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Kafka's *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*)

The Bureaucratic Everyman and the Enigma of Modernity¹

The unique modernity of Kafka's writing rests on something more substantive than his kinships with Existentialism and psychoanalysis and more rational than the abysmal angst which Lukács and others have perceived at the core of his work. Kafka experienced, probably more directly than any of his contemporaries in literature, the rise of the advanced capitalist era, its typical occupational modes and the theory and practice of its institutions, all of which are registered both in his work and in the documents of his life in recurrent direct confrontations.

The rise of advanced capitalism means that the nineteenth-century market system of relatively small and independent entrepreneurs is supplanted by a new system of large interdependent firms, coordinated with government ministries and run from offices filled with growing staffs of dependent salaried employees. Voicing considerable trepidation at the process, Kafka underwent this transition personally when, as the son of a self-made merchant, he entered the ranks of the so-called new middle class, first as a private salaried employee and later as a minor official.²

¹ Reprinted from chapter 4 of Andrew Weeks, *The Paradox of the Employee: Variants of a Social Theme in Modern Literature*, Germanic Studies in America, 35 (Berne, Frankfurt/Main, Las Vegas: Peter Lang Verlag, 1980), 81-114. (All translations of German texts in this chapter are my own.)

² As a new employee of the giant *Assicurazioni Generali* Kafka wrote despairingly that he was "deklassiert." (*Briefe*, 50). Even his personal failure as a suitor is attributed to the denatured character of his class status. In a letter of apology to the sister of Julie Wohryzeck, his erstwhile fiancée, he directed at himself the accusation: "Du bist kein Bauer dem das Land die Kinder nährt und . . . nicht einmal ein Kaufmann . . . sondern/ wohl eine Auswurfsklasse des europäischen Berufsmenschen/Beamter . . . müde sich herumdrückend um die kleine Schreibearbeit Bureau." [Klaus Wagenbach, "Julie Wohryzeck, die zweite Verlobte Kafkas," in *Kafka-Symposium* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1965), 50.

Advanced capitalism means an extension of bureaucratic structures which were once peculiar to the church or to state service into the private sector. When Kafka was a doctoral candidate in law, his doctoral advisor (“Promotor”) was the economist Alfred Weber, the younger brother of Max Weber and himself a scholar concerned with the geographical concentration, bureaucratization, and monopolistic agglomeration of modern industry. A few years after his graduation, Kafka was sent as an employee of the semi-governmental *Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt* (hereafter: “the Institute”) to the heavily concentrated industrial region in North Bohemia which had been an object of Weber’s studies. Kafka’s inspection journeys afforded him ample opportunity to observe the workings of modern industry from within.

Advanced capitalism with its bureaucratic systematization of economic life not only subsumes or subordinates independent commerce; it also appropriates from the manual worker whatever autonomous or artisanal functions remain and concentrates them as far as possible in the sphere of management control. Labor is rendered thoughtless and automatic by the “time-motion studies” of the managerial system called, after its American inventor, “Taylorism.” If one can credit Janouch’s *Gespräche*, Kafka was familiar with the degradation of “ein vertaylorisiertes Leben” (a Taylorized life). He saw it as threatening a “Verknechtung durch das Böse” (subjugation by evil) in which the precious possession of time is pressed “in das Netz unreiner Geschäftsinteressen” (into the network of unsavory business interests).³ Kafka gave these principles a compelling expression in his images of incessant, mindless toil.

Advanced capitalism with its concentration and bureaucratization of control suppresses independent initiative both in the petit-bourgeoisie and in the proletariat. Instead of increasing class solidarity in these declining strata of society, it leads in Kafka’s world, quite logically, to a splintering

³ Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka: Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968), 159.

of forces. Thus, his small independent businessmen, the paranoid first-person narrators of “Der Kaufmann” (The Businessman), “Der Nachbar” (The Neighbor), and “Das Ehepaar” (The Couple) are harried to the verge of insanity by a competition far more ruthless than that faced by the small tradespeople in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Kafka’s small businessmen, unlike Zola’s, lack even the petit bourgeois class cohesion which in the earlier example could at least lend a certain tragic dignity to economic defeat. So, too, Kafka’s proletarian or plebeian figures, most notably the figure of “der Heizer” (the stoker) in the first chapter of *Amerika (Der Verschollene)*, are unable to assert themselves even psychologically against their class opponents. Worse than powerless, they are deluded and dispirited. Thus, too, the narrators or central figures in Kafka’s tales and novels are often the solitary witnesses of some evil or injustice which they are powerless to oppose.

Kafka’s experience at the Institute provided him with a critique of then prevalent Marxist notions of oppression and the proletariat. In Janouch’s account, Kafka noted that the Institute came into being as “ein ein Ergebnis der Arbeiterbewegung” (a result of the workers’ movement), but that it was in reality “ein dunkles Bürokratenest” (a dark nest of bureaucrats).⁴ From his professional vantage the arena for deciding conflicts of employers and workers was the official hierarchy. Although the employers were guilty of defrauding the Institute by keeping wage sums secret, Kafka observed in a report written under official auspices that in attempting to exert pressure on the delinquent private firms the Institute could get at its opponents only via a path leading up through a “staatliche Aufsichtsbehörde” (inspector general) to the “Staathalterei” (governor’s administration) of the Kingdom of Bohemia, then back down by way of the “Bezirkshauptmannschaften” (district administrations) to the “Unternehmer” (business owners) themselves.⁵ Likewise, the workers in

⁴ Janouch, 233.

⁵ Franz Kafka, “Die Arbeiterunfallversicherung und die Unternehmer,” in Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend, 1883-1912* (Bern: Francke, 1958), 328-329.

seeking redress for their industrial injuries were referred to the path of hierarchy at the Institute, a path they trod with a patience and humility which astonished Kafka. Thus, his famous remark to Brod: “Wie bescheiden diese Menschen sind. Sie kommen zu uns bitten. Statt die Anstalt zu stürmen und alles kurz und klein zu schlagen, kommen sie bitten.” (How modest these fellows are. They come to us petitioning. Instead of storming the institute and smashing it to bits, they come and petition.)⁶

The man positioned at mid-point in the hierarchy, the man who is neither a worker nor an employer yet shares certain qualities of both—this man is the salaried employee or minor official, Kafka himself during nearly the entire period of his activity as a writer. The influence of his professional life is reflected in some of the most impressive thematic features of his work: in the overriding importance of hierarchy or bureaucracy as an oppressive determinant of life, in the awesome inaccessibility of hierarchy’s higher reaches, in the resultant alienation and atomization of those below, in the importance of the *Angestellte* (employee) as a central marginal figure in *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*), and *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*) and in the gray omnipotence of monopoly capitalism as the background of modern life in *Amerika*.

These thematic elements reach final fruition in *Das Schloß*, a novel in which the banal world of advanced capitalism is rendered most thoroughly and inexorably uncanny and fantastic. Precisely because this rendering is marked by such an extreme union of the mundane with the uncanny, the impression may arise that its social elements have been taken up in fragmentary form and subordinated wholesale to some non-social theme of a metaphysical, psychological, or existential nature. K. and the other principals of the plot may appear as mere tokens or ciphers in a strangely undecipherable abstract treatise. The impression may be reinforced by the utopian, a-historical setting of the nameless castle village where the entire action takes place.

⁶ Quoted from Klaus Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1964), 68.

The impression of austere abstraction, a prerequisite of allegorical interpretations of *Das Schloß*, can be dispelled if one is willing to forego initially the difficult questions of authorial intention and ulterior meaning and to found the discussion instead on a literal reading of the text itself and upon an examination of the social context without which words like *Angestellter*, *Arbeiter*, or *Beamter* would be devoid of their literal denotations. The procedure to be followed resembles Schliemann's search for Troy by means of a literal reading of the *Iliad*, except that in the case of *Das Schloß* the "site" of the action, the objective situation within which K.'s strange "Kampf," as he calls it, is fought, must be sought in the social-historical context of the author's occupational experience, a sphere which is still largely *terra incognita*, despite the thoroughness of a Kafka scholarship which has mined the significance of the author's earliest experiences and most casual encounters.⁷ Though *Das Schloß* plays out in an archaic, de-historicized setting, it conveys the crux of dawning modernity, much as Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Woman of Sezuan*) captures the inhumanity of capitalism in the microcosm of a remote Chinese shop, doing so without presenting the urban and industrial background itself.

Literally, who is K. and what is the objective basis of his story? He is a man who arrives in the castle village apparently in order to assume, or demand, a position as a surveyor in the employ of the castle officials. He claims that his summons and calling are for work of a higher technical nature; but after some equivocal exchanges with his employers or their representatives he is employed instead in a lower capacity, as a school janitor. Then this too slips from his grasp, and he is lowered toward the uncompleted ending to a destitute and completely uncertain position in the village.

⁷ For roughly half a century, German Kafka scholarship has been trapped in the circular reasoning that, since the author himself did not suffer bureaucratic malaise, such could not have been his artistic intention. This argument presupposes what it cannot prove—that the writer was focused on his personal inner life—while at the same time ignoring the blatant fact that his protagonists reveal no kinship with his inner life. This tendency begins with the far-fetched Hartmut Binder, *Kafka in neuer Sicht: Mimik, Gestik und Personengefüge als Darstellungsformen des Autobiographischen* (Stuttgart, 1976), 430, and is maintained unquestioningly in Reiner Stach's, *Kafka. Die Jahre der Entscheidung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), 329-33.

Comparing the elemental situation of the surveyor K. to the raw material of Kafka's social-occupational life, one encounters a number of parallels, some of which are so loose as to be of merely speculative interest, others exact to the point of identity. The degradation of K.'s vocation has a very general parallel in the declining curve of the author's aspirations during much of his adult life. Beginning his university study with lectures in art history and German literature, switching then to the less fulfilling but more practical legal curriculum, graduating with a law doctorate only to enter the drab and confining employ of a private insurance company, abortively contemplating an escape from his job and from Prague itself by formulating, then abandoning, plans to study at the *Exportakademie* in preparation for travel and work abroad, and ending finally in a position at the semi-governmental Institute, a position in many respects secure and advantageous, but which nonetheless gradually comes to appear as an ever more frustrating obstacle to his real vocation as a writer: Kafka could well have perceived his career, a rather successful one by the standard of his time and situation, as no more than a long series of humiliating defeats, a single frustration of his higher calling in life.⁸

Within this outwardly advancing but inwardly declining occupational history, one period in particular stands out because of its parallels to the situation of the surveyor K. It is the two-year period beginning in June, 1908, when the author changed positions, moving from the private *Assicurazioni Generali* to the semi-governmental Institute, and ending when he received the secure rank of *Concipist* in May, 1910, and thereby became a *Beamter* in the strict German sense. This was an interval filled with new activities on behalf of the Institute, a period, too, in which Kafka acted with a certain boldness during his free time: he attended meetings of anarchist clubs and befriended their members, including Jaroslav Hašek. The passing of this period would set the pattern for nearly the entire remainder of his life. Sometime around the end of this period, Kafka began his diary, renewing with it his fundamental

⁸ Wagenbach, "Die ersten Berufsjahre, 1907-1912" in *Biographie*, 141-52.

bent toward solitude and introspection. After 1910 would come his “solipsism,” his agonizing double life, split between working and writing, and, most importantly, nearly the entirety of his fictional *oeuvre* including all the novels and stories in which the thematic material garnered at the office would be progressively treated, refined, and interpreted.

During the two-year probationary period, Kafka, like K., was employed only provisionally: he was therefore dependent on the good graces of his employers. (Despite his success and popularity with his colleagues, Kafka was still able to voice his characteristic anxiety concerning his position, even after he had been promoted to a higher rank.)⁹ Both K. and Kafka left behind what was, if not secure, at least familiar, in order to obtain a new position in the service of officials. Both arrive with real or purported technical credentials. (Kafka took courses in insurance, administration, and bookkeeping in preparation for his job at the Institute.) In both cases, their intended technical activities are supposed to involve a kind of “measurement”: K.’s surveying or Kafka’s statistical work and adjustment of the employers’ insurance rates. In both cases, the “measurement” has implications which are, if not revolutionary, at least upsetting to the status quo. Finally, both will face sooner or later the resistance of intangible hindrances and unexpected obstacles which will blunt their initiatives and drain them of their vital energies. Both will encounter what K. calls “die Gewalt der entmutigenden Umgebung, der Gewöhnung an Enttäuschungen, die Gewalt der unmerklichen Einflüsse jedes Augenblicks” (the power of discouraging surroundings, of inurement to disappointments, the power of the subliminal influences of each and every moment) (24).

The question arising now concerns the meaning of such parallels. If the parallel only links the novel’s plot with the author’s experiences from ten years earlier, experiences received and interpreted by the author in a purely personal sense, then any social significance possessed by the novel’s thematic

⁹ Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher* (New York: Schocken, 1948), 41.

material would be of a highly fragmentary and perhaps minimal nature. In point of fact, however, the significance of the novel's social content is neither fragmentary nor merely personal. Each thematic level of *Das Schloß*, its fundamental conflict, its envisioned world, and nearly the whole of its plot, reflects and concentrates the social-historical developments which were bringing forth a "new middle class" of white-collar workers and subaltern officials under circumstances specific to the late Habsburg Empire. The technical employee's conflict with established officialdom, depicted in *Das Schloß* and represented to some extent in Kafka's personal experience, was central to a dramatic series of historical developments that were entering a climactic stage precisely in the period of Kafka's initial employment at the Institute. The background, build-up, and eventual open emergence of this conflict toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century have been described by Josef Redlich, a Viennese law professor and pre-war finance minister, in the Introduction to his book *Austrian War Government*:

The new so-called "social" police legislation, together with the new system of workmen's insurance introduced on the German model, cast a fresh burden on the civil service, and led to the creation of endless offices and bureaus. . . . As the result of the nationalization of the railways, the extension of the postal service on modern lines and the addition of many other new and technical branches, a kind of great subsidiary civil service had grown up, an annex, too, that inevitably was without the traditions of the older official body. Finally, the beginning of the new century witnessed a gradual revolt of the service itself against its conditions of pay and the rigid, hierarchical grading of the lower ranks under the official bureaucracy. This was aggravated, in its turn, by the rise within the lower civil service ranks of a trade-union spirit, more or less tinged with Socialism.¹⁰

¹⁰ Josef Redlich, *Austrian War Government* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1929), 28, 53-54.

This revolt of the minor officials which climaxed around 1910 parallels K.'s "Kampf" in *Das Schloß*: both struggles stem from the disruptive arrival of the new technical employee who confronts an established officialdom, rebels vociferously against his lack of rights and his hierarchical subordination, yet falls prey to the inherent ambiguities of his struggle against an establishment in which he wishes to serve.

During the very years in which Kafka was stealthily attending anarchist meetings and hazarding out his internship as a *Praktikant* at the Institute, the Austro-Hungarian "Beamtenbewegung" or "officials' movement" was reaching an astonishing crescendo. Demands were being raised by the subaltern officials in great public assemblies for improved pay, for the right of civil servants to engage in political activity, for extending greater security and privileges to the untenured *Praktikanten*, and for the establishment of a favorable service code (*Dienstpragmatik*).¹¹ Redlich's conversations with government ministers in 1909 and 1911, recorded in his *Politisches Tagebuch*, indicate that the movement caused grave concern and consternation at the summit of government.¹² The rebellion of the minor officials was accompanied by stirrings among the similarly placed employees in private industry.¹³ Attempts were made to organize all salaried employees or officials into a single organization which would employ collectivist measures in order to secure the class interests of the "Festbesoldeten"¹⁴ (those on a fixed salary). Partially and implicitly, the government extended recognition to this new social grouping by passing legislation (again the date falls at the end of the first decade, January 16,

¹¹ Emil Lederer extensively reported and analyzed the *Beamtenbewegung* in his "Zeitchronik" series, in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, XXXI (1910), 681ff.; XXXIII (1911), 975ff.; XXXV (1912), 895ff.; XXXVII (1913), 660ff.; XLI (1915-1916), 920ff. See especially XXXI (1910), 689-92.

¹² Josef Redlich reports for Nov. 5, 1909, "Koerber spricht über den fortschreitenden Verfall der Verwaltung, gibt mir zu, daß die laute und stille Widersetzlichkeit der Beamten den Staat schwer gefährde" (Koerber speaks of the continuing disintegration of the administration and agrees with me that the overt and covert resistance of the officials is a grave danger to the state) and for Nov. 25, 1911, "Ueber die Beamtenfrage wird viel gesprochen—Aehrental sieht die Sache sehr ernst an" (Much is said about the question of the officials—Aehrental considers the situation quite serious). In *Das politische Tagebuch Josef Redlichs (1908-1914)*, 1 (Graz-Köln: Böhlhaus, 1953), 29, 113.

¹³ Ernst Lakenbacher, "White-Collar Unions in Austria," in *White-Collar Trade Unions*, ed. Adolf Sturmthal (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 38-39. See also Lederer, XXXIII (1911), 983.

¹⁴ Lederer, XXXV (1912), 907.

1910), which regulated under a single heading the status of the lower employees in both the public and private sectors of society.¹⁵

In objective terms, K.'s agony is his lack of any binding contractual relationships with his employers. That this was also the plight of public and private employees around 1910 is suggested by the fact that *Das Gesetz vom 16. Jänner 1910*, which specifically included in its jurisdiction the employees of “Versicherungsanstalten jeder Art” (insurance institutes of every kind) addressed itself mainly to the regulation of employees’ contractual relationships with their public or private employers. In *Das Schloß*, K. goes to the house of his supervisor, the mayor, and attempts, in a grotesque scene amidst huge bales of documents, to obtain a paper bearing on his summons for work. Again, several passages of the law of 1910 are addressed to the problem of assuring the employee an access to documentation concerning his hiring and tenure of service. The surveyor K., engaged as a school janitor, is provided with room and board in lieu of a salary. That such an invidious arrangement was not unfamiliar at the time is evidenced by § 6. of the law of 1910 which expressly mandated that such practices might be forbidden: “Die Überlassung von Wohnräumen an Dienstnehmer sowie deren Verköstigung auf Rechnung des Entgeltes kann von den beteiligten Ministerien . . . durch Verordnung für Unternehmungen bestimmter Art oder für den Bereich bestimmter Orte verboten werden” (The letting of rooms to employees or their boarding counted against their remuneration can be prohibited by the relevant ministries . . . by decree for enterprises of a certain kind or for certain localities.)

The extent to which the stifling legalistic world of *Das Schloß* corresponded to the social circumstances of Habsburg subaltern officials and private employees can be gauged by considering

¹⁵ “Das Gesetz vom 16. Jänner 1910, Über den Dienstvertrag der Handlungsgehilfen und anderer Dienstnehmer in ähnlicher Stellung (Handlungsgehilfengesetz).” In *Reichsgesetzblatt für die im Reichsrate vertretenen Königreiche und Länder* (Vienna: K. u. k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1910), 41-47.

the speech in which the schoolmaster, his voice resounding with juristic pretensions, explains to K, the rights and duties of the janitor:

Sie haben, Herr Landvermesser, täglich beide Schulzimmer zu reinigen und zu heizen, kleinere Reparaturen im Haus, ferner an den Schul- und Turngeräten selbst vorzunehmen, den Weg durch den Garten schneefrei zu halten, Botengänge für mich und das Fräulein Lehrerin zu machen und in der wärmeren Jahreszeit alle Gartenarbeit zu besorgen. Dafür haben Sie das Recht, nach Ihrer Wahl in einem der Schulzimmer zu wohnen; doch müssen Sie, wenn nicht gleichzeitig in beiden Zimmern unterrichtet wird und Sie gerade in dem Zimmer, in welchem unterrichtet wird, wohnen, natürlich in das andere Zimmer übersiedeln. (82)

(Every day, Herr Surveyor, you must clean and heat both school rooms, undertake minor house repairs, as well as taking care of the school and exercise equipment on your own; you must keep the path through the yard free of snow, discharge errands for me and the madam teacher and perform all garden work during the warmer season. In exchange, you have the right to dwell in one of the two schoolrooms of your choice; yet when both rooms are not in simultaneous use and you are occupying the one that is needed, you must of course move into the other one.)

What is significant here is not the precise details but rather the merging of personal and occupational conditions in ways that are intrusive yet fluid, whereby the borders between the private and the official are dissolved. *Das Gesetz vom 16. Jänner* concerned itself with official living quarters and articulated conditions under which a deceased employee's household must be subject to abrupt displacement:

Stirbt ein Dienstnehmer, dem vom Dienstgeber auf Grund des Dienstvertrages Wohnräume überlassen werden, so ist die Wohnung, wenn der Dienstnehmer einen

eigenen Haushalt führte, binnen einem Monate, sonst binnen vierzehn Tagen nach dessen Tode zu räumen. . . . Der Dienstgeber kann jedoch die sofortige Räumung eines Teiles der Wohnung verlangen, soweit dies zur Unterbringung des Nachfolgers und seiner Einrichtung erforderlich ist.¹⁶

(Upon the death of an employee whom the employer has permitted the use of rooms on the basis of the service contract, the dwelling, assuming that the employee furnished it, must be vacated within a month, otherwise within fourteen days. . . . However, the employer may demand the immediate evacuation of a portion of the dwelling if this is necessary for the accommodation of the successor and his furnishings.)

The law of 1910 responded to the employees' demands by requiring and regulating their "Dienstverträge" (service contracts). According to the schoolmaster, K. will be required to sign a "Dienstvertrag" upon entering his service as a janitor. He never receives the contract. The question of a salary will be decided only after a probationary period of service: "erst nach einmonatigem Probedienst" (only after one month's probation). The criteria on which the decision is to be based are not stipulated. Barnabas likewise toils as the servant of official employers without recognition, recompense, or even a minimal assurance that he is indeed in the official service. Both Barnabas and K. are fixed to a kind of indefinite *Praktikum* or *Probedienst* in which the terms for acceptance or advancement are unknown. The rebellious Habsburg officials of 1910 had demanded improvements in the status of the *Praktikanten* and denounced the use of arbitrary, secret ratings as a remnant of reactionary absolutism.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Gesetz vom 16. Jänner," 624.

¹⁷ Lederer, XXXI (1910), 701; XXXVII (1913), 662.

By the close of the novel's uncompleted plot (or in the planned ending reported by Brod), it is clear that K.'s initial vociferous struggle for autonomy vis-à-vis his official employers, has been moderated, compromised, and finally totally defeated. Similarly, the Habsburg officials' movement moderated its goals and compromised its positions only to meet with failure in the end. Emil Lederer described its achievements as of 1913:

Die gegenwärtige Situation für die österreichische Beamtenschaft kann vielleicht am besten dahin gekennzeichnet werden: die Versuche der Organisationen, für die Beamten eine größere Autonomie zu erlangen und ihre Rechtslage, namentlich ihre staatsbürgerlichen Rechte zu verbessern, sind nahezu ganz erfolglos gewesen . . .¹⁸
(The present situation of Austrian officialdom can perhaps best be characterized thus: the attempts of their organizations to achieve a greater autonomy and to improve their legal position, and in particular their rights as citizens, have been almost completely unsuccessful . . .).

The movement rose and fell and passed into oblivion; but the attitude of a vociferous yet futile anti-authoritarianism which it had engendered continued to manifest itself at the Institute even under the new republic. Janouch's *Gespräche* offer extensive evidence for this. In the period preceding the writing of *Das Schloß*, in the early twenties, the Institute was unsettled by certain "reorganizations" which compromised Kafka's relationship with his colleagues, who, rather like K. himself, rebelled very loudly against institutional authority, but apparently failed to back their words with deeds.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lederer, XXXVII (1913), 668.

¹⁹ Janouch, 87-91. One of Janouch's recollections illustrates to perfection this continuance of the old pattern in the new setting. The scene must have taken place around or shortly after 1920. Kafka is in conversation with a colleague. The latter complains bitterly about the latest planned "reorganization" of the Institute. Kafka replies that in the end everything will remain just the same. The colleague explodes angrily that in that case his merits will again go unacknowledged. Kafka replies that this can only be so: "Der Vorstand wird doch nicht seine eigene Bedeutung herabsetzen!" The colleague, enraged, talks about blowing up the Institute. Kafka replies: "Sie wollen doch nicht die Quelle ihres Einkommens zuschütten! Oder doch?" The colleague, embarrassed, backs down, explaining that the constant insecurity caused by the

The influence of the *Beamtenbewegung* is evident, not in some suspected substratum of the work, but in its literal contents. To the labor lawyer and industrial specialist, to the employee who departed the *Assicurazioni Generali* in order to escape some of the very conditions at issue, or to the erstwhile socialist sympathizer and occasional habitu  of anarchist meetings, in short, to Kafka whose formative experience extended beyond purely intellectual influences, the upheaval within the lower ranks of the civil bureaucracy and the resultant legislation could not have been unknown. To assume that because Kafka made no specific mention of these events in writing they therefore had no impact on the content of *Das Schlo * is to entertain a very narrow and overspecialized view of literary scholarship. Nowhere in his letters or diaries is there any reference to his courtroom experience during his legal *practicum*. Hardly any mention is found of his acquaintance with the inner workings of modern industry, but from this silence one cannot conclude that his legal or industrial experience did not enter, respectively, into the contents of *Der Proze * and *Amerika*. Regarded objectively, the figure of K. does not stand for or symbolize a low-ranking public employee. He simply *is* such an employee, and his circumstances and actions largely parallel those of his historical counterparts, the nascent stratum of the *Festbesoldeten* with which Kafka's occupational experience and class interests coincided.

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reorganization has gotten to his nerves and that his threat was only words. Kafka presses the case and cautions his colleague that words can become deeds. He points to the street outside. The street is a powder keg which could blow up the Institute and others around it. (The reader is reminded that the Prague streets had seen demonstrations against injustice turn into anti-Semitic rioting; and that such riots darkened the immediate post-war years of the republic.) The colleague, frightened by the prospect of institutional destruction, replies: "Sie  bertreiben, Herr Doktor. Die Stra e ist keine Gefahr. Der Staat ist stark." But Kafka presses the point relentlessly and the colleague leaves the office chastened. On no less than two subsequent occasions Janouch witnessed scenes of a similar sort. In one a colleague accused Kafka of uncomradely support for the directorate of Institute. According to Janouch, Kafka considered the official's words unjust, but acknowledged the real suffering which caused them. ("Er ist nur ver ngstigt. Dadurch wird er ungerecht. Die Angst um's Brot zerfri t den Charakter.") It seems that the lower officials' insecurity and ambivalent relation to authority continued throughout Kafka's career, and that he suffered from the consequences in more ways than one. He apparently differed from his colleagues in that he was conscious of his ambivalent relation to official authority.

Thus far, only certain raw materials, the possible sources for the thematic core of K.'s conflict situation, have been compared to the social context of the author's experience. The comparison can be extended beyond K.'s immediate situation to the structure of the envisioned world encompassing it. K. stands *against* the castle world; yet, once recognized as a castle employee, he also stands *within* it. The bureaucratic hierarchy is both his opponent and the setting of his "struggle." Furthermore, the hierarchies that descend from the castle dominate every facet of existence in the novel.

Kafka's envisioned structures are not unlike those of Max Weber, who projected the extension of bureaucratic dominion ("bürokratische Herrschaft") into every sphere of society, including both the public and private domains. The high-level syncretism of governmental and private monopolistic bureaucracies was characteristic for the Habsburg system during Kafka's tenure of employment. The historian Oscar Jászi commented on the frequent desertions of the higher *Beamten* into the capitalist sector—transfers that resulted in an interwoven network of public and private bureaucratic rule.²⁰ Such "Übertritte" (transfers) were opposed by the radical subaltern officials of 1910—in vain.²¹

The bureaucratization of modern life is an often acknowledged but rarely analyzed thematic element which Kafka shares with Max Weber. In *Amerika* or in "Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle," the bureaucratizing tendency proceeds from private industry. In *Der Prozeß*, the protagonist is caught in the terrible margin between two bureaucracies, one judicial, the other capitalistic. Finally, in *Das*

²⁰ Oscar Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago Press, 1929), 165. "This rule of bureaucracy was made more oppressive by other factors. The favoritism exercised by the court and the higher nobility put many unfit men into public service . . . In a later period the bureaucracy came into a certain dependence upon the great industrial and financial enterprises. By this statement I do not allude to any corruptive influences but to a connection of quite another nature. When the big capitalistic concerns began to dominate the industrial life, their leading offices meant a far more splendid financial position than the badly paid state offices. Under such circumstances the more capable and energetic public servants preferred to go over into capitalistic employment. It was quite natural and human that these gentlemen utilized their former connections with their colleagues in the higher state bureaus in the interest of their new connections and were often capable of securing such advantages as ordinary businesspeople could not attain."

²¹ Lederer, XXXI (1910), 693; XXXVII, (1913), 663.

Schloß, the system appears diffuse, extensive and complex. As K. proceeds through its nether reaches, the full complexity of its dynamic and pervasive hierarchies is revealed.

But in at least one respect, a highly important one, depiction of hierarchy differs from Weber's and, in so doing, comes closer to historical reality than the great sociologist. In Weber's "ideal type" of *bürokratische Herrschaft*, the structure and differentiation of the bureaucracy's hierarchical gradations are highly uniform and distinct. This view of bureaucratic hierarchy corresponds to the character of an official civil service bureaucracy in which rank distinctions are based in statute.²² However, the subsequent researches of a number of sociologists including Hans Speier and Siegfried Kracauer were to indicate that in the non-official private sectors the structure of hierarchical differentiation tended to become much more subtle, minute, and subjective. Speier enumerated several "unofficial" criteria, including love affairs with superiors, which played a role in determining hierarchical rank distinctions in the "rationalized" German firms of the 1920s.²³ Similarly, Kracauer's study of the world of the Berlin *Angestellten* of the late twenties demonstrated that the employees' hierarchical interrelationships had become highly "abstract." Whereas one could say that even in autocratic Russia the official hierarchy had been constituted for the most part independently of the individual ruler, Kracauer's "Angestelltenhierarchien" (employee hierarchies) were increasingly "an den Geist der Unternehmer gebunden,"²⁴ (bound to the will of the employer). Furthermore, the hierarchically directed impulses of the *Angestellte* or employees worked as a hidden principle within Berlin's mass culture, motivating an intricate "Zeichensprache" or semiotics in entertainment, commercial art, and advertising.²⁵ Kafka's awareness of the homogeneity wrought by the *Angestelltenkultur* upon the culture of the individual is suggested by an ironic aside in a letter to Max Brod in which he introduced Julie Wohryzeck, his

²² Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft; Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie, Studienausgabe* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976), 551ff.

²³ Hans Speier, *The Salaried Employee in German Society I* (New York: Works Projects Administration, 1939), 51-53.

²⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten aus dem neuesten Deutschland*, in *Schriften I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), 234, 236.

²⁵ Kracauer, 285.

second fiancée, as a personification of “das Jüdische”: “Will man ihre Volkszugehörigkeit genau umschreiben, muß man sagen, daß sie zum Volk der Komptoiristinnen gehört”²⁶ (To be more precise about her ethnicity, one must say that she belongs to the nation of female office employees).

The increasingly subtle and subjective nature of the hierarchies that descend from the uniform official world is clearly portrayed by Kafka in *Das Schloß*. Shortly after his arrival, K. perceives the ranks of his official opponents as Weber might well have viewed them, as highly uniform and well organized: “Aber mehr noch . . . staunte er über die Einheitlichkeit des Dienstes dort” (21) (But even more he was amazed by the uniformity of the service). His perception reassures him and orients him in his struggle. Preparing to confront his supervisor, the mayor, he is almost astonished at his own calm in consequence of “der bewunderungswürdigen Einheitlichkeit des Dienstes, die man besonders dort, wo sie scheinbar nicht vorhanden war, als eine besonders vollkommene ahnte” (51) (the admirable uniformity of the service which was especially perfected where least expected).

This real or imagined ubiquitous “Einheitlichkeit” or uniformity not only sets K.’s orientation: the invisible pole of official authority establishes various hierarchies among the village inhabitants. Anchored in the presumed solidity of officialdom and descending from it in less uniform, less clearly defined ranks, are ranged the varied strata of subaltern employees. Beneath the officials are their “secretaries” who in turn are subdivided into “Schloßsekretäre” (castle secretaries), “Dorfsekretäre” (village secretaries) and “Verbindungssekretäre” (liaison secretaries). The secretaries appear organized in a hierarchy of their own, since, for example, Erlanger is regarded by Barnabas as “einer der ersten Sekretäre Klamms” (199) (one of Klamm’s first secretaries). However, the exact scope of the secretaries’ authority is shadowy.

²⁶ Franz Kafka, *Briefe* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1958), 252.

Next, presumably beneath the secretaries, stand the still vaguer and more subjective ranks of the “Diener” or servants, and finally, at the lower limit of their corpus, the “Boten” or messengers. The indeterminacy which increases in the descending hierarchy is adumbrated by Olga when she attempts to explain to K. Barnabas’ unclear status as a messenger. It seems that Barnabas cannot possibly be regarded as “ein höherer Diener” (a higher servant)—the latter are all very reserved and perform little work. He cannot even be regarded as “einer der niedrigen Dienerschaft,” (as a member of the lower servant corps), for they wear something resembling an official uniform. (“es ist keine eigentliche Livree, es gibt auch viele Verschiedenheiten, aber immerhin erkennt man sofort an den Kleidern den Diener aus dem Schloß . . .”—149) (it isn’t an actual livery; for there are many differences; but in any case one immediately recognizes the castle servant by his clothing). Since Barnabas possesses none of the outward attributes of a “Diener” and since his and Olga’s faith in the substantive being of official authority and hierarchical rank excludes the notion that a messenger is simply one who bears messages, a servant simply one who serves, Olga and Barnabas cannot escape the question, “ob es wirklich Botendienst ist, was er tut” (150) (whether what he does is real messenger service). But if Barnabas were to openly acknowledge his doubts, this would mean, “Gesetze grob verletzen, unter denen er ja noch zu stehen glaubt” (150) (to violate laws he presumes to live by).

Beyond the great ramified hierarchy of officials, secretaries, servants and messengers, other hierarchies come into view. There appears to be a hierarchy of castle custodians (“Kastellane”), a hierarchy among the employees of the inns, of the school, and among the officers of the volunteer fire brigade to which Barnabas’ father had belonged before his disgrace. Nearly every episode and encounter in the plot turns upon the determination of rank within these more or less indeterminate hierarchies. Almost every contact between characters turns into a power struggle to determine relative hierarchical position. Even friendly or amorous contacts are hierarchically conditioned. A comradely touch upon the shoulder from Barnabas is perceived by K, as an “Auszeichnung” (105), a distinction.

The fact that Frieda has been Klamm's mistress represents to the Brückenhofwirtin a "Rang." It confers, in K.'s sarcastic terms, "den Ehrennamen Geliebte" (46) (the honorific of paramour).

Hierarchy and rank serve not only to structure the interaction among characters; they demark and gradate the process of character development, insofar as any such development occurs. Toward the end, K. stands in the "Sekretärangeang" (secretaries' passage) of the Herrenhof and takes stock of the personal courage and initiative of a "Diener" who appears to display great fortitude in performing his onerous duty of distributing the matinal documents to the furiously petulant secretaries:

Von allen abseitigen Beobachtungen kehrte dann K. immer bald wieder zu dem Diener zurück; für diesen Diener traf das wahrlich nicht zu, was man K. sonst von den Dienern im allgemeinen, von ihrer Untätigkeit, ihrem bequemen Leben, ihrem Hochmut erzählt hatte, es gab wohl auch Ausnahmen unter den Dienern oder, was wahrscheinlicher war, verschiedene Gruppen unter ihnen, denn hier waren, wie K. merkte, viele Abgrenzungen, von denen er bisher kaum eine Andeutung zu sehen bekommen hatte. (231)

(From all roaming observations, K. always soon returned to this servant. He was truly exempt from all that K. had heard about the servants in general, about their sloth, their comfortable life, their arrogance. Evidently there were exceptions among the servants, or more probably, various groups among them; for K. was beginning to recognize the presence of many distinctions of which until now he had noticed hardly anything.)

Here, within the single pregnant incident, the whole of K.'s struggle is recapitulated, his progress in it demarcated, and, finally, the possibility of progress cast in doubt. The forthright servant's struggle against an unseen opponent parallels K.'s own ordeal and therefore offers a parable of hope; but the unthinking rapidity with which K. reduces the individual as "Ausnahme" (exception) to "verschiedene

Gruppen” (various groups) belies his own compromised consciousness. The further reduction of the one “Diener” to “viele Abgrenzungen” (many gradations) portends the infinity of instances which will render impossible all progress toward a determination of K.’s own position.

Hierarchy is the defining principle of every major aspect of the castle world. If “culture” in a minimal but perhaps adequate sense emerges when one ascribes higher intangible meanings to visible and tangible objects or actions, the village inhabitants construct their own culture *more hierarchico*. The castle officials’ varying appearances and incidental habits are studied and conjured upon like comets or eclipses in ancient times. A body of popular lore and folk wisdom is attached to the ranks and workings of the hierarchy. There is the “saying” or *Redensart*: “Amtliche Entscheidungen sind scheu wie junge Mädchen” (148) (official decisions are as shy as young girls). The *Beamten* pronounce their “blessing” (*Segenspruch*) with the words: “Es möge dir gehen wie einem Diener” (185) (May you have the lot of a servant). The secretary Bürgel instructs K. of a proverb: “nach einem alten Spruch sollen die Türen der Sekretäre immer offen sein” (215) (according to an old saw, the doors of secretaries are always open). Language, too, bears the imprint of hierarchy. There are numerous compounds formed on “Schloß-,” “Beamte-” or “Bote-,” including formations in which the hierarchical prefix is conjoined to a word denoting a sentiment or quality that is highly individual or highly universal: “Beamtenliebe,” “Botenehre,” or “Botenempfindlichkeit” (official love, messenger’s honor, or messenger’s sensitivity). In certain cases the word formation itself appears to realize an irrational extension of hierarchy. The term “Briefschaften” (154) appears to imply something greater and more solemn than mere “Briefe,” as “Herrschaften” appear greater and more solemn than “Herren.” The crime committed by Amalia, for which her whole family has been ruined, is the offense of “Botenbeleidigung,” analogous to *lèse majesté*, “Majestätsbeleidigung,” but referring to the lowest rung of the hierarchy (184).

The culture centered in the official authority of the castle appears more vital than the dispirited communal life of the villagers, peasants, and craftsmen. In a certain sense, those critics who have identified the castle with the deity have not done badly: Like the Prime Mover Unmoved of theology, it attracts everything toward itself while remaining preoccupied solely with its own forms of being. One learns that, “die Verwaltung der großen Dienerschaft ist freilich ein äußerst wichtiger und sorgenvoller Teil der behördlichen Arbeit” (185) (the administration of the great corps of servants is surely a highly important and demanding part of official work). Yet the pathetic Fuhrmann Gerstäcker, introduced at the beginning of the novel as a despondent, sickly creature, is encountered again at the end, standing patiently in line through the night in the hope of being able to speak to some underling of an official concerning a trifle, “wegen der Fuhren für den Bau” (204) (regarding the transport for the construction). Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* employed images of human sacrifice and cannibalism to express the dynamics of monopoly formation; so, too, the castle officials are described as predators aroused by the smell of game in their acquisition of new “Angestellte” (197):

. . . es gibt Bearnte, welche förmlich gegen ihren Willen den Geruch solchen Wildes lieben, bei den Aufnahmeprüfungen schnuppern sie in der Luft, verziehen den Mund, verdrehen die Augen, ein solcher Mann scheint für sie gewissermaßen ungeheuer appetitanreizend zu sein, und sie müssen sich sehr fest an die Gesetzbücher halten, um dem widerstehen zu können. (187)

(. . . there are officials who love the scent of this game; during the hiring examinations they sniff the air, contort their mouths and roll their eyes: a man like that must be in some way enormously appetizing to them. They have to adhere firmly to the legal codes in order to resist him.)

Through hierarchy human qualities and affectations are transformed into their opposites. It is said in sincere expiation of the official Sortini, a man not known to be personally crude or aggressive, that he has penned frightful obscenities to Amalia, the object of his affections, simply because, “zwischen einem Beamten und einer Schustertochter doch ein großer Abstand besteht, der irgendwie überbrückt werden muß, Sortini versuchte es auf diese Art, ein anderer mag es anders machen” (166) (between an official and a shoemaker’s daughter there is after all such a great distance to be bridged somehow; Sortini tried it in this way, another might do it differently). In this world, even the most spontaneous gesture of love or joy acquires a violent aspect, as in Olga’s reaction when she hears of Barnabas’ first success as a messenger: “Dieser Erfolg machte mich damals fast toll, ich lief, als es mir Barnabas abends beim Nachhausekommen zuflüsterte, zu Amalia, packte sie, drückte sie in eine Ecke und küßte sie mit Lippen und Zähnen, daß sie vor Schmerz und Schrecken weinte” (189) (This success drove me nearly insane; when Barnabas came home in the evening and whispered to me, I ran to Amalia, pressed her into a corner, and kissed her with my lips and teeth so that she cried from pain and fright).

Even the visible dimensions of the physical world appear as if warped by the force fields of hierarchical authority. This is true not only of the predominant image of the castle itself with its commanding height and its paths leading toward but never turning into an entrance. Even the petty tyrant and mistress of the Brückenhof seems to overwhelm and polarize a space by the force of her presence: “Sie lag in einem durch eine leichte Bretterwand von der Küche abgetrennten, fensterlosen Verschlag. Er hatte nur Raum für ein großes Ehebett und einen Schrank. Das Bett war so aufgestellt, daß man von ihm aus die ganze Küche übersehen und die Arbeit beaufsichtigen konnte. Dagegen war von der Küche aus im Verschlag kaum etwas zu sehen” (67). (She lay in a partitioned, windowless annex separated from the kitchen by a thin wall of boards. There was only room there for a large conjugal bed and a standing closet. The bed was arranged so that from it the whole kitchen was visible; conversely, from the kitchen almost nothing in the annex could be seen.)

Since the characters internalize the principle of hierarchical authority in their consciousness and reproduce it in their behavior and conduct toward others, all relationships are analogous or structurally identical. Comparing the outwardly very dissimilar relationships, Amalia-Sortini and Frieda-Klamm, Olga argues: “Deshalb sind es zwar grundverschiedene Fälle . . . aber doch auch ähnliche” (165) (Hence these cases are fundamentally different . . . yet still similar). The hierarchical thinking of the village inhabitants reduces the concrete living being to a set of abstract relationships and reifies the abstract hierarchical rank to the status of substantial being: “Nie hatte K. Amt und Leben so verflochten gesehen, wie hier. (51 -52). (K. had never seen officialdom and life so intertwined as here.)

The villagers’ internalization of external authority explains a curious incongruity of the story. On the one hand, the castle authorities seem to weigh upon the village with a crushing force of oppression. In the course of the story, it would seem that a man is cruelly misled and ruined, a family disgraced and reduced to impoverished outcasts and a young woman insulted and humiliated, all under the auspices or at least with the tacit approval of the authorities. Yet nowhere in all the occurrences of the plot is a single overt act of force, violence, or even physical restraint inflicted by the authorities or their underlings. Barnabas could spare himself his agony and save his family from poverty if only he were to accept the *Schusterarbeit* or cobbler’s work which awaits him in plenty. The villagers are oppressed but in large measure they are the collective author of their own oppression.

The technique by which the peculiarities of the castle world are brought home to the reader is in a sense ideally suited for depicting this oppression. Just as no coercion is employed by the castle authorities, so the narrator makes no attempt to coerce any higher meaning into the content. None of the queer phenomena such as Klamm’s “changing” appearance, cited sometimes as proof of his divine powers, are in fact presented independently of the villagers’ awestruck and objectively unreliable

observations. The castle world is constructed entirely out of earthly materials. The reader, too, is implicated in its construction; for again and again details are presented which, by virtue of their implicit hierarchical context, induce the vision of a monstrous unseen organization which swells far beyond the modest glimpses of it that are actually revealed. On the morning after K.'s victorious skirmish with Schwarzer, K. learns that the latter's apparent source of authority, his father, was only "ein Unterkastellan und sogar einer der letzten" (11) (a subordinate castle keeper, and indeed one of the least). When Olga begins her story of Amalia's unfortunate encounter with Sortini, she points out that the latter is not identical with the official Sordini, spelled with a "d," already known to K. The casual equivocation brings to mind a thick directory of officials.

These and many similar details seem to predetermine and foreshadow an inevitable doom. In spite of their incidental connection with the plot, they have the dramatic effect of increasing the proportions of K.'s opponent surroundings, not by single increments but, so to speak, exponentially. By virtue of their inferred hierarchical context, they project a vast empty world in which the individual is an alien being.

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Against this world, and into it, marches the surveyor K. In spite of the story's nameless utopian setting, his ambiguous advance soon comes to coincide with the theme of the white-collar employee or *Festbesoldeter*. From the very beginning, K. sees his actions as part of a "Kampf." But who are his opponents? What is his objective? And why does he proceed as he does? Since the tale is narrated from a point of view that remains at least very close to K.'s own (no facts are provided independently, though K.'s point of view is often presented ironically), there seems little alternative but to accept his struggle on the terms in which he himself represents it to us: his goal is the exercise of a freely chosen vocation; everything he does in the village is subordinated to this object. Even if one assumes that K.

has not been summoned by the authorities (the textual evidence concerning this point is inconclusive), no other motive for his conduct is mentioned, none beyond his own explicit—though ambivalent—motivation to become a castle employee and to make contact with his official employers.

But perhaps it is not even necessary to discover or imagine any additional hidden motive. The story is intelligible on its own terms. Its protagonist begins by insisting above all else upon his complete freedom, that is, his freedom from external interference in the exercise of a freely chosen vocation. The question whether K. is “justified” vis-à-vis his employers in making his choice and pressing his demands may depend ultimately upon the reader’s own attitude regarding work and authority. In the first episode, after Schwarzer receives the telephoned confirmation of K.’s appointment as a surveyor, this fact of having been recognized by the castle authorities appears in K.’s immediate reflection as an ambivalent, latently negative, but ultimately inconsequential factor. Though the term is not used, K. appears to be responding to something similar—but only similar—to a “Berufung,” a vocation in the original sense of an individual’s inspired, higher “calling” in life. Only gradually do his objectives narrow. He becomes identified with his “Beruf” or profession. He attempts to secure his “Stellung” or position as a surveyor. He is compelled by circumstances, including Frieda’s promptings in the interest of security, to accept a lesser “Stelle” or job. But every footing fails him.

Anyone familiar with the contingencies of exercising a vocation under modern circumstances should be able to recognize something familiar in K.’s ambivalent struggle. The social-historical background has been illuminated by Max Weber’s famous essay on the Protestant origins of the modern notion of profession: The free individualism of professional man divests itself of an earlier transcendental significance through the very process of realizing itself in practical activity. The ultimate outcome of this process, as envisioned in Weber’s concluding projection of an increasingly secularized industrial-bureaucratic complex, suggests that the ultimate *Berufsmensch* may also divest himself of even

individuality and authentic freedom. Kafka of course experienced a special personal conflict between the demands of vocation and profession, a “Kampf zwischen Beruf und Berufung,” a struggle between profession and calling, as Brod aptly designates a chapter in his Kafka biography. However, Kafka’s comments on such matters as the relationship between working time and free time of factory women or concerning the healthier, more holistic nature of the pre-industrial professions in agriculture or craft labor make it appear unlikely that he viewed his own conflict in purely personal or abstract-symbolic terms.

After receiving the initial, tentative “Anerkennung seiner Landvermesserschaft” (recognition of his status as a surveyor), K. takes the logical next step of attempting to contact his supposed employers. On the morning of his arrival he sets off, marching through deep snow toward the castle which looms above the village. The village’s main street at first leads him in the right direction, but then thrusts abruptly aside so that he loses his momentum and finds himself compelled to become an unwelcome guest in a villager’s cottage. When he arrives back at the inn, night has already fallen. (In the castle village, time seems abnormally compressed; the fleeting days almost escape reckoning.) Two men have been dispatched to K. by the castle officials. Although they admittedly know nothing of surveying and are assuredly not his trusted former assistants whose arrival he claims to await, the men are assigned as his assistants. It appears that the authorities, as if in exchange for their recognition of his status as a surveyor, appropriate to themselves the right to determine all the conditions of his subordinate employment.

Next a messenger arrives bearing a letter from K.’s employers in the castle. The message at first seems simple: The “Vorstand der X. Kanzlei” (the chairman of the Tenth Office—the official Klamm) addresses K. with the courteous greeting, “Sehr geehrter Herr!” and informs him that, as he knows, he has been accepted into manorial service (“in die herrschaftlichen Dienste aufgenommen”).

From his immediate superior, the village mayor (“Gemeindevorsteher”), he is to learn the details of his employment. However, Klamm himself will keep him in view, permitting the bearer of the message, Barnabas, to inquire after and communicate K.’s wishes from time to time.

K. pores over and analyzes this letter. It and his interpretation set the terms for everything that follows. Several decisive points stand out in his reflections. First of all, his interpretation of its meaning is conditioned by an almost unquestioning faith in the authority of the bureaucracy in whose name the letter is authored. (“Den einer solchen Behörde gegenüber wahnwitzigen Gedanken, daß hier Unentschlossenheit mitgewirkt habe, streifte K. kaum.”) Second, his situation is defined in reference to two options: either to be “ein Freier” (a free agent) or to become a subordinate “Arbeiter” (worker): “es gab Stellen, wo mit ihm wie mit einem Freien gesprochen wurde, dessen eigenen Willen man anerkennt, so war die Überschrift, so war die Stelle, die seine Wünsche betraf. Es gab aber wieder Stellen, wo er offen oder versteckt als ein kleiner, vom Sitz jenes Vorstandes kaum bemerkbarer Arbeiter behandelt wurde . . . (23-24). (There were passages where he was addressed as a free agent whose personal volition was recognized—thus the heading and the passage concerning his wishes. But there were also places where he was treated openly or tacitly as a little worker, barely noticeable from the position of the chairman.) He concludes that it has been left to him to interpret the letter’s stipulations as he chooses:

es war ihm überlassen was er aus den Anordnungen des Briefes machen wollte, ob er Dorfarbeiter mit einer immerhin auszeichnenden, aber nur scheinbaren Verbindung mit dem Schloß sein wolle oder aber scheinbarer Dorfarbeiter, der in Wirklichkeit sein ganzes Arbeitsverhältnis von den Nachrichten des Barnabas bestimmen ließ.

(It was up to him to interpret the specifications of the letter as he chose, to decide whether he would be a village worker holding an at least exceptional, if only apparent

connection with the castle, or whether he would be an apparent village worker who in reality had his whole employee relationship determined by news borne by Barnabas.)

K. does not hesitate to make his decision. He chooses the latter course of action:

Nur als Dorfarbeiter, möglichst weit den Herren vom Schloß entrückt, war er imstande, etwas im Schloß zu erreichen, diese Leute im Dorfe, die noch so mißtrauisch gegen ihn waren, würden zu sprechen anfangen, wenn er, wo nicht ihr Freund so doch ihr Mitbürger geworden war . . . dann erschlossen sich ihm gewiß mit einem Schlag alle Wege, die ihm, wenn es nur auf die Herren oben und ihre Gnade angekommen wäre, für immer nicht nur versperrt, sondern unsichtbar geblieben wären.

(It was only as a village worker, as distant as possible from the gentlemen in the castle, that he could have an effect within the castle. These village people who were still so suspicious of him would begin to talk as soon as he became, if not their friend, at least their fellow citizen . . . this would certainly all at once open up every path which would otherwise remain forever barred, if not altogether invisible, for as long as it depended on the good graces of the gentlemen up above.)

But this course of conduct as a “scheinbarer Dorfarbeiter,” this strategy of solidarity with the villagers in order to achieve some personal autonomy and influence in the castle, conceals one grave danger: Freilich, eine Gefahr bestand. . . . Es war das Arbeitersein. Dienst, Vorgesetzter, Arbeit, Lohnbestimmungen, Rechenschaft, Arbeiter, davon wimmelte der Brief, und selbst wenn anderes Persönlicheres gesagt war, war es von diesem Gesichtspunkt aus gesagt. (24) (But indeed there was one danger. . . . It was the danger of becoming a worker. Service, superior, work, wage conditions, accountability, worker—the letter was full of the like; and even if other, more personal things were expressed, they were always dominated by this aspect.) This is confusing: K. intends to gain some

autonomy and at the same time avoid the threat of proletarianization inherent in his service relationship by becoming “ein scheinbarer Dorfarbeiter.” Only by appearing to accept the status of a village worker, and by entering into some sort of solidarity with the villagers, can he evade the snares of his position and surmount the arbitrary “graces” of his superiors (“ihre Gnade”), in order to acquire a degree of influence in the seat of authority.

Despite the singularity and idiosyncrasies of K.’s position, here again there is a parallel to that of the Austro-Hungarian *Festbesoldete* during the last years of the empire. The minor Habsburg officials of 1910 likewise struck a posture that was radical and plebeian. They declared that they were not “Staatsbeamten,” that is, officials serving the state and oppressing the people, but rather “Volksbeamten,” answering only to the people.²⁷ But somehow the people were not convinced. They regarded their officials as an unproductive burden which had to be borne by the “productive” classes.²⁸ Like K., the Habsburg officials and salaried employees struck a proletarian stance. Their organizations took on the character of trade unions, becoming increasingly radical between 1910 and 1913.²⁹ Some of their demands were indeed strikingly radical and progressive. The officials opposed monopolistic tendencies in industry and denounced the flight of the higher officials from public service into the corporate sector.³⁰ Their movement opposed military expenditures³¹ and entered into an impromptu alliance with the Socialists and trade unionists.³² But even the relatively sympathetic observer, Emil Lederer, pointed to the ambivalence and latent conservatism of the *Beamtenbewegung*.³³ Hermann Bahr saw the burgeoning ranks of minor officialdom as mere perpetuators of that legendary “sloppiness” (*Schlamperei*) which was the proverbial moderating factor of Habsburg absolutism. Bahr regarded the

²⁷ Lederer, XXXI (1910), 696.

²⁸ Lederer, 686; XXXIII (1911), 977, 979.

²⁹ Lederer, XXXI (1910), 687, 692; XXXIII (1911), 983; XXXV (1912), 908.

³⁰ Lederer, XXXI (1910), 693; XXXVII (1913), 663.

³¹ Lederer, XXXIII (1911), 982.

³² Lederer, XXXV (1912), p. 912; XXXVII (1913), 660.

³³ Lederer, XXXV (1912), 912.

reform proposals brought before Parliament by Prof. Redlich—under pressure from the officials’ organizations—as nothing more than a means for putting the petty bureaucrat in his place.³⁴

To the great dismay of the *Beamten* that was in fact what happened. Nearly all their demands for civil rights, for a definitive service code, and for greater freedom from higher arbitrariness were shelved or canceled. The government reserved for itself full prerogatives in the naming of officials. Their employment was re-defined as a service relationship *sui generis*; and all requests and complaints were to be taken up via the path of official hierarchy.³⁵ The leaders of the crushed movement could do no more than declaim against “bureaucratic absolutism” and appeal vainly for an audience with Emperor Franz Josef.³⁶ Lacking adequate support from on high, but still without any genuine program for radical action, it collapsed sadly between two stools. Its ultimate failing was its ambivalent relation to official authority: its opposition to a system upon which it, far more than the workers’ movement, depended. The lower officials and employees were indeed oppressed and impoverished; but their vociferous radicalism was impotent and deluded. Precisely this contradiction is emphasized in Janouch’s account of Kafka’s quarrels with his still vocal colleagues in the early twenties.³⁷

K., the “scheinbarer Dorfarbeiter” and vociferous defender of civic freedom, suffers from the same contradictions that beset his counterparts, the radical “Volksbeamten” of 1910. He soon finds that by accepting the special terms of his employment he is restricted in his freedom to press his demands as a “Dorfarbeiter.” K. is never accepted by the sullen, respectful villagers. And when the

³⁴ *Das Hermann-Babr-Buch* (Berlin: Fischer, 1913), “Österreichische Ordnung” (excerpted from *Austriaca*, 91ff.), 305-306. “Man hat statistisch nachgewiesen, daß in Oesterreich die Zahl der Beamten dreimal so rasch wächst als die Bevölkerung. Es drückt die Atmosphäre, wenn um jeden einzelnen herum eine ganze Kohorte von Beamtenschaft steht. . . . Dieses System hat soviel Not und Schmach über uns gebracht, daß nun endlich selbst der geduldige Österreicher, das Lamm Europas in allen öffentlichen Dingen, anfängt sich aufzulehnen. Das Abgeordnetenhaus hat einen Antrag des Abgeordneten Redlich angenommen, der eine kaiserliche Kommission verlangt, zur Beratung über das Unwesen unserer Verwaltung und was zu tun sei, um uns aus ihrer Liederlichkeit, ihrer grotesken Faulheit zu retten. Die Verwaltung wird mit ihrer ganzen Macht aufspringen, um ihn abzutreiben. Doch ist wenigstens ein Anfang gemacht.”

³⁵ Lederer, XXXVII (1913), 660-663.

³⁶ Lederer, XXXVII (1913), 660, 667.

³⁷ See note 18.

innkeeper of the Herrenhof (the officials' village lodging) bars him because of his quasi-official status, but then appears to yield to his pressure and only adds that Klamm is at the moment spending the night there, K. is suddenly beset by a new hesitation: "besonders der Umstand, daß gerade sein Vorgesetzter hier war, verblüffte ihn. Ohne daß er es sich selbst ganz erklären konnte, fühlte er sich Klamm gegenüber nicht so frei wie sonst gegenüber dem Schloß" (32) (especially the fact that at the moment his superior was here threw him off guard. Without being able to explain this to himself, he felt less free with regard to Klamm than otherwise with reference to the castle). Although K. suffers through his ordeal as a depersonalized contestant in a nameless castle village, not as an individual member of an Austro-Hungarian class of *Festbesoldeten*, his struggle and defeat are parallel to theirs.

After receiving the first letter from Klamm, the next step is to confirm his "chosen" status by making direct contact with his official employers. He tries to accompany the messenger Barnabas back into the castle but only succeeds in arriving at a dismal hut, the home of the messenger's family. Declining night quarters there, he accompanies Bamabas' sister Olga to the nearby inn, the Herrenhof. There his attention falls upon the bar maid (*Ausschankmädchen*), Frieda, who is Klamm's mistress. K. and Frieda are smitten with one another and spend the night cavorting on the tavern floor beneath the counter. When she is summoned by Klamm the next morning, she shouts back, "Ich bin beim Landvermesser!" (I am with the surveyor!) K. sees his conquest turn into a confusing setback:

Statt vorsichtigst, entsprechend der Größe des Feindes und des Zieles, vorwärtszugehen, hatte er sich hier eine Nacht lang in den Bierpfützen gewälzt, deren Geruch jetzt betäubend war. "Was hast du getan?" sagte er vor sich hin. "Wir beide sind vedoren."— "Nein," sagte Frieda, "nur ich bin verloren, doch ich habe dich gewonnen . . ." (38).

(Instead of proceeding as cautiously as possible, in consideration of the magnitude of the enemy and of the objective, he had wallowed here all night in these beer puddles of which the smell was stifling. “What have you done?” he muttered to himself. “Now we are both lost.” “No,” replied Frieda, “only I am lost, but I have won you . . .”)

By now the pattern is clear: K’s every move forward coincides with an equal or greater reversal.

K.’s next step takes him, still with great resolve and confidence, to the village mayor’s house. There he is told that the original summons was so distant in time that it could not possibly have been meant for him. He is offered as charitable compensation the job of school janitor (“Schuldiener”), a position created especially for him. After first refusing, he is compelled to take the job but finds that its terms are such that living and working conflict impossibly.

Next, he visits Barnabas’ house again and learns from Olga that she and her family are his companions in suffering. Olga relates to K. the tale of “Amalias Geheimnis,” Amalia’s secret. But this moment of solidarity costs him his tenuous foothold in the village. Frieda, his assistants, and his position at the schoolhouse are lost.

The plot’s constant concatenation of progress and regress, to all appearances irrevocably anti-climactic in structure, gives rise at this point to a paradoxical climax. Upon departing Olga’s, K. finds himself summoned to a night interview with Klamm’s “first secretary” Erlanger. Arriving at the Herrenhof before daybreak, exhausted from lack of sleep and preoccupied more with the thought of a vacant bed than of an interview, he stumbles by mistake into the room of the “Verbindungsekretär” Bürgel and awakens him from a nocturnal nap. (The secretaries often conduct their business off and on between naps throughout the night.) Once awakened, Bürgel requires company, a conversation partner, a listener. He summons K. into the room, bids him be seated at the foot of his bed, inquires after his position about which he and his employer, the official Friedrich, are knowledgeable, and then

begins a discourse on the nature of the official castle world. To the exhausted, half-dozing K., Bürgel relates the great “secret” by which an individual can circumvent and defeat the vast castle bureaucracy.

It soon becomes apparent that the “Verbindungssekretär” is in fact disentangling the very paradoxes of the surveyor’s own dilemma. The bureaucracy, Bürgel explains, is indeed flawless; yet somehow its very impenetrability (“die Lückenlosigkeit der amtlichen Organisation”) works against it in certain cases. Through its overzealousness, it opens up paths of initiative to its opponents: “Aus dieser Lückenlosigkeit aber ergibt sich, daß jeder, der irgendein Anliegen hat oder aus sonstigen Gründen über etwas verhört werden muß, sofort, ohne Zögern, meistens sogar noch ehe er selbst sich die Sache zurechtgelegt hat, ja, noch ehe er selbst von ihr weiß, schon die Vorladung erhält” (221). (As a result of this flawlessness it happens that anyone who has business, or for whatever reasons is to be interviewed, already receives the summons, immediately and without delay, usually before the party has come to terms with the matter, indeed, even before knowing about it.) Having already been summoned yet still lacking a fixed appointment time, the affected party may proceed at once to the offices of the great organization. Should the party by chance arrive—just as K. has!—at the office of a secretary who is not officially responsible (“zuständig”) for the case in question, and should the respondent’s arrival occur by night, a time during which the secretaries, their perpetual assiduousness notwithstanding, find themselves hard pressed to adhere fully to the official nature of the proceedings (“den amtlichen Charakter der Verhandlungen voll zu wahren”), and should the respondent party catch the otherwise unanswerable secretary in an unguarded moment, the affected party may benefit from the paradoxical “secret” of the official organization, a secret that Bürgel now discloses as follows:

Das Geheimnis steckt in den Vorschriften über die Zuständigkeit. Es ist nämlich nicht so und kann bei einer großen lebendigen Organisation nicht so sein, daß für jede Sache nur ein bestimmter Sekretär zuständig ist. Es ist nur so, daß einer die

Hauptzuständigkeit hat, viele andere aber auch zu gewissen Teilen eine, wenn auch kleinere Zuständigkeit haben. Wer könnte allein, und wäre es der größte Arbeiter, alle Beziehungen auch nur des kleinsten Vorfalles auf seinem Schreibtisch zusammenhalten? Selbst was ich von der Hauptzuständigkeit gesagt habe, ist zuviel gesagt. Ist nicht in der kleinsten Zuständigkeit auch schon die ganze? Entscheidet hier nicht die Leidenschaft, mit welcher die Sache ergriffen wird? Und ist die nicht immer die gleiche, immer in voller Stärke da? In allem mag es Unterschiede unter den Sekretären geben, und es gibt solcher Unterschiede unzählige, in der Leidenschaft aber nicht. . . . Nach außen allerdings muß eine geordnete Verhandlungsmöglichkeit geschaffen werden, und so tritt für die Parteien je ein bestimmter Sekretär in den Vordergrund, an den sie sich amtlich zu halten haben. Es muß dies aber nicht einmal derjenige sein, der die größte Zuständigkeit für den Fall besitzt, hier entscheidet die Organisation und ihre augenblicklichen Bedürfnisse. Dies ist die Sachlage. (222)

(The secret is contained in the regulations regarding official responsibility. It is not, and could hardly be the case, that in such a great living organization, each matter is the responsibility of only one particular secretary. It is only the case that one bears the prime responsibility, while many others bear an at least partial, if smaller, responsibility. Who by himself, even if he were the most industrious worker, could possibly assemble all aspects of the smallest occurrence on his desk alone? Even what I said about the main responsibility goes too far. Does not even the smallest responsibility contain the entire one? Isn't the decisive thing the passion with which the matter is taken up; and isn't that passion always the same, always there in full force. In many respects the secretaries may differ, and such differences are legion, but not in passionate dedication. Vis-à-vis the public, a certain orderly procedural path must be projected so that for

the parties a certain secretary stands out whom the party should address; but this does not even have to be the secretary with the greatest responsibility for the case. What is decisive is the organization and its momentary needs. This is how things stand.)

The exact terms in which Bürigel's "secret" is expressed are curious. Bürigel is describing the workings of bureaucracy; and in general, Kafka's bureaucracy corresponds to Max Weber's. If one considers such characteristics of the Weberian ideal type of "bürokratische Herrschaft"—features such as the supposed or assumed uniformity of bureaucratic organization, the hierarchical organizing principle, the division of bureaucratic tasks into individual "Kompetenzen" (Weber) or "Zuständigkeiten" (Kafka), the bureaucratic insistence upon secrecy, the bureaucracy's full command upon the officials' time and activity (embodied so definitively in Bürigel), and the requirement that the official treat each case *sine ira ac studio* and, where possible, "ohne Ansehen der Person"³⁸ (irrespective of the person)—then one finds that Kafka has either represented, albeit with parodistic exaggeration, or at least strongly intimated, all these features in his portrayal of bureaucracy in *Das Schloß*. The fact that his novel might almost be read as an accentuated illustration of Weber's ideal type is a great tribute to Kafka's acumen as an observer of society. It is therefore striking that Kafka's bureaucracy should differ from Weber's in a certain respect, all the more since the difference is contained in the novel's key passage, in Bürigel's "secret."

In Weber's view, the overwhelming efficiency and vitality of bureaucracy as a living machine ("jene lebende Maschine") lies in its precisely parceled and machine-like specialization and division of "Kompetenzen":

Eine leblose Maschine ist geronnener Geist. Nur daß sie dies ist, gibt ihr die Macht,
die Menschen in ihren Dienst zu zwingen und den Alltag ihres Arbeitslebens so

³⁸ Weber, 551-574.

beherrschend zu bestimmen, wie es tatsächlich in der Fabrik der Fall ist. *Geronnener Geist ist auch jene lebende Maschine, welche die bürokratische Organisation mit ihrer Spezialisierung der geschulten Facharbeit, ihrer Abgrenzung der Kompetenzen, ihren Reglements und hierarchisch abgestuften Gehorsamsverhältnissen darstellt.*³⁹ [Italics added.]

(A lifeless machine is congealed spirit. Only being such lends it the power to compel human beings to serve it, dominating the daily life of work as thoroughly as this happens in a factory. *No less a congealed spirit is that living machine presented by the bureaucratic organization with its specialization of trained professional work, its delimitation of areas of competence, its regimes and hierarchically graduated relations of obedience.*)

Weber's view, then, implies that all irregularities or breaches in the perfect *Abgrenzung der Kompetenzen*, all departures from the ideal type, in short, all formal imperfections, result in the decreased efficiency of any actual bureaucracy. Bürgel, on the other hand, states just the opposite: that in any "große lebendige Organisation," in the castle bureaucracy itself, real effectiveness depends not on the officials' exact hierarchy and division of labor, but rather on the overlapping or transferability of bureaucratic "Zuständigkeiten" or spheres of competence that is called into play by the changing momentary needs of the organization. Here, again, Kafka's implicit divergence from Weber only brings the world of *Das Schloß* closer to an historical reality conveyed by sociological studies as summarized by Peter Blau:

Weber's approach . . . implies that any deviation from the formal structure is detrimental to administrative efficiency. Since the ideal type is conceived as the perfectly efficient organization, all differences from it must necessarily interfere with

³⁹ Weber, 835.

efficiency. There is considerable evidence that suggests the opposite conclusion; informal relations and unofficial practices often contribute to efficient operations.⁴⁰

The German sociologist Bahrtdt suggests much the same thing in his *Industriebürokratie*. Not Weber's machine-like hierarchical division of labor, but rather the less formal, more transferable spheres of competence operate and maintain the mechanism of any "große lebendige Organisation"—in *Das Schloß* and in reality. Accordingly, there is a loophole in the "Vorschriften über die Zuständigkeit" (the strictures governing spheres of competence). Should an unsuspecting secretary find himself suddenly confronted with a respondent—who represents the end toward which the whole bureaucracy claims only to be a means—then the strictures against a direct face-to-face procedure may cease to hold sway over the secretary. He may succumb to the overwhelming temptation to treat the client without regard for the interminable mediation of impersonal routine. Just as the sociologist Bahrtdt can speak of direct, non-hierarchical contacts between employees as functionally beneficial "Sakrilegien gegen das hierarchische Prinzip" (sacrileges against the hierarchical principle),⁴¹ so too the direct contact between the secretary and the affected party is described as an enormous usurpation which is both devastating and fulfilling:

Freilich, wenn die Partei im Zirnmer ist, ist es schon sehr schlimm. Es beengt das Herz. . . . diese Einladung in der stillen Nacht ist berückend. Man folgt ihr und hat nun eigentlich aufgehört, Amtsperson zu sein. Es ist eine Lage, in der es schon bald unmöglich wird, eine Bitte abzuschlagen. Genaugenommen, ist man verzweifelt; noch

⁴⁰ Peter M. Blau, *Bureaucracy in Modern Society* (New York: Random House, 1956), 36.

⁴¹ Bahrtdt, *Industriebürokratie. Versuch einer Soziologie des industrialisierten Großbetriebes und seiner Angestellten* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1958), 62-63, suggests that "horizontal," thus non-hierarchical "Kooperation" is highly important for the maintenance and coordination of the industrial bureaucracy. Yet this cooperation appears as a "sacrilege" the against hierarchy: "Aber es geht bei dieser Zusammenarbeit gewissermaßen über Stock und Stein. Die Kooperation trägt alle Kennzeichen des Zufalls und sehr oft—man sollte es nicht glauben—die Züge des schlechten Gewissens; denn alle zwischenbetrieblichen Ausprachen, bei denen der Dienstweg über den gemeinsamen Vorgesetzten nicht eingehalten wird, sind ja im Grunde Sakrilegien gegen das hierarchische Prinzip. Man wagt sie deshalb nur dann, wenn es wirklich keinen anderen Weg gibt."

genauer genommen, ist man sehr glücklich. Verzweifelt, denn die Wehrlosigkeit, mit der man hier sitzt und auf die Bitte der Partei wartet und weiß, daß man sie, wenn sie einmal ausgesprochen ist, erfüllen muß, wenn sie auch, wenigstens soweit man es selbst übersehen kann, die Amtsorganisation förmlich zerreißt: das ist ja das Ärgste, was einem in der Praxis begegnen kann. Vor allem—von allem anderen abgesehen—, weil es auch eine über alle Begriffe gehende Rangerhöhung ist, die man hier für sich gewaltsam in Anspruch nimmt. (223)

(Certainly, when the party has come into the room, it is awful. It oppresses one's heart. . . . the invitation in the still of the night is captivating. When one takes it up, one is no longer an official personage. It is the kind of situation in which it soon becomes impossible to refuse any request. Stated clearly, one is desperate; yet stated even more clearly, one is quite happy. Desperate because of the defenselessness in which one sits and waits for the party's request, knowing that as soon as it has been brought forward, it must be fulfilled, even if to the best of one's knowledge this may shatter the official organization, which is the worst thing that can happen to one in practice. Above all, aside from everything else, it is nothing less than a colossal self-promotion that one is usurping in the process.)

The direct, face-to-face contact between a secretary and a client violates the strictures for maintaining hierarchical procedure and impersonality and destroys the official organization, "tearing" it asunder like a veil. The solidarity or compassion of the secretary forces upon him an enormous *Rangerhöhung*, an elevation no doubt to the "rank" of common humanity.

The inner driving force of the bureaucracy as portrayed by Bürgel resides not in its formal mechanism but in the enormous "Leidenschaft," the passion or dedication, of the officials or subaltern

employees. If the secretaries toil at their paper routine like Melville's scrivener Bartleby, "by daylight and by candlelight," with an efficiency which may appear as automatic and thoughtless as the Cashier's calculating motions at the beginning of Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, Kafka, not unlike Melville or Kaiser, hints that behind the machinelike functioning resides a "passion" which, if ever it were fully awakened, might smash and overturn the whole imprisoning system of bureaucracy.

But in Kafka more than elsewhere, this hint is balanced with its opposite, with resignation. Up to the point of Bürgel's discourse, the plot is a perpetual concatenation of progress and regression which completely neutralizes and reverses K.'s advance. Without breaking this anti-climactic structure of thematic development, the episode in Bürgel's room creates a unique climax by transforming the succession of action-reaction into a simultaneity: progress and regress are made to coincide in a single interchange. Precisely in the moment of Bürgel's revelation, K. yields to his exhaustion and begins to descend into a peculiar trance-like sleep. As he is dozing off, he dreams of a great victory celebration. The talkative secretary whose discourse impedes his slumber is transformed into a fencing opponent, one already defeated by K. And as K. advances toward the re-creation of his final victory the question arises, "War es überhaupt ein Kampf?" (Was it really a battle at all?) And soon his opponent has indeed disappeared, and K. stands alone. Only a champagne glass is to be seen. As he crushes it underfoot, K. is half aroused and recognizes his opponent in the reclining secretary whose monotonous discourse both lulls him toward and prevents his sleep, until finally the pull of sleep wins out altogether.

K. thus extracts from Bürgel's words only a soporific means of escaping "das lästige Bewußtsein": "in tiefen Schlaf zu sinken und auf diese Weise allem zu entgehen" (the annoying wakefulness: . . .to sink into deep sleep and in this way escape everything). More subjective than Don Quixote who at least postulated his transfigured windmills as valid for everyone's experience, K.'s reaction to Bürgel's speech is an assertion of solipsism: "Klappere, Mühle, klappere, dachte er, du

klapperst nur für mich” (222) (Just keep on rattling, mill, he thought, you rattle only for me). Victory in K.’s struggle is the solipsism of a deep sleep “abgeschlossen gegen alles, was geschah” (closed off against whatever happened).

This drift into the complete solipsism of sleep coincides with the consummation of Bürgel’s revelation—the moment in which it becomes quite clear that the hypothetical loophole is the actual case of K. At this moment, Bürgel envisages a *mundus inversus* in which the last has become the first, within an unconditional embrace of human solidarity: “durch die Nähe dieser nächtlichen Partei wachsen uns gewissermaßen auch die Amtskräfte, wir verpflichten uns zu Dingen, die außerhalb unseres Bereiches sind; ja, wir werden sie auch ausführen” (because of this proximity of the nocturnal party, our official powers expand, so to speak; we promise things outside our official competence, and we shall indeed make good on it). But triumph and failure are the irremediable warp of a narrative Möbius circle. The passage ends in Bürgel’s evocation of a universal “Gleichgewicht,” a balance or perhaps stalemate, which is both soothing and disconsolate.

More could be said about the remaining episodes of *Das Schloß* which have not been discussed. But one general point merits emphasis above all particulars. The point is that the narrative modernity of *Das Schloß* is a correlative of its subject-matter—the advanced capitalist world from which Kafka derives his theme. The “Kafka debate” therefore proceeds from false premises to the degree that it insists upon a dichotomy of “realism” versus “modernism.”

Lukács, who insisted most obdurately that Kafka’s work offers the archetype of “modernist” writing, rested his argument on Hegelian premises.⁴² According to Hegel, the greatest narrative

⁴² Georg Lukács, *Der russische Realismus in der Weltliteratur* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1949), 100ff.

literature, the Homeric epic, portrayed man as a “freie Individualität”—as the active creator of the material conditions of his social and personal existence:

Was der Mensch zum äußeren Leben gebraucht, Haus und Hof, Gezelt, Sessel, Bett, Schwert und Lance, das Schiff, mit dem er das Meer durchfurcht, der Wagen, der ihn zum Karnpf führt, Sieden und Braten, Schlachten, Speisen und Trinken: es darf ihm nichts von allem diesen nur totes Mittel geworden sein, sondern er muß sich noch mit ganzem Sinn und Selbst darin lebendig fühlen und dadurch dem an sich durch den engen Zusammenhang mit dem menschlichen Individuum ein selber menschlich beseeltes individuelles Gepräge geben.⁴³

(Everything the human being needs for life, house and farm, tent, chairs, bed, sword and lance, the ship with which he plows the sea, the chariot that bears him into battle, boiling and broiling, fighting, eating and drinking: none of this is allowed to become a mere lifeless means; rather he must experience himself alive with full consciousness and personality in all of it; and in so doing, through its close connection with the human individual, he must give it its human imprint.)

And, in order to draw attention to the fact that the tradition rooted in the Homeric epic necessarily becomes problematical in the modern world with its complex modes of production and divisions of labor, Hegel immediately adds:

Unser heutiges Maschinen- und Fabrikwesen mit den Produkten, die aus demselben hervorgehen, sowie überhaupt die Art, unsere äußeren Lebensbedürfnisse zu befriedigen, würde nach dieser Seite hin ganz ebenso als die moderne

⁴³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* III, in *Werke* 15 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 343.

Staatsorganisation dem Lebenshintergrunde unangemessen sein, welchen das ursprüngliche Epos erheischt.

(Our present-day system of machines and factories with the products to which they give rise, as well as the whole associated manner of satisfying our material conditions of life, and indeed the modern organization of the state, would be incommensurate with the world presumed by the original epic.)

This view of a social-historical world (*Lebenshintergrund*), which imposes certain impulses and limits upon narrative form, represents the most central principle of the Marxist or socially oriented school of realism. In accordance with this Hegelian principle, Lukács acknowledges that the modern writer is confronted with the problem of how to overcome the artistically refractory qualities of the modern social material. He argues that “modernism,” exemplified above all by the works of Kafka, fails to overcome the resistance of its subject-matter and therefore portrays the human being as passive, incapable of affecting the external world in any manner at all.

By Lukács’s own criterion, *Das Schloß* should be accounted one of the greatest works of narrative realism. It is true that Kafka portrays the real passivity and helplessness of modern people in the face of the institutional world which their collective endeavors have helped bring into being. But Kafka does not lose sight of the human being as *homo faber* and *homo fabricator*, at work behind the enormous facade of a purely objective, purely external and intractable world. On the one hand, Kafka’s narrative technique in *Das Schloß* challenges the self-evident facticity of the advanced capitalist world by portraying it as a deep mystery to the individual. On the other hand, the “secret” of the castle world as disclosed by Bürgel is that in reality not the lifeless inhuman mechanism but rather the human being himself, the enormous *Leidenschaft* or passion of the working secretaries, together with the credulous *Leiden* or suffering of its subordinates including K., are the operative forces at work within the “living

organization.” Its vitality ultimately rests, then, not on a functional machine-like division of labor, but on the peculiar condition whereby every *Zuständigkeit*, every sphere of responsibility or employment, ultimately contains or implies the whole: “Ist nicht in der kleinsten *Zuständigkeit* auch schon die ganze?” Does not even the smallest competence or sphere of responsibility contain the whole?

Of course, the negative inverse side of this conception of the individual as an employed *Zuständigkeit* containing the whole of an organizational reality becomes manifest in K.’s sleep, when the whole is in turn reduced to the limits of an individual consciousness in an act of willful solipsism. But even if the latter state characterizes the bureaucracy’s normal *modus operandi*, the norm cannot exist without the possibility of its polar opposite, as expressed in Bürgel’s envisioned solidarity of secretary and client—the enormous “Rangerhöhung” or advance in rank which transcends and annuls all subdivisions and distinctions created by the bureaucracy.

It seems, therefore, that Kafka did not so much break with the traditions associated with realism as adapt them to the circumstances of an advanced capitalist world: a world in which the former model of a system based on the power of industrial or commercial entrepreneurs, is supplanted by a top-heavy system of bureaucratic employment in which the ambiguously placed dependent employees rise to prominence as “a new middleclass.” Perhaps there were doctrinaire reasons preventing Lukács from recognizing Kafka’s realism. In any event, it is necessary to amend Marx’s concept of commodity production by adding the notion of employment within a “service industry” in order to expand his famous formulations of “Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis,” the fetish character of the commodity and its secret, to cover the essential “secret” of the castle world: “Es ist nur das bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Menschen selbst, welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt. Um daher eine Analogie zu finden müssen wir in die Nebelregion der religiösen Welt flüchten” (It is nothing but a certain social

relationship of men themselves which here takes on the phantasmagorical form of a relationship of things. Accordingly, in order to find an analogy, we must take refuge in the nebulous region of the religious world). Kafka's *Schloß* contains all of this; it contains the social relationships of human beings rooted in their occupational activity, the phantasmagorical form these relations assume, and, finally, the impulse of flight into the misty regions of a mystical quasi-religious sphere.