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## **Kafka, Weber and organization theory**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, we hope to show why examining the work of the writer, Franz Kafka (1883–1924), may enhance our understanding of organizations. In doing so, his life and achievements will be compared with Max Weber's (1864–1920). We will seek to see how their backgrounds, experiences and writing, in their respective ways, can offer analytic insights for scholars of organization vis-à-vis a number of key concepts in the field, such as bureaucracy, power and authority, rationality and lastly, alienation.

### **KEYWORDS**

alienation ■ authority ■ bureaucracy ■ Kafka ■ organizations ■ Weber

### **Introduction**

We can probably say that we (more or less) 'know where we are' with Weber as an organization theorist, yet we remain unsure as to how Kafka can illuminate our knowledge other than by the use of terms such as 'Kafkaesque', an adjective that for example now features over half a million times on the Google search-engine, to describe dysfunctional encounters with bureaucracies of various kinds (see Parker, 2002, 2003; Žižek, 2005).

Yet, '[e]verywhere there is organization, everywhere bureaucratization; like the world of feudalism, the modern world is broken up into areas dominated by castles, but not the castles of *les chansons de geste*, but the castles of Kafka', as one scholar noted several decades ago (Wolin, 1961: 354).

Taking this as our *point de depart*, the analytic objective of this article is to interpret the legacy of this Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and compare it

with that of his contemporary, Max Weber (1864–1920) exploring concepts such as *bureaucracy*, *power* and *authority*, *rationality* as well as *alienation*, in the literature on organizations (see, for example, Hassard & Holliday, 1998; Parker, 2003, 2005; Pelzer, 2002) whether or not ‘lost in translation’ (see, for example, Durrani, 2002).

This article argues the main reason we should continue to be interested in the Kafka/Weber axis is because they both articulated a reaction of deep ‘cultural pessimism’ that they derived from the onset of ‘modernization’ (involving more specifically, contemporary organizational structures and processes) yet perhaps in the perspective presented here, more meaningfully seeing the former writer as ‘satirist’ vis-à-vis the latter as ‘theorist’ (see Robertson, 2004: 86).

### Backgrounds compared: Kafka and Weber

We shall begin by comparing Kafka’s and Weber’s respective biographical details and backgrounds in law and bureaucracy, which we believe led them to reveal profound insights into the workings of organizations.

Kafka grew up in the same tumultuous times as Weber – and in the same Central European, German-speaking ‘cultural space’ (see Preece, 2002; Schorske, 1981) in which we find such luminaries as Einstein, Freud and Mach (Adler, 2001). Franz Kafka was born into a *petit-bourgeois* German-speaking, Jewish household in Prague in 1883; he was to see himself as ‘*kavka*’, a jackdaw in the Czech (‘minor’) language, which he also spoke, from which it is sometimes supposed his surname is derived.<sup>1</sup> Later, he was intrigued by Yiddish and then Hebrew (Diamant, 2003). Max Weber was born in Erfurt in 1864, into a Protestant upper middle-class family (see Bendix, 1960). The two writers died within four years of each other, the former in 1924 at the age of 39 and the latter in 1920 at the age of 56. One, the ‘Jewish Patient’ (see Gilman, 1995) succumbed to tuberculosis; the other to pandemic influenza.<sup>2</sup>

Both appear to have been victims of ‘*Angst*’ for many years, as well as ‘stress’ and even ‘pain’, although it was Weber who had a breakdown. Kafka interpreted his own illness as a metaphor: ‘what power could a bare fact have against a death sentence issued at birth?’, he asked (Bamforth, 2000: 85; Sontag, 2002: 19). Freud, a contemporary of theirs (Jones, 1963), would probably have had much to say about their ‘Oedipal’ struggles – had he known them. Deleuze and Guattari (1975/1986) however disagree; there was also no trace of the works of Freud in Kafka’s personal library (see Born, 1990) and only a few references to him in his *Diaries*. As is now well-known,

Kafka had a 'bully' for a father (Wagenbach, 1984, 2003) but whose love and approval he desperately craved (as noted in his unsent *Letter to the Father/Brief an den Vater*, written in 1919). Weber too had a painful relationship with his own father. Both Kafka and Weber went through sustained periods of inner turmoil, as indeed did their contemporary, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1917) (Kakar, 1978) to whom we will refer later.

Both Kafka and Weber studied law at university (the latter following in his father's footsteps). The former graduated in Prague and the latter in Heidelberg, as well as in Berlin later. Max Weber's brother, Alfred (1868–1958) was coincidentally Kafka's thesis examiner, as he was then a Professor at Charles Ferdinand University. Then, in June 1906, Kafka graduated with what was called a 'doctorate' in law, becoming an employee in an insurance compensation agency, whereas Weber, by then a *rentier*, became a scholar (Kaelber, 2003).

Kafka found his first post at the Italian-owned General Assurance Insurance Company/Assicurazioni Generali in Prague in 1907, a job he detested. Later, in 1908, he started work at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia/*Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt für das Königreich Böhmen*, a semi-governmental agency, rising to the high position of Senior Secretary of the Institute, finally, in June 1922 being granted 'temporary retirement', with a decent pension. Often just referred to as a minor body, the Institute had over 200 employees and provided insurance for over 200,000 enterprises and their three million workers, one-quarter of the Austro-Hapsburg Empire's firms (excluding Hungary). But as he noted in his *Diaries* Kafka (1964: 38), as a writer, lived a 'horrible double life' and that his two professions 'can never be reconciled with one another' (1964: 49). His experiences were extensively recorded in his *Office writings/Amtliche Schriften* (see Kafka, 1984 [ed. Hermsdorf]) and no doubt also contributed to his sense of alienation.<sup>3</sup> As a Jew, he was fortunate at all to find employment at the Institute – he was the 'token' member of the minority there – as opposed to seeking a post in the Civil Service. In 1917, he noted that 'it was now closed to Jews' (as anti-Semitic riots were breaking out concurrently) (see Brod, 1978: 165). He has been seen as 'a key industrial reformer' in his country<sup>4</sup> – as much as a *littérateur* – 'changing minds and saving lives' (Wasserman, 2000: 92).

Kafka's and Weber's studies in law, it is highly likely, greatly helped both of them to better grasp the 'legal-rational' underpinnings of the growing bureaucratization of society and their respective experience in administration enabled them to fully seize, in their respective ways, its *dilemmas* and *paradoxes*. *We must now see how these insights took root in their respective writing.*

## The writings of Kafka and Weber

Kafka's works – as well as Weber's – had to wait some years for significant international (posthumous) recognition. Kafka did, however, receive acclaim very quickly for his satirical short story, *The metamorphosis/Die Verwandlung* (completed in 1915) about a man who is inexplicably transformed into an insect. He also worked at his picaresque novella *Amerika (The man who disappeared/Der Verschollene*, 1996) the first chapter of which, 'The stoker'/*Der Heizer*, had appeared separately in short story form in 1913, to great praise.

Kafka's posthumous novels are, however, the main focus of our attention here. In 1925, *The trial/Der Prozess*, about a man who is put on trial for reasons that are unfathomable to him, made its public debut; in 1926, *The castle/Das Schloss* concerning the frustrated efforts of a man to obtain access to the authorities up the mountain in a vast fortification, was published; in 1927, *Amerika* (based on his reading and appreciation of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*) about an immigrant seeking to comprehend a wholly surreal, alien country emerged (it was started much earlier, abandoned, then revised). In 1937, all his works appeared in the original, but not necessarily finished, German-language versions (Poppel, 1973) bravely put together by his best friend, Max Brod (see Brod, 1973).

Weber, on the other hand, had many works published in German before his death but only achieved world-wide prominence in the social sciences *posthumously*, like Adam Smith and Karl Marx (see Turner, 2000). In 1930, we find *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism/Die Protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus* (written in 1904–5) translated by Talcott Parsons (see Weber, 1930). His concept of the 'Protestant ethic' appealed to scholars in many fields (see Gannon, 2002–2003). Then, in 1949 (from 1903–1917) *The methodology of the social sciences/Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (translated and edited by Edward Shils and Henry Finch – see Weber, 1949) appeared in English; next, in 1958, (from various dates) we find a collection, namely, *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills; see Weber, 1958); last, in 1968, we have a version of *Economy and society/Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (translated and edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, in three volumes; see Weber, 1968). As Nisbet (1966) suggests he can be seen as *the* sociologist of the organizational revolution.

Weber's work is the focus of a special issue of the journal *Organization Studies* in 2005 (see, for example, Clegg, 2005). In turn, Parker (2003, 2005) presents both our authors as exemplifying the 'organizational gothic', with

organizations seen as ‘sites of darkness’, ‘labyrinths with endless corridors’; and ‘locked doors hiding evil secrets’ shifting from ‘the dark street’ to ‘the cramped office’ or ‘the nightmare factory’. We find also Weber’s ‘iron cage’ invoked here, as well as Kafka’s ‘trial’. It is, in our view, only a short leap into the details of the two authors’ organizational insights.

## **Comparing Kafka’s and Weber’s organizational insights**

### **Bureaucracy**

Both writers had experience of organizational life *at first hand* that helped shape their reactions to modernity, as we have noted above (see Bendix, 1960; McDaniel, 1979; Meyer, 1995; Sica, 2000).

Kafka’s work as a bureaucrat, for instance, is visible in his short story ‘Poseidon’ (which he finished in 1916). Max Brod (1973) thought it self-evident that ‘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’ (Brod, 1973: 82–4). Heinemann (1996: 256) writes of Kafka’s ‘dialectic of the bureaucratic mind’.

Weber, in turn, was not just a library-based scholar. He had worked in a law firm as a trainee, prior to achieving his full doctorate and then carried out first-hand studies of industrial workers (Schluchter, 2000). His awareness of the public health authority’s control of a major cholera epidemic in Hamburg, as a young man – let alone of the performance of the German General Staff – led him to see *professionalism as superior to amateurism*. During the First World War, Weber as a reserve officer was appointed Director of Army Hospitals (nine of them in all) in Heidelberg. In those difficult years, Kafka, who had been exempted from military service, campaigned for the setting up of a hospital for shell-shocked veterans in Prague (Wasserman, 2000).

Kafka’s diaries and letters extensively reveal his views on bureaucracy, organization and work (Gross, 2002). He observed in his *Office writings/ Amtliche Schriften* (1984):

When the interests of workers (the protection of as many workers as possible, compensating for as many accidents as possible) and the interests of employers (the lowest possible contributions shared equitably among as many employers as possible) are met, the interests of the organization will be met.

(Kafka, 1984: 120)

Yet the key protagonists of his best-known works are not just simple projections of his own work-role but respectively portray a salesman Gregor Samsa in *The metamorphosis*, a senior bank clerk Joseph K. in *The trial* and a land-surveyor, K, in *The castle*. The workplace, namely 'The Bank' in which Joseph K. works, is revealed as *not* the root cause of his problem – it is 'The Court', a legal body that is prosecuting him. The latter is a sharply drawn 'Kafkaesque' caricature of legal practice, whose perversity is hard to penetrate. Similarly, *The castle* depicts an almost *timeless bureaucracy*, where arbitrary authority reduces the individual to uncomprehending powerlessness, a point to be amplified later, with a few contemporary features of modernity (such as electricity and telephones) added on. Organizations also feature prominently in many of Kafka's other writings, such as in his story *The Great Wall of China/Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (1916/2005), a detailed account of its construction (Murray, 2004).

### Rationality

Kafka sees the workplace as an *arena* for the interplay of 'uncontrollability, unpredictability and helplessness' (Kets de Vries, 1995: 55). According to Albrow (1970, 1990), Weber, by comparison, did *not* rely only on one *specific* notion of *rationality* but on a *range* of possible interpretations, a view amplified in other sources (Brubaker, 1984; Ritzer, 1992). He also sees formal rational organizations as having *irrational* consequences, 'in other words, the irrationality of rationality' (see Ritzer, 1998: 732; also Grey, 2005: 27–8).

Weber sees the outcome as the so-called 'iron cage' (on an alleged mistranslation here, see Baehr, 2001) as follows: 'Rational calculation . . . reduces every worker to a cog in this bureaucratic machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself into a somewhat bigger cog . . . The passion for bureaucratization drives us to despair', he wrote in 1921 (Weber, 1968: liii). In turn, Weber's ambiguities and doubts about bureaucracy surface from time to time (see Eliaeson & Palonen, 2004), as he sees modernity as 'deeply morally and politically problematic' (see Marsden & Townley, 1996: 662), perhaps inspired in part by his reading of Goethe and Nietzsche (see Sica, 2000).

Kafka also uses the imagery of the 'cage' very vividly: it is 'I who am in the cage . . . [N]ot only in the office but everywhere' (Janouch, 1971: 20). Again, 'one cannot break one's chains when there are no chains to be seen' (1971: 53). He goes on: 'I sit in the office. It is a foul-smelling factory of pain' (1971: 125). Images of the 'cage' also appear in *Report to an academy/Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (which appeared in 1919) and *The*

*hunger artist/Ein Hungerkünstler* (1922). Kirchberger (1986) points to a 'cage' of elaborate clandestine legal organization in Kafka's writings 'which employs corrupt warders, oafish inspectors and examining magistrates' (1986: 66); this he calls '*unfamiliar jurisprudence*' (1986: 46, emphasis added).

While Weber insists that 'a bureaucracy is capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency, and is in this sense formally the most "rational" known means of exercising authority over human beings' (Weber, 1968: 223), Kafka's fiction displays little of these characteristics. *Perhaps Weber was taking the Prussian bureaucracy as his benchmark, Kafka the less strict Austrian one.* The Austro-Hapsburg Empire had been seen for years as a 'house of cards' waiting to be knocked over (see Janik & Toulmin, 1973).

Again, in Kafka's work, the workings of bureaucracy for example are far from 'rational'. The novel *The trial* starts with the now legendary opening: '*Jemand musste Josef K verleumdet haben . . .*' ('Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., (for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested one fine morning)' (Kafka, 1999a: 7). Joseph K. is unaware of what he has been charged with. In *The castle*, the protagonist K., finds the rules changing every time he seeks confirmation of what is expected of him in his post of Land Surveyor. He is confronted by an unpredictable 'personnel bureaucracy' that first appears to hire him and then seems to find ways of evading this commitment: 'You have been taken on as a Land Surveyor, as you say, but unfortunately we have no need of a Land Surveyor' says the Superintendent (1999b: 61). Perhaps K., *is*, in his unyielding quest, an archetypal *Sisyphus*.

### Authority and power

Kafka satirizes *dominance*, particularly the *authority-relationship* in Gregor Samsa's office, where the 'head clerk' and 'the boss' exert their wills in the social space of the workplace. The latter 'sits on top of his desk and from a great height addresses his employees, who must step up very close because of the boss's deafness' (Kafka, 2003: 8). In 'The stoker' (the first chapter of what was later published as *Amerika*) he befriends this fellow, the unnamed one, who is abused by his boss. He witnesses 'the sufferings of the underdog at the hand of the powerful' (2003: 11) and tries to speak up for him. As the tale continues, he reveals the hustle and bustle of the capitalist marketplace, the 'Tayloristic' working conditions in a prototype of a 'call-centre', as well as a strikers' demonstration and so on. In chapter 5, where Karl becomes a lift boy, there is a very strong almost Dickensian empathy with the workers in the Hotel Occidental, vis-à-vis the harsh work discipline there; when he encounters a lift boy asleep on his feet, he retorts that 'a ten or twelve hour

day is just a bit much for a boy like that' (p. 90); the protagonist himself is later unjustly 'sacked'. Kafka vividly depicts Karl's rebuff in this 'materialistic Eden' (Murray, 2004: 223). The 'dismissal' sequence reads like an industrial relations case study.

Weber sees *Herrschaft*, 'the rule of man over man' in society, as an inescapable historical phenomenon (Hennis, 1988: 182). He distinguishes conceptually between *Macht* (power) and *Herrschaft* (rule). The former hinges on having one's way in a 'social relationship', as opposed to the latter in getting things done through specific channels and 'through specifiable persons' (Lassman, 2000: 89). If there was a struggle between bureaucratization and charisma, *power was now to be built on impersonal rather than personal foundations, legitimacy to be defined in terms of legality* (Lassman, 2000: 91).

### Alienation and justice

As early as 1910, when Kafka first starts writing *The metamorphosis*, the alienated central character (Gregor Samsa) reveals a reluctance to bother to go to work: "“Oh, God”, he thought, “what a gruelling a profession I picked. Travelling day in, day out. It is much more aggravating work than the actual business done at the home office . . .The devil take it all!”" (2003: 7–8). Kafka can be seen as always highly 'engaged' with his characters and the injustice meted out to them. Max Brod recalled his friend's anger at the meekness of workers, mutilated in avoidable industrial accidents, who had approached the Institute as suppliants instead of 'storming it' and 'smashing it to bits' (Brod, 1973: 82–4). Kafka himself helped workers in accident injury compensation cases where he contested their claims, sending them a top lawyer at his own personal expense (Janouch, 1971: 66).

Kafka's 'alienated' perspective is, for example, exemplified in the detailed attention to the contract of employment of the Land Surveyor, K. in *The castle*: 'It was not a consistent letter, in part it dealt with him as a free man whose independence was recognized, the mode of address, and the reference to his wishes. But there were other places where he was directly or indirectly treated as a minor employee, hardly visible to the Heads of Departments' (1999b: 29); he ends up unjustly being offered 'the post of School Janitor' (1999b: 90).

There may be an interesting parallel here between the theme of this novel and the protracted struggle for a 'code of service' by Hapsburg civil servants on whose behalf Kafka fought in the white-collar equivalent of a 'trade union' to which he belonged (namely, the Association of Officials of



the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute/*Verein Beamte Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt*) and of which he was for a short time, the treasurer (see Wasserman, 2000).

## Discussion

We now attempt to show why Kafka and Weber have a great deal in common but will particularly try to highlight why the former has something very 'distinctive' to say about what concerns us in the 21st century in our roles as individuals, citizens, and social scientists, which particularly singles him out for attention. Kafka, we will argue, speaks directly to many of our contemporary concerns. The argument we present below rests on three major props.

First, we argue on the one hand Kafka in many ways anticipates the *alienation* of our times. His works, we argue, persuasively invoke a *perverse bureaucracy* that expresses his obsessive sense of 'fear'/'*Angst*' – 'its hand at my throat'; indeed, we may also ask if there are perhaps shades of Kierkegaard's influence here, as a number of observers have pointed out (see Murray, 2004; Steiner, 1989). Albert Camus (1991) himself observed in *The myth of Sisyphus*, originally published in 1942, that we may see all the ambiguity, anxiety and hope of Kafka's and therefore our spiritual lives, projected onto the very concrete but absurd workings of an estranging judicial system and bureaucracy in all their dark reality.

Kafka writes from the perspective of a 'modern citizen who realizes that his fate is being determined by an impenetrable bureaucratic apparatus whose operation is controlled by procedures which remain shadowy even to those carrying out its orders and *a fortiori* to those being manipulated by it', as Walter Benjamin (1980: 248) noted. This description of bureaucracy suggests less of the Weberian mundane administrative 'normality' and more of a *Kafka-esque* bizarre hierarchical, almost-timeless system that reflects the 'golden rule' that it never makes mistakes. In an apparent ethos of selfless public service, there lurks a self-serving bureaucracy but it exists in the 'parallel world' that we spoke of earlier where '[g]othic romance, classical myth, religious allegory and social satire' (Boa, 2002: 66) are shaken and stirred.

Kafka imaginatively depicts the reality of organizational life and the manipulation of social representations today, as much as in the past he portrays the imperial bureaucracy of his own times as caricatured in what has been called the 'minor literature' (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1975/1986).

The 'castles of Kafka' (Wolin, 1961: 354) noted earlier may represent a vivid metaphor for seeing organizations as edifices of repression (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Morgan, 1997) albeit in that 'parallel world' in which K. seeks *community* (see Boa, 2002: 62; Turner, 2000: 10).

Although Kafka sees bureaucracy as 'the social structure most closely corresponding to human nature' (*Menschennatur*) (Heinemann, 1996: 257) he does not like what he sees and sets out to parody it, anticipating, it is said, 'a *Catch 22* type of organizational logic' (see Parker, 2003: 11). Kafka regards himself as a *satirist* who does not always take himself too seriously, like Swift whom he read towards the end of his life (see Meyers, 2004); it is said he would often laugh, loud and frequently, when reading drafts of *The trial* to his friends (see Brod, 1973: 178).

Our everyday Camusian-existential struggle, the reader might well infer, is played-out 'as if' it were unfolding within a labyrinth-like bureaucracy, as we wrestle with the increasing complexity of contemporary life, with its spider's web of rules and regulations, some often contradicting the others. The online Medical Training Application Service (MTAS) that evidently excluded the perusal of either curriculum vitae and references, or both, was quickly dubbed 'Kafkaesque' in the extreme by those junior doctors who recently applied for a limited number of consultant training places in the UK (Pemberton, 2007). Immigration procedures, even for tourists to the USA for instance, have sometimes turned into Kafkaesque nightmares; asylum-seekers, some in fear of their lives back home, may go through even more tortuous rituals, as some have had to do in Australia, for example; and after 9/11, human rights may be seen as a 'dispensable luxury' by some in positions of authority, even in liberal democracies, as contemporary comment on the Guantanamo Bay detention centre testifies (see Amnesty International, 2005).

Second, Kafka's view of *authority and power in organizations* was one seen from the '*bottom-up*' rather than 'top-down'. As Elias Canetti (1974: 85) comments: 'No author ever wrote a clearer attack on subjection to the superior, whether one views the latter as a higher power or as a merely terrestrial one'. Kafka clearly does identify with the 'underdog' rather than the 'top-dog', for example, his taking up the case of the workers in his brother-in-law's asbestos factory. On an industrial visit, he remarks painfully that 'the girls are not human beings in their unbearably dirty and loose clothes, with their hair in disarray, as if they had just woken up . . .' (cited in Adler, 2001: 54). Women are sympathetically portrayed in Kafka's writings, although he was admittedly no early feminist (see Boa, 1996). He also took the side of the employees in his father's warehouse, whom the latter accused of being 'paid enemies' – perhaps here, there are shades of an 'Oedipal' side

to his behaviour – as we mentioned earlier. In our own times, this father–son ‘power-game’ finds its legacy in the plays of Harold Pinter, who was greatly influenced by the Czech writer (see Armstrong, 1998).

Without doubt, Kafka was consistently a life-long foe of repression, a libertarian ‘Socialist’ in his beliefs sporting the ‘red carnation’ in his lapel in his youth, as many young radicals then did. In 1917, he apparently expressed his sympathy for an *avant-garde* project of the journal *News of the Fight Against the Will of Power* set out by the Anarchist Freudian, Otto Gross (see Whimster & Heuer, 1998). A year later, he proposes a *Brotherhood of Workers Without Property* (Wagenbach, 2003). Kafka ‘fears power in any form since the real aim of his life is to withdraw from it . . .’ claims one critic (Canetti, 1974: 87).

Weber, for his part, had surprisingly been a member of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council in Heidelberg for a short time, at the end of the First World War, although a Liberal Conservative (Eliaeson, 2000). But neither Kafka nor Weber saw much future in Communism, the former not at all optimistic about the Russian Revolution; the latter seeing little alternative to Capitalism, although not without his doubts about the future. Weber (1990: 184) in one of his last public utterances in 1919 warns: ‘It is not the flowering of summer that is waiting for us, but a polar night, icy, sombre and rude’. Kafka, a ‘man of the left’ (unlike Weber) was unlikely to have been swayed by Marxism<sup>5</sup> – although it is said his Jewishness may have made him a perpetual ‘outsider’ anyway; he had been traumatized, as many of his generation at the time, by the anti-Semitism of the day, cumulating in the ‘Dreyfus Affair’ of the 1890s (Gilman, 1995) leading to his growing interest in Zionism, later contemplating emigrating to what was then British-mandated Palestine.

When a contemporary asks Kafka if Taylorism might lead to ‘the enslavement of mankind’, he rejoinders: ‘It is much worse than that. Such a violent outrage can only end in enslavement to evil: it is inevitable’ (Janouch, 1971: 115). He was already familiar with *scientific management* notions circulating in Central Europe (see Merkle, 1980) in the enterprises he dealt with as noted earlier through his insurance inspections (see Fava, 2001). We come here to a most interesting insight in the follow-up quotation to the one cited above which a contemporary attributed to Kafka, allegedly in that author’s own words: ‘Time, the most essential element in all creative work, is conscripted into the net of corrupt business interests’ (recalled in Janouch, 1971: 115). Whether this is an implicit reference to the *Marxist* notion of alienated labour or not is unclear but it shows Kafka’s prescience regarding how time is appropriated by the employer/s or employing organization. Take for example his definition of capitalism as ‘a system of relations of

dependence [where] everything is arranged hierarchically and everything is in chains' (cited in Löwy, 1997: 1); however, this statement was interpreted here as typically *anarchist*, for it places its stress on 'the authoritarian character of the system and not on economic exploitation as in Marxism' (1997: 1).

He was certainly obsessed by how his own organizational role drained his time and his health, as it did in the case of the protagonist of *The metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa. We may well ask if the *carapace*, both the author and the character develop in their figurative and literal respective ways, is a *defence-mechanism* against their common exploitation in terms of appropriated 'time'. *The insight has a very contemporary ring to it, given the 'time-poor' dilemma of contemporary organizational life*. Sullivan and Gershuny (2004) see this phenomenon as 'the problem of the maintenance of consumption expenditure in economies where leisure time is shortest for those who have the most to spend', which they see as a contradiction particularly characteristic of 'liberal market' societies (see Sullivan & Gershuny, 2004: 79), a paradox Kafka might well have found both amusing and tragic.

Robertson (2004: 80) emphasizes alienation as intrinsically embedded in the lives of the characters in the short stories and novels of the Czech writer, with 'work' seen negatively as both 'abstract' and 'hierarchical'. The employee does not 'make' anything and Kafka's protagonists are often mere 'middle-men'. Kafka, at the age of 30, himself often took on manual work as a gardener nearby, after he finished at the office. Here, we have 'body politics' being played out in Kafka's life: he sees his body as 'a necessary evil', from which energy is drained by the demands of everyday survival in the workplace. Renewal and re-vitalization come from physical exercise and this greatly helps his motivation to return to his writing but it does not always last long. The mind finally betrays the body (Sontag, 2002: 41). In the end, his frailty proves to be his nemesis and he dies from tuberculosis in 1924, the same year as Thomas Mann's classic novel *The magic mountain/Der Zauberberg*, in which TB is deployed as the central metaphor of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, is published in Germany, later winning this author a Nobel Prize for Literature, an award that ultimately eluded Kafka in his lifetime.

*The metamorphosis* epitomizes a sharply etched depiction of 'alienation' – as Gregor Samsa, the salesman whose work shrinks him by its meaninglessness, literally morphs into an insect, a trope that may be seen as autobiographical vis-à-vis Kafka's desperate struggle to cope with his personal life, his health, his work and the societal context in which he found himself. Here, we find a sense of 'disgust' that was said to have coloured his self-image and by implication, his view of organizational life (see Pelzer, 2002).

Third, both Kafka and Weber were well aware that humans can be taken over by particular modes of organizational socialization, the shared understandings that make organizations work, or through the routines of work (see Sandberg & Targama, 2007), as exemplified in the novels and short stories for the one and the accounts of bureaucratic routines for the other; yet Kafka anticipates how these can go perversely amiss in *organizational dystopia*, perhaps more so than Weber. Both however anticipated the psychological requirements of being socialized into the new bureaucratic order, whether as *estranged employee* in Kafka's fiction or as Weber's *man with a vocation* (being the ascetic 'professional' [*Berufsmensch*] in the rational organization). The former shows, in *The trial* and *The castle*, where he thought the logic of bureaucratization was pointing – into very dark corners. 'Utopia' is seen in this context as a 'good' place, 'dystopia', a 'bad' one (see Parker, 2006).

We must here ask how far Kafka's insight into this organizational dystopia was more than a 'half-way' anticipation of a totalitarian future and only went part of the way to grasping the full 'narrative' of the horrors to come.<sup>6</sup> Neither the full scale, scope or structure of Stalinist or Nazi terror was admittedly imaginable even at the end of the First World War (Bauman, 1988), although Kafka's short tale, 'In the penal colony'/*In der Strafkolonie* (written in 1914) perhaps in part inspired by Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of darkness* (published in 1902/1999) has more than a strong hint of the 'total institution' (see Goffman, 1961) if not quite the 'final solution' of the Holocaust (Murray, 2004: 225; also Black, 2001). What we now call 'genocide' had already blighted the reputation of the colonial powers in Africa, whether in the Belgian Congo or German South-West Africa. *Yet while neither Kafka nor Weber could predict the bureaucratic perversions which accompanied totalitarianism and subsequent horrors, there is a dark foreboding in their work one might argue that hints at such a possibility.*<sup>7</sup>

Hannah Arendt's (1963) concept of the 'banality of evil' inherent in the Nazi regime reveals the degree to which Adolph Eichmann, chief administrator of the 'Final Solution', stretched the 'rationality' of bureaucratic process under the Third Reich in our own times; while on the other hand, Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor (see Levi, 1947/1995) in his discourse vividly unpacked the 'randomness' and 'irrationality' of the organizational *modus operandi* found in Auschwitz. The latter author, who translated *The trial* into Italian in his later years, was so depressed by this task that he was said to have been pushed closer to his ultimate suicide – his biographer observed that 'Primo Levi is Joseph K' (Thomson, 2003: 427ff; 443). Levi himself pointed out in his essay on translating the work that whereas he himself led the reader from darkness to light, the Czech writer took him or

her in the opposite direction; as 'he forges his path in the opposite direction: he endlessly unravels the hallucinations that he draws from the incredibly profound layers, and he never filters them . . . Kafka understands the world (his, and even better ours of today) with a clairvoyance that astonishes and wounds . . .' (Levi, 1989: 127–8). *Few, we may concur, are as well qualified to make this pronouncement.*

## Conclusions

Summing up, we argue that Kafka insightfully explores a number of themes that are highly germane to a deeper understanding of organization theory, as commentator, observer and satirist, if not as theorist. In these roles, he skilfully interprets, for example, not only the *bottom-up perspective on authority and power* but also the perils of *organizational dystopia*. In doing so, he highlights the dysfunctions of *alienation, loneliness* and *marginalization*.

Kafka clearly sees how society may have a self-destructive potential. Here, he was greatly disturbed, as many of his generation had been, by the *fin-de-siècle* wave of racism and anti-Semitism, as we noted earlier. This would soon take us onto the slippery slope to concentration camps, gulags and the like. *Pari passu*, Kafka's insight, as Gilman (1995: 239) shows in *The Jewish patient*, was extraordinarily prescient vis-à-vis Hitler's obsession with the Jews as 'carriers of disease' in the body politic itself, in the context of the 'Degeneration' debate (see Pick, 1989) of which it was a constituent but sinister part. Although Kafka could not have envisaged it, his three sisters were to die in the death camps. His own early death saved him from the mass extermination of the *Shoah*, 'but not from the system that labelled him as different, even in the meaning ascribed to the illness that finally killed him' (Gilman, 1995: 243; Sontag, 2002: 19).

If controversially, many writers believe that he may be seen as truly 'prophetic' in his dark vision.<sup>8</sup> Kafka is thus said to speak to our contemporary concerns – what society, its institutions (especially the family, the law, business and so on) and its organizations can do to you. They may constrain, even dominate you, as Foucault (1975) and Goffman (1961) have powerfully shown. Here, we can truly say, Kafka 'was there before them' (Robertson, 2004: 67).<sup>9</sup> Given the allegedly 'foolproof' organizations we daily encounter in the age of the 'audit culture', the invasions of privacy in the 'data-bank society' and the burgeoning 'surveillance-state', it is understandable that there is a continuing interest (at least in academia) in the 'modernist' and/or 'critical realist' views of bureaucracy (see Reed, 2001, for example), on the one hand – and the post-structuralist concerns of the Foucauldians ('power-knowledge'

and the social manufacture of ‘subjectivities’) on the other (see Chan & Garrick, 2002, for instance). It is eminently reasonable to try to make sense of what is happening around us and why it is not always to our satisfaction. In our contemporary institutions, what cannot be counted does no longer have value; what cannot be tabulated does not have merit. Targets, league tables and assessments now increasingly dominate the world of work and human resources.

Last, while both authors may be enjoined in their ‘cultural pessimism’, Weber may be perhaps seen as the ‘father’ of the first group of possible interpreters noted above, whilst Kafka might quite plausibly be regarded as the ‘progenitor’ of the second. Standing back, we can see that the contribution of Kafka may help not only ourselves in the West but others across the world, to better resist the ‘sanitized visions of a brave new world’ that are being imposed upon us (Parker, 2003: 11).<sup>10</sup>

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### **Notes**

- 1 When Joseph II emancipated the Jews, many took up vernacular names in Czech, often the names of animals or birds.
- 2 Kafka himself also caught the Spanish flu in late 1918 but soon recovered (Murray, 2004).
- 3 A history of the Institute can be found in the author’s *Office writings/Amlichte Schriften* (Kafka, 1984), only relatively recently available to scholars and as yet untranslated into English.
- 4 This reminder of a relatively neglected dimension of Kafka’s life is a valuable contribution to our understanding of his pragmatic side.
- 5 The only book by Marx in Kafka’s library legacy was *On the Jewish question/Zur Judenfrage* (see Born, 1990). This does not mean of course that he did not read the author elsewhere or know something about him.
- 6 There is no firm evidence, for instance, of Kafka having had a discernable influence on George Orwell (1903–50) (see Taylor, 2003), whose main model for his novel *1984* (1950) is said to have been Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884–1937), a Soviet author, who wrote a famous ‘dystopic’ novel called *We* (1924/1983), which Orwell had reviewed for *Tribune* in 1945. There is also little evidence that Zamyatin had come across Kafka’s work. On the other hand, both Albert Camus (1913–60) and Michel Foucault (1926–84) had read and been profoundly influenced by the Czech author (see Szakolczai, 1998).
- 7 Kafka, although a post-war cultural *success d’estime* in the West during the Cold War years, was only taken up as a beacon for dissidents in the former Soviet Europe

- and Eastern Europe very much later, not until the 1960s (de Mallac, 1972; Tall, 1976). In the same period, he became an icon in his own country prior to the 1968 Prague Summer (see Goldstucker, 1981). In China, Kafka's work surfaced in the Communist regime in the PRC on any significant scale only in the late 1970s, when *The metamorphosis* was published in Chinese in 1979. At first, he was presented as a critic of western capitalist society; then, he was taken up as a key to comprehending the excesses of the 'Cultural Revolution' (see Schwarcz, 1986; Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2005).
- 8 Murray, his most recent major biographer, sees his depiction as a 'prophet' (largely due to Brod's influence) and his role as the spokesperson for contemporary humankind's anxiety more generally defined, as exceeding his artistic achievements (2004). This view has a broader resonance than a merely political or sociological anticipation of totalitarianism but could presumably encompass it.
  - 9 Robertson (2004: 67–8) sums up: Kafka's work 'contains a deeply felt, sensitively rendered analysis of institutions, not only showing how they oppress the bodies and minds of their inmates, but also, in his later works, exploring possibilities of resistance and escape.'
  - 10 Here is an intriguing illustration. In 2001, the then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dubbed Guantanamo Bay 'the least worst place' to store evil-doers – now, the US Navy asserts 'with the torture scandal unfolding . . . that Guantanamo Bay is not "the least worst place" at all . . . The removal [of a banner on the official website stating this phrase] was ordered because the commanding officer did not feel it accurately reflected his vision of the base,' said Navy spokesman, Lieutenant Mike Kafka' (a coincidentally revealing name to conjure up – see [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/06/23/guantanamo\\_worster](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/06/23/guantanamo_worster); Lt Kafka's authenticity is identified on <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31403-2004Jul6.html>).

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