be extracted from his stories. It is to be supposed that such suggestions *can* be extracted from them, if only because of their tone of superior calm.³⁸

Brecht's view reflects in essence the Marxist orthodoxy which still prevailed at Liblice in 1963. In contrast, Benjamin's conviction that practicable suggestions *can* be extracted from an analytical Kafka now looks modern, initiating a lineage of political readings with their intellectual roots in the Frankfurt School, of which Adorno's is the most eminent. Herbert Kraft

is arguably the most adventurous of the more recent critics belonging to this lineage, insofar as he argues for a criticism which relates Kafka to our present, on the grounds that our age has now caught up with Kafka's imaginative projections. Kraft insists that in order to read him correctly we must move beyond the standardised reception of the canonised, 'important' texts, and explore the smaller, less well known texts. In doing so we will see the 'major' texts afresh. His study of the fragment 'Der Unterstaatsanwalt' ('The Assistant Prosecutor'), for example, which has chronological and thematic ties with *The Trial*, demonstrates Kafka's dismantling of the notion of the unpolitical conservative, and provides contextual support for critics who see in *The Trial* a critique of right-wing ideologies such as phrenology and its applications in the criminology of Kafka's day.³⁹ According to Kraft, short texts such as 'The Problem of our Laws' and 'The Helmsman' are transparently political tracts on the nature of power, the former exposing 'how "the Law" is only the euphemistic formulation for "hegemony"', the latter documenting the mechanism of a *Machtergreifung* ('seizure of power').⁴⁰

In rejecting what might be called the 'religious fallacy' inherent in Brodian readings, secular and political readings must also answer the charge that they are guilty of an equal and opposite simplification of Kafka, the creation of a 'political fallacy'.⁴¹ Making Kafka into a socialist or some other kind of party-political activist on the strength of these insights, no matter how persuasive they are, will simply not do, and the question remains how seriously Kafka's writings should be taken as social and political critiques. On the whole one would not turn to these critics for an appreciation of the profound and hilarious qualities of Kafka the visual and verbal humorist, though his humour is often barbed with social implications (as in the look-alike lodgers and the elements of farce and slap-stick in 'The Metamorphosis'). Also, the fact that clothes are important in Kafka, on which Anderson bases his perceptive study, had gone unregarded, not worthy of note, it seems, by 'political' and 'metaphysical' commentators alike, who in their different ways had assumed that a 'serious', 'major' writer could not be interested in such 'superficial' themes.

Yet the wide-ranging political import of much of Kafka's writing, and the nuanced way in which it engages with major ideological battlegrounds of his time, has been well demonstrated by critics like Pascal, Kraft, and Gilman. It is now no longer possible to take seriously the notion that his writing does not engage in profound and urgent, though subtle and parabolic ways, with a recognisable social reality. The 'political' Kafka who has emerged from these readings is an important and necessary corrective to the picture of the *homo religiosus* or introverted existentialist which tended to dominate his early

reception. The question facing Kafka criticism today is not whether political readings are admissible, but how they are to be integrated into an appreciation of his work as a whole. This requires a sophistication and sensitivity equal to the work itself, with its multiple, shifting refractions of meaning, its playfulness and deadly seriousness, its perspectival subtleties and ambiguities, its private and public resonances. Perhaps Peter Beicken's view of *The Trial* points to the possibility of such an adequate reading, suggesting that Kafka's imaginative fiction is shaped by a poetics of attrition between antagonistic points of view which fight out an unresolved battle. Beicken suggests a way of acknowledging an engagement with and interaction of the religious and the secular, the private and the political, accusation and justification, in a way which preserves the ideological complexity of Kafka's work and refrains from 'taking sides', as a critic, in the ideological debates themselves. Such an approach might have much to commend it as a general approach to Kafka's oeuvre. But critics like Adorno, Deleuze and Guattari, and Kraft would presumably view this as a compromise and itself an ideological construct which continues to deprive readers of the true import and historical significance of Kafka's work. The essential point is that in the critical debate all schools of interpretation need to justify their findings with reference to the aesthetic, semiotic, and rhetorical features of Kafka's texts, since these appear to be designed to replicate the surface confusions and perspectival tensions of actual experience.

To sum up: Kafka's declared dedication to writing his 'dreamlike inner life' should not prevent us from seeing the ways in which his imaginative fiction also engages critically with a historical, empirical social reality. Those who read him 'politically' make a good case for seeing him as a critical receptor and reflector of social forces, an observer of secular power, a radical sceptic in religious issues, whose imaginative fictions are driven by an iconoclastic, though insidious and oblique, critique of historically real power structures and their discourses. In particular, once we accept that irony and travesty are part of Kafka's treatment of religious themes, it becomes possible to conceive of the social and political dimensions of his critique of metaphysics. Crucially, however, his fictions are composed as intellectual and moral challenges to the reader, offering us the *potential* of analytical insight and radical perspective which it is for us to activate. Seen in this way, his works are constructed as provocations, invitations to see into the mechanisms of power through the 'smudges', as Adorno says, which they leave behind on the surface of conventionalised reality. Kafka was certainly familiar with, and appears to have been sympathetic to, radical political theory of the left, but neither his biography nor his fiction suggests that he subscribed to a conventional political philosophy or programme, with

the possible exception of ethical anarchism, which indeed may overlap with the social-ethical programmes of Zionism that he encountered in the latter stages of his life. His critique of patriarchy and other forms of power is at once subtle and capable of self-irony. But the exact extent of these 'political' dimensions to his work is ultimately a matter for interpretation within an overall interpretation of his life and work. It will in all probability remain contentious.

NOTES

1. Dušan Glišović, *Politik im Werk Kafkas* (Tübingen: Francke, 1996).
2. Roger Garaudy, 'Kafka and Modern Art', in Hughes (ed./tr.), *An Anthology of Marxist Criticism*, pp. 104–10, here pp. 109–10.
3. See Klaus Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1964), pp. 64–71; Lee Baxandall, 'Kafka and Radical Perspective', *Mosaic* 3:4 (1970), 73–9 and 'Kafka as Radical'; and Tom Morris, 'From Liblice to Kafka'.
4. Hartmut Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 361–4; Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 140.
5. Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, second, enlarged edition, tr. Goronwy Rees (London: Village Press, 1971). This includes material from the second, expanded German edition, the veracity of which has been doubted.
6. Alfred Wirkner, *Kafka und die Außenwelt: Quellenstudien zum 'Amerika'-Fragment* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), pp. 46–51 and pp. 91–104.
7. Robertson, *Judaism, Politics and Literature*, p. 85.
8. Sokel, *From Marx to Myth*, p. 107.
9. J. P. Stern, 'The Judgement', p. 123.
10. Herbert Kraft, *Kafka: Wirklichkeit und Perspektive* (Bebenhausen: Rotsch, 1972), p. 74.
11. For an English translation of Kracauer's review, see W. J. Dodd (ed.), *Kafka: The Metamorphosis, The Trial and The Castle* (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 88–91. For Brod's response, cf. p. 87.
12. Deleuze and Guattari, *Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 51.
13. Kraft, *Someone Like K.*, pp. 33–85.
14. Peter Beicken, *Franz Kafka: eine kritische Einführung in die Forschung* (Frankfurt aM: Fischer, 1974), pp. 283–4.
15. Pascal, *Kafka's Narrators*, pp. 60–89.
16. Walter Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen: Kafkas Erzählung In der Strafkolonie im europäischen Kontext* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985), pp. 80–7.
17. Malcolm Pasley, 'Semi-Private Games', in Angel Flores (ed.), *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for our Times* (New York: Gordian, 1977), pp. 188–205.
18. Malcolm Pasley, 'Franz Kafka. Der Proceß. Die Handschrift redet', *Marbacher Magazin*, 52 (1990), p. 21.
19. See Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka: the Necessity of Form* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 228–49; Mark M. Anderson, 'The Ornaments of

- Writing: *In the Penal Colony*', in *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp. 173–93.
20. J. P. Stern, 'Introduction'.
 21. Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: a Biography*, tr. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (New York: Schocken, 1973), pp. 82–4.
 22. 'Letter to his Father', in *Wedding Preparations in the Country and other Posthumous Writings*, with Notes by Max Brod, tr. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 181.
 23. Anthony Northey, *Kafka's Relatives: their Lives and his Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 96.
 24. Dodd (ed.), *Kafka*, pp. 171–88.
 25. The former in Max Brod, *Franz Kafka*, pp. 84–5, the latter in Baxendall, 'Kafka and Radical Perspective', pp. 78–9. Subsequent quotations are from Brod's biography. The German text can be found in *BB*: 221–3.
 26. *Kafka-Handbuch*, vol. 1, p. 506.
 27. On Kafka's awareness of Kropotkin, see Dodd, *Kafka and Dostoyevsky: the Shaping of Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 27; also Glišović, *Politik im Werk Kafkas*, pp. 25–7.
 28. For a fuller account, see Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891–1924* (London: Pimlico, 1996), pp. 241–4.
 29. The passage is quoted here in the now rather dated translation by the Muirs, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, tr. Willa and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 79. The paragraph containing this passage is omitted from Malcolm Pasley's translation on the grounds that it was deleted in the manuscript. The relevant paragraph of some twenty-eight lines directly precedes the paragraph beginning: 'If one were to conclude from such phenomena' (*GWC*: 68).
 30. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', p. 245.
 31. Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: the Letters to Felice*, tr. Christopher Middleton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), p. 80.
 32. Herbert Kraft, *Mondheimat. Kafka* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1983), p. 204.
 33. Gilman, *The Jewish Patient*, pp. 66–8.
 34. Elizabeth Boa, *Kafka: Gender, Class and Race in the Letters and Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 149.
 35. Stephen Dowden, *Kafka's Castle and the Critical Imagination* (Colombia: Camden House, 1995), p. 95.
 36. Giuliano Baioni, *Kafka: Literatur und Judentum*, tr. Gertrud and Josef Billen (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1994), p. 146. Baioni is here taking issue with a contrary view put forward by Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch*, vol. 1, p. 505.
 37. Baioni, *Literatur und Judentum*, p. 268.
 38. Walter Benjamin, 'Notes from Svendborg: Conversations with Brecht', in *Understanding Brecht*, tr. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1973), pp. 105–21, here 31.VIII.34, p. 110.
 39. Kraft, *Mondheimat*, pp. 74–82.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
 41. See, for example, Robertson's argument that Pascal in his reading of 'In the Penal Colony' 'seems to be foisting his own liberal views on to Kafka' (*Judaism, Politics and Literature*, p. 155).

FURTHER READING

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