Book Review – Michael Löwy on Franz Kafka: In His Times and Ours

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FRANZ KAFKA: SUBVERSIVE Dreamer provides bracing corrections to much fuzzy thinking about the German-speaking writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924) as an anguished misfit.

In seven chapters as compact and elegant as they are erudite and engrossing, the French-Brazilian Marxist Michael Löwy delivers a crystalline appraisal of an imagination in rebellion. His thesis is that Kafka's œuvre expresses a coming together of double insurgency: a revolt against paternal authority and a libertarian socialist challenge to the despotic institutions of the modern state.

While Kafka supplies no diagram of solutions, his art enables us to appreciate more lucidly the foundations of our contemporary political predicament, illusions in certain aspects of Enlightenment progress, and the necessity of taking action.

This is a unique but credible interpretation, achievable because Löwy's cast of mind, like Kafka's, is continuously wide-ranging, endlessly curious in an interdisciplinary fashion, and unafraid of heresy and heterodoxy.

In Löwy, of course, a strong Marxist commitment to a materialist explanation endures as the framework. The interaction that follows is irresistible: our own fires of defiance are fueled by the thrill of different registers colliding as we watch Löwy's luminous insights emerge through his engagement with demanding, multifaceted topics.

Löwy began researching Kafka in the 1960s, inspired by a Marxist friend who impressed upon him the worth of Kafka's critique of modern bureaucracy. In essays and book chapters throughout the late 20th century, Löwy repeatedly returned to the subject even as he pursued a long academic career at the French National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS) and remained a militant in revolutionary socialist movements on several continents.

Finally, due to a conviction that "Kafka is relevant as never before, and more readable than ever in the anguished beginning of our twenty-first century" (8), he reworked much of this material into the French edition of this volume in 2004. Soon after came translations into Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, and Turkish.

The reader of the University of Michigan Press's highly polished English translation, by Professor Inez Hedges of Northeastern University, should not be misled by the modest tone of Löwy's

introduction: “The time has come to consider [Kafka’s] works from a different vantage point, in order to examine their fascinating power of insubordination.” (1)

What comes in the pages that ensue, however, are thunderbolt insights into shortcomings in the prevailing judgments that customarily accuse Kafka “of being a radical pessimist and of preaching fatalism and resignation.” (6) *Franz Kafka: Subversive Dreamer* effectively rips the topic of Kafka’s critique of bourgeois society down to the studs and rebuilds it anew.

A Friend of Kafka

Few committed socialist scholars are as equipped as Löwy to craft such a rich and agile account of the landscape of experience underpinning Kafka’s visionary world. Not only is he a specialist in exploring the internal dynamics of cultural works through their bond to the social structure, he is also an authority on the sociology of knowledge, Marxist epistemology, surrealism, liberation theology and much more.

Beyond this, Löwy has a biographical link to his topic, one loosely suggestive of the protagonist of the 1968 story, “A Friend of Kafka.” In this famous tale by the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, the fictional character Jacques Kohn may or may not have been the first contemporary to recognize Kafka’s genius, and we do not know whether Kohn truly accompanied Kafka on all the adventures that he claims to have taken place. Yet there is enough substance in Kohn’s anecdotes to establish a strong connection to the avant-garde cultural ferment of Kafka’s time and place.

In Löwy’s case, the link is through the paternal branch of the Löwy family that shares its name and place of origin with the maternal branch of Kafka’s relatives in the Bohemian region of the present-day Czech Republic. (Franz’s mother was born Ruth Löwy.) Moreover, in 1963 Löwy spent an afternoon in Jerusalem with a literal friend of Kafka, the Israeli philosopher Samuel Hugo Bergmann, who had as a student personally observed the emergent writer’s socialist politics.

Born in Prague when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kafka was the eldest of six children in a middle-class, Ashkenazi Jewish family ruled by Hermann Kafka, a tyrannical patriarch. Temperamentally contentious and lonely, Franz was drawn to writers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Gustav Flaubert, Nikolai Gogol and Heinrich von Kleist, but trained as a lawyer and was employed mostly in the field of workman’s compensation.

In his spare hours he brought out a number of short literary works, including The Metamorphosis (1915), a novella about a traveling salesman transformed into a giant insect. He was also a prolific letter writer and kept diaries and notebooks during the final years of his illness, prior to passing away at age 40 of starvation caused by tuberculosis.

Kafka’s publications received scant attention in his lifetime, and he gave instructions for all unpublished work to be burned by his friends and his literary executor, Max Brod. Brod, fortunately, was disobedient and among the materials he salvaged were three unfinished full-length novels that would command worldwide posthumous fame: *The Man Who Disappeared* (also known as *Amerika*, which he began in 1912), *The Trial* (started in 1914), and *The Castle* (on which Kafka worked during his last two years).

What Kafka Knew

The socially critical elements of Kafka’s writing are sometimes obscured by his use of predicaments

that seem absurd or surrealistic; “Kafkaesque” is now a synonym for a nightmarish feeling of helplessness in the face of bureaucracy, customarily without a clear explanation of its basis. The dominant interpretations of his work tend to be psychoanalytical, theological, metaphysical (asserting his submission to “the human condition”) and postmodern (pronouncing the unfathomability of his message).

Löwy, however, is an imaginative scholar who likes to unthink and rearrange, which enables him to apprehend aspects of a topic that others have overlooked. He has long been stirred by the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin’s injunction — in the sixth thesis of his “On the Concept of History” (1940) — “to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.” A dizzying mastery over his materials permits Löwy to bring an accurate and compelling understanding of the stakes of Kafka’s artistic project into focus more than ever before.

To achieve this, Löwy trawls through a vast archive with some unexpected detours. There are plenty of learned allusions and memorable turns of phrase in Löwy’s prose, but this is not a volume that piles dense idea on dense idea in a manner that can be wearing to read. Among the charms of Löwy’s writing is its equanimity; he never belittles the scholars with whom he disagrees and he works hard to present alternative ideas fairly.

To revisit Kafka’s politics, Löwy devotes Chapter 1 (“’Don’t Forget Kropotkin’: Kafka and Antiauthoritarian Socialism”) to addressing the young writer’s “inner landscape.” (9) This entails a review of his thinking and activities in the years just before and after the Russian Revolution through the recollections of friends (including Bergmann), letters, publication sites for his fiction, reports of meetings attended, published reminiscences of conversations, and biographical research by others.

All these sources demonstrate that Kafka’s youthful contact with Prague anarchist circles was profound and that his critical understanding of bourgeois society was historical: “encompass[ing] the idea of the abolition of the existing social order and its replacement by a liberated humanity (‘redemption’).” (28)

Chapters 2 (“Tyrannies, From Patriarchal Autocracy to Impersonal Apparatuses”) and 3 (“Kafka’s The Trial: From the Jew as Pariah to Joseph K. as Universal Victim”) revisit customary themes in Kafka criticism: power, exclusion and oppression. The philosopher Theodor Adorno aptly characterized the force of domination in several of Kafka’s works as a “raging patriarch” (29), and Kafka’s own 1919 document “Letter to My Father” confirms that the authoritarian personality of Hermann Kafka was a potent factor driving the son to take refuge in his writing.

Löwy, however, emphases the ways in which Kafka’s romantic, libertarian, antiauthoritianism joined this resistance to his father to a profound identification with working people, women, and immigrants against capitalist bosses and the state.

Social and Personal Power

This linkage is evident in a number of stories and journal entries, but explicit in The Man Who Disappeared, which Löwy describes as “without doubt the novel that has the closest affinities with the Marxist critique of industrial society” (37). Such a blend of social and personal power is also evident in the 1919 novella “In the Penal Colony” through the brutal use of “’rational’ technology” (45) by the old Commander in an explicitly French colonial setting.

With The Trial, Kafka focuses more directly on the oppressive nature of the modern state itself, seen from the near-anarchist view that “any form of the existing state [i]s an authoritarian hierarchy

based on illusion and lies." (54)

At the same time, Löwy draws upon the argument of Hannah Arendt that Kafka expressed the "pariah-rebel sensibility" (49) of modern Jews who experienced subjugation and exclusion. Löwy observes that such an approach counters the influential readings of The Trial that tend to label protagonist Joseph K. as condemned by a divine force to which he must be resigned, or guilty of "something" that justifies his ultimate execution.

Yet Löwy notes that even Arendt fails to grasp how it is specifically the sinister tendencies in the bureaucracy, judicial system and laws of the state that are Kafka's core targets. Moreover, he demonstrates that some sources for Kafka's thinking about justice and the state can be found in anti-Semitic trials of the era in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Russia, and of course France (Alfred Dreyfuss); the victims were condemned, sometimes to death, principally for the crime of being Jewish.

On the other hand, the explanation for Joseph K.'s voluntary co-operation in his own execution as a form of resistance offers a more doubtful alternative to prevailing interpretations of the novel. Löwy's less-than-satisfactory clarification is to forward a reading that points to Kafka's radical anti-militarist activity of the time. He conjectures that Kafka, who started The Trial just after learning of the outbreak of international war in August 1914, may have been dramatizing a double expression of compassion for, as well as criticism of, those who submitted to the military machine.

In his last four chapters Löwy turns to issues such as the relation of Kafka's writing to religion and literary realism; offers a sustained analysis of The Castle; and ends with a short commentary on the meaning of "Kafkaesque."

Each of these is approached in light of Kafka's insistence on the use of paradoxical and often startling forms to express his longing for absolute liberty. Even so, Löwy deduces that religious redemption can only come as the work of humans themselves, while individual insubordination is the appropriate response to powerful officials in The Castle.

Löwy then tackles critics who — like the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács — insist that the nightmarish aura and lack of thick social detail in The Castle and elsewhere are proof that Kafka was locked in a subjectivist angst. He responds that they are blind to the main point: "this absence of content, this elusive sphere and transcendence, do not refer to a 'nothingness,' but to the very structure of reification [the objectification of social relations]…as well as to, more concretely, the abstract, empty elusive, and transcendent impersonality of an alienated and reified bureaucracy." (98)

For Löwy, "Kafkaesque" conveys the psychological experience of individuals confronted with the "mutilated instrumental rationality" of modern Western society. (108)

Why Kafka Matters

A tour-de-force of lucid argumentation, full of original and trenchant observations, Löwy's book encapsulates the many-sided dimensions of his subject. Moreover, it is bursting with Löwy's signature virtues as a seasoned Marxist researcher. Not only has he mastered the existing scholarship, but he has brought it together in an innovative mode — and then intensified the story with fresh research.

Moving between the abstract and the particular, he never falls back on old verities and willingly concedes that some debates are far too complicated to resolve with confidence. Remarkably, he has

managed to write an excellent introduction to Kafka that covers almost all the bases while also diving into aspects of his life and work that have received insufficient attention.

This is also a book that hardly ever skips off the rails. The main limitation is that the volume, although chronologically designed, has features of an anthology of essays and commentaries. These range from four to 20 pages each, and treating them as "chapters" entails a certain amount of generosity. Then, touching on so many volatile ideas in only 150 pages, the argumentation cannot be equally thorough or persuasive across all areas.

Occasionally a haste to tie up loose ends as efficiently as possible results in contradictions and cross-currents not always exhaustively analyzed. For example, the speculation about the conclusion of The Trial is suggestive but not persuasive. The index is bare-bones; neither Kafka nor any of his writings are among the entries!

Nonetheless, Franz Kafka: Subversive Dreamer is a conceptually razor-sharp work, as historically engaging as it is pressingly relevant. In fact, it is a book that feels like a window thrown open; not just a rendition that is helpful but also one that is transformative in the sense that one's experience of reading Kafka may never again be the same.

In almost every other interpretation, including the brilliant landmark Marxist study in the United States, Philip Rahv's "Franz Kafka: The Hero as Lonely Man" (Kenyon Review, Winter 1939), critics elevate Kafka to the revered signifier of a despairing gloom. As early as the 1950s, Kafka was invoked as a cultivated cliché by the prematurely cynical and jaded, an excuse for inaction. After reading Löwy, one hopes that this sacred cow can now be quietly put to rest.

In Löwy's view, we need Kafka not only because he can "view the invisible" (103) workings of capitalism, but also as a corrective to the positivist hubris that has plagued the Left. In particular, Kafka serves to remind us that human history is not subsumable under any scheme of evolutionary destiny — whether a general narrative of progress or a specific teleology of objective class struggle leading inevitably to working-class triumph.

At the same time, even if history isn't bent just one way, toward an arc of justice and liberty, it is equally misleading to accept it merely as a morass of power struggles, large and small, for domination and survival.

Kafka's narratives, then, are not meant to be simple exposés of history as absurd and messy contingencies. Dramatized in his fiction are discernible lines of social organization (and disorganization), and to recognize them is to extend the frontiers of a human knowledge that enhances liberatory action.

Löwy's alternative construal of "subversive dreamer" is grounded in a demonstration that Kafka was never above or apart from the fray. A name that still glows in the dark, Kafka was a partisan artist at all times siding with the humiliated.

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P.S.

* Against the Current n° 188, May-June 2017:

https://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4976