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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"The Greatest Consideration That the Parties Could Possibly Desire" – Kafka's Twofold Tie to Bureaucracy

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Abstract

After a brief theoretical introduction, this paper will explore two main reasons why Kafka's work became synonymous with bureaucracy. The extra-literary one, that Kafka himself was a bureaucrat, will be dealt with in section two and will challenge some of the usual misconceptions by attending to Kafka's office writings, and the important work being done on those documents by Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner. The second reason, immanent to literature, is that Kafka's novels and short stories best capture the logic of hypertrophied administration run amok. Corngold and Wagner have insightfully emphasised that it wasn't only at the level of the content and themes, but also of the narrative form and style, that Kafka's day job of accident insurance and his bureaucratic know-how were integrally present in his literary writings. In the third section, this paper will connect these insights with Lubomír Doležel's possible-worlds analysis of Kafka's narratives' semantic macrostructures. In section four, the question of whether mystification and goal displacement are inevitable for bureaucracies will be explored by using Max Weber's, Theodor Adorno's and Claude Lefort's insights. In attempting to provide an answer, the use will be made of Karl Marx's conceptualisation of the economic base and the distinction he draws between productive and unproductive labour in capitalism. In conclusion, this line of thought will be brought back to Kafka's work, and to the thought that troubled him throughout his life and found a most direct expression in his last finished story, "Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People" – how can an individual justify being an artist before society?

Keywords

Franz Kafka, bureaucracy, politics of literature, Marxist criticism, labour theory

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Introduction

> *[Kafka] was terrified by the thought of the empire of ants: the thought of men being alienated from themselves by the forms of their life in society.* Bertolt Brecht, as recorded by Walter Benjamin (1 on page 108)

If we start by briefly defining bureaucracy, such an opening could easily be dismissed as a pedantic, not to mention uninspired, move par excellence. But given that one of the chief characteristics ascribed to bureaucrats is pedantry (2 on page 143; 3 on page 259), there's at least a thematic justification for proceeding in this manner. So, modern bureaucracy is a type of organisation 'governed by regulations' and written rules of procedure, and operating through a form of graded authority or hierarchy. It is staffed by full-time, salaried officials who must possess requisite expertise and competence and whose work is based upon files, with the clear "administrative separation of official activities from private affairs." (4 on page 141) Though also present in the private sector, in the public imagination, bureaucracy is usually associated with state-run public services.

The most important theoretician of bureaucracy – and at the time "almost alone" (4 on page 141) in not treating the phenomenon solely pejoratively – was Max Weber who thought that such type of organisation was just as inevitable for large private companies as it was for state agencies, and that was because the bureaucracy was technically superior to all the other ways of organising, since "[a] fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares to other administrative forms in the same way a machine compares to nonmechanical means for producing goods." (5 on page 96) Max Weber's ideal-type understanding of bureaucracy as the most efficient kind of administration came from his acting as a social scientist, where he methodically tried to think in a value-free way. Still, in his political writings, he compared bureaucracy in horror with the living machine and people working inside it with mere cogs[6], and he sought to delimit its use and influence, seeing it as a part of the larger and unfortunate process of disenchantment[7].

It's exceedingly rare to find such a vast and significant societal phenomenon so strongly and widely connected to a single theorist, as is the case with bureaucracy and Max Weber. Yet despite that, it wasn't the great sociologist's name that became incontrovertibly synonymous with it, but that of a literary writer who was his nineteen years younger contemporary – Franz Kafka. There are at least two good reasons why that became so.

The first is immanent to literature: in all three of his astounding unfinished novels (*Amerika/The Missing Person, The Trial*, *The Castle*) and in a slew of magisterial short stories (e.g. "In the Penal Colony", "The Great Wall of China", "The Problem of Our Laws", "Poseidon") Kafka proved to be an unparalleled narrator – nay, a veritable poet – of a hypertrophied administration run amok. His texts not only described bureaucracy at great length but, in certain crucial passages, downright incorporated it and adopted its logic for plot-propelling purposes.

Kafka managed to pass on to his readers the sapping sensation of interminable waiting in the long, stuffy corridors for one's name to be called out from one of the many doors while the nagging feeling shapes into an unavoidable conclusion: that the true seat of power and a possible solution to one's problem is always, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (8 on page 45) have put it, "in the office next door, or behind the door, on to infinity," and never to be reached – like anything resembling stable occupation and shelter for Karl Rossman in America; like the reasons for Josef K.'s arrest and eventual execution; like, for K., the entrance to, and recognition and employment from, the castle. The second is external to literature, yet absolutely central to the public perception of his works, so we are going to start with it.

Kafka, a Bureaucrat in his day job

> *It is a Kafkaesque irony that the man who appears to be convinced of nothing so much as of the frailty of all safeguards should have been an insurance agent.* Bertolt Brecht, as recorded by Walter Benjamin (1 on page 111)

The extraliterary reason that Kafka's name got so inextricably tied to bureaucracy lies in the well-known fact that he toiled away as a part of one such bureau – the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague – for nearly the entirety of his working life (1908–1922). It ought to be stated from the outset that, contrary to common misconception, he was not like Italo Svevo, T.S. Eliot and Fernando Pessoa, merely some low-positioned clerk.[1] Rather, he worked as a highly ranked lawyer and high official and soon became "a significant innovator of modern social and legal reform in the Crown Land of Bohemia", which was dubbed *the Manchester of the Empire* for rapidly becoming "one of the most highly developed industrial areas of continental Europe." (9 on page ix) The Institute was a semi-governmental agency that covered "some 33,000 businesses in Bohemia", and was responsible for making the companies pay their workers' insurance. (10 on page 355)

For the most part, Kafka worked on risk classification, which meant ascertaining how dangerous, statistically speaking, a given industry was, which in turn determined how high the insurance premiums they had to pay were. Additionally, he had to wrangle in courts with businessmen unwilling to pay and field their constant complaints and formal appeals about being unfairly treated and assigned too high a risk classification. Whenever they did so, one can imagine they made sure to bemoan the rampant bureaucratisation of the Institute, the endless red tape that ties them down and the ridiculous regulatory hoops they have to jump through. One interesting case was from the spring of 1913.

[1] 'Italo Svevo was a mere correspondence clerk from 1880 to ca. 1900 at the Triestine branch of the Viennese Union Bank. Fernando Pessoa was a mere bookkeeper and correspondent for a Lisbon company from ca. 1910 to 1935. T.S. Eliot, as well, was a mere currency trader in the Foreign and Colonial Department of Lloyds Bank, London, from 1917 to 1925. Comparisons of Kafka with the clerks Svevo, Pessoa, and Eliot are malapropos.' (9, 379). See also 11 on page 295.

> [Kafka] represented his Institute in an unsuccessful criminal charge against the orchard and quarry owner Josef Renelt, a stubborn northern Bohemian villager who did not care in the least about risk percentages but simply declared his quarry workers to be orchard workers so as to be able to exempt their wages from insurance fees. (12 on page 38)

One is almost tempted to say: too bad Josef R. didn't get some of the treatment his namesake got at the end of *The Trial,* which, strikingly, took place in the quarry of all places. In later years, Kafka also had to inspect factories and argue for the implementation of safety measures and accident prevention procedures, and throughout his career, he penned speeches that his superiors would give at various conferences, in addition to writing some of the articles the Institute published in the newspapers for the general audience.

All of this goes to show that the general idea of Kafka languishing in some small office in a rote, pen-pusher position of no note and significance is utterly false (13 on page 354). On top of that, the very important, sensitive and complex writing tasks he was assigned from the beginning of his career help us dispel another legend that soon caught on after his death: that he was a misunderstood genius completely unrecognised during his lifetime, apart from a few true friends. Not only was he praised by his fellow writers and caught the eye of some critics (14 on page 248–9), but he was also highly regarded within the Institute precisely for his literary talent.

Robert Marschner, Kafka's highest-ranking supervisor, shared a passion for literature and consequently "valued and supported Kafka, even though he was well aware that his employee's second occupation as a writer took a toll on his energies." Marschner was also the one who "prevented Kafka from going to war by persistently ignoring his wishes to join the Austrian army, and had instead repeatedly insisted that Kafka's specialized skills were indispensable to the company." (14 on pages 65–66) While Kafka doubtlessly found his main job of risk assessment, classification and insurance premiums determinations to be insufficiently connected to reality, calling his workplace "more fantastic than stupid" (15, on page 126); he was, nonetheless, reminded daily of what stood behind the anonymised, phantasmic forms and figures he dealt with, given that the Institute building faced a steady "stream of visitors consisting of injured workers" who "present[ed] themselves for medical examination, [...] often accompanied by members of their families" as the Institute's Annual Report for 1915 had put it. (12 on page 43) And they weren't just a constant crowd in the corridors Kafka had to pass through, he often had to deal directly "with the maimed victims of work-related accidents" (11 on page 137), prompting him to recount to Brod (16 on page 82): "How modest these men are … They come to us and beg. Instead of storming the institute and smashing it to little pieces, they come and beg."

Kafka knew that his work, however immediately abstract and formulaic, was, in effect, quite palpably and tangibly real and important – it literally helped save lives and succour those whose bodily integrity was routinely sacrificed and fed into the profit-maximising machine of the ascendant industrial capitalism. The sense of purpose, of engaging in a meaningful and impactful activity, was clearly present for those working there (13 on page 321), and the jobs on offer were no sinecures as the continued existence of the Institute was anything but secure. If we look at one of the articles they published in the newspapers for the general audience – 1911's "Workmen's Insurance and the Employers" written by Kafka – the contours of the broader situation come sharply into view.

> Of course, at the same time we must make certain that the honest endeavor toward redress and reorganization *does not turn into pure budgetary concerns and oppressive taxation*. In short, industry can welcome and promote the efforts of the Prague Institute only as long as these are aimed at forcing the dishonest employers to fulfill their obligations in order to relieve all honest employers. *Any effort beyond that aimed at depriving industries of capital only to amass it sterilely in the Institute's coffers* would have to be resisted with all our might. (17 on page 152; emphasis mine)

This excerpt helps us flesh out the difficult situation the Institute was in, being underfunded and not strongly state-backed – no overflowing coffers in sight – and, as a consequence, they operated with a huge deficit and couldn't risk alienating the employers who paid "90 percent of the premiums", other ten being paid by the workers themselves. (12 on page 30) The Institute had to walk a fine line while always in the middle of a melee. As a contemporary commentator explained, "the operation of the Accident Insurance Law" which created the non-private insurance companies such as the one Kafka worked in, neither "succeeded in making the law popular, nor (…) proved satisfactory for a single group of those affected by it", unleashing instead "the dogs of war among the groups involved" with the insurance institutions, "through no fault of their own" ending up in the centre of public condemnation and getting "publicly labeled the 'most hated institutions'." (12 on pages 28–29)

The uneasy standing of his workplace extended to Kafka's own position. For one, as he said to Brod, the place was "closed to Jews" (18 on page 165) and without intercession from his school friend's father, he wouldn't have stood a chance as an applicant because of his identity (14 on page 143). Besides that, Kafka was a civil servant in all but name; legally speaking, he wasn't really one. This discrepancy was widespread in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time, and it led to the creation of a large movement of the so-called new bureaucracy employees in "government, commerce and industry" (19 on page 35), who wanted to remedy this and lobbied for better pay, work conditions and greater official status in the protracted struggle for a code of service (*Dienstpragmatik*). Kafka took part in these efforts through "the white-collar equivalent of a 'trade union' to which he belonged (namely, the Association of Officials of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute/*Verein*

Beamte Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt) and of which he was for a short time, the treasurer." (20 on pages 1026–1027)

However, as already indicated, many other types of workers were in the same unenviable position because, as José M. González García (21 on page 473) helpfully enumerated, four immense historical factors were driving new bureaucratisation. These were: 1) the Taylorisation of work which went hand in hand with the concentration of capital into large trusts and conglomerates; 2) "the development of *social legislation*" which increased "the bureaucracy dedicated to the state administration of social problems"; 3) "the development of *state interventionism in the economy* through the nationalization of key sectors such as the railroads"; 4) "the development of *popular political parties* that required an internal bureaucratization as a means to ensure their organization and success in electoral campaigns."

The first factor on the list caused – or exacerbated to a previously unimaginable degree – societal problems due to the creative destruction that the capitalistic vein of industrialisation inevitably wreaks, while the second was tasked with alleviating that strain by tackling the problems with housing, the "inhuman working conditions", and "the destruction of the family", and by developing healthcare and schooling system (21 on page 475). The second and third factors taken together were the ones that cast "a fresh burden on the civil service", and had as a consequence "the creation of endless offices and bureaus", with "great subsidiary civil service" that soon took up those posts, inevitably finding themselves "without the traditions of the older official body", as Josef Redlich, an influential Austrian politician before and during WWI, described it in his historiographical work. (19 on page 36)

In a very neat coincidence, we can also submit this fact: "By 1900, incoming forms and files at the level of the district authorities had increased by a factor of four, and Austrian bureaucracy" (12 on pages 29–30) – as Erich Graf von Kielmansegg, the Austrian civil servant and politician, stated at the time – was on the verge of "being suffocated by files and drowning in ink." (12 on page 30) Offices overflowing with paperwork and massive bureau desks bursting at the seams with files and folders meant to keep the manifold documents organised – this was a scene in which the struggle took place between the new kind of bureaucracy based on technical expertise and the old type which was derived from the royal courts and upon whom legitimacy was granted by a sovereign. This older type of bureaucracy, Weber (5 on pages 78–79) called patrimonialism, because its "regulations and rules were based upon individual privilege, and the capacity to bestow acts of mercy, whenever the rules and regulations were not based on sacred traditions."

In his diary entry from July 30, 1914, Kafka (22 on page 352) began sketching a story that can be read as capturing and dramatising, with customary wit and verve, this point of Weber's. It is the story of Banz, the director of the Progress Insurance Company, who looks sceptically "at the man standing in front of his desk" trying to get hired, and tells him: "Pleading won't help you here. I'm not authorized to take pity on people. You'd be happy to do any kind of work. Sure. So would anybody. That doesn't make you special. It only shows how little you think of yourself." In this very appropriately named insurance company, no traces of patrimonialism survive – one is not entitled to show mercy – except for the cruelty and stern talking to of yesteryear, of course.

In Kafka's last novel, however, both strands of civil service are present and at loggerheads, as per Andrew Weeks' inspired reading of *The Castle*. Because "the plot itself coincides with the protagonist's struggle to establish the terms of his employment", Weeks (19 on page 35) explores how the novel echoes the historical attempts of the new Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy to extract concessions and formal recognition from the old one. K. claims to be a land surveyor, which puts him squarely in the rank of new bureaucracy with their knowledge and expertise as a basis for the office they hold; he wants employment and a rank befitting his station and insists: "what I want from the Castle is not charity, but my rights." (23 on page 74)

At one point, about one-third of the book in, K. lamented how his "livelihood" had been "jeopardized by the ignominious machinations of officialdom." (23 on page 89) The Castle and its bureaucrats, who act with the impunity of feudal lords and are revered by the peasants as such, seem to stand perfectly for the old patrimonialism (24, on page 19). But that appears so only at first glance; on closer inspection, things are more complex. Just as the actual castle building proves to be "neither an old knight's fortress nor a magnificent new edifice, but a large complex, made up of a few two-story buildings and many lower, tightly packed ones" of which K. thinks that "had one not known that this was a castle, one could have taken it for a small town", so do the castle officials display a strange mix of the old and new. (24 on page 8)

Deleuze and Guattari (8 on page 75) described two types of bureaucracies in Kafka's work in terms of their respective architectural styles: stairs, towers, astronomical model and "distant and close" standing for the old state of bureaucracy, as opposed to the low ceiling, unlimitedness of the immanent hallway, earthly or underground model and "faraway and contiguous" for the new state of bureaucracy.

> The contiguity of the offices, the segmentalization of power, replaces the hierarchy of instances and the eminence of the sovereign (already, the castle had revealed itself to be a segmental and contiguous rambling assemblage in the style of the Hapsburg bureaucracy or the mosaic of nations in the Austrian empire). (8 on page 50)

The castle towering above the village, one of the most obvious architectural embodiments of the feudal sovereign, turns out to be, on a second glance, closer to modern office spaces where, for those who need help from civil services, there is never a right door on which to knock, nor a properly filled

form to bring, nor a bureaucrat who could accurately answer one's query and resolve a problem in a timely fashion. All of that is the exact opposite of the situation with the sovereign, who is at least easily identifiable, if not easily accessible, and sits on a throne in some castle or a palace, with a retinue of dignitaries ready to serve as emissaries, envoys and plenipotentiaries. The only description we get of the castle's interior is Barnabas's, as relayed by his sister Olga to K., and is that of "a large office chamber" that is lengthwise

> divided in two by a single high desk, which reaches from one side wall to the other, a narrow section in which two persons could barely get past each other, that's the space for the officials, and a wide section, the space for the individual parties, the spectators, the servants, the messengers.[2] (23 on page 178)

In a large castle room, there were so many people crammed inside, and the imposing, immovable desk cordoned them off to separate the officials from the chaff, so that "the tightness of the space" became inevitable. (23 on page 178) The castle is, from both inside and outside, an amalgam of two types of bureaucracies, the new one hatching from inside the old. Deleuze and Guattari noted this and connected it with Kafka's historical background, yet didn't go into any specifics. But these are quite fascinating and revealing: "Austrian social insurance remained closely connected to the most advanced system of its kind at the time—the Bismarckian welfare state of the German Reich", resulting in a "contradictory involvement" of "the most archaic" (the Hapsburg empire's old state bureaucracy) and "the most advanced sectors of knowledge." (12 on page 22) Terrified of the effects of the class war, or more precisely, of the workers' victory which fleetingly but blazingly presented itself in the form of the Paris Commune throughout the spring of 1871, the imperial chancellors, Prince Otto von Bismarck of the German and Count Friedrich Ferdinand Beust of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, met in the late summer of that year

> to discuss ways to combat the dangers of the Socialist International. They agreed that a strategy grounded merely in police and military power—in the vein of the Karlsbad resolutions of 1819—was no longer timely. Instead, the two noblemen decided to consider the question "from the higher standpoint of public welfare"—in other words, join the stick of repression with the carrot of biopolitical regulation. (12 on page 22)

These newly instituted social welfare programmes were the concessions gained by the revolutionary actions of the international proletariat and sprang from the desire of old, still-ruling nobility to keep the lid on the deleterious effects of capitalism in so far the latter led to the destabilisation of the state. The German empire at least recently became a modern nation-state, but the old Hapsburg Empire, the living fossil of feudalism, engaging in the most up-to-date attempts to biopolitically manage and lighten the backbreaking burden of industrialization on the population, this was a particularly uncanny, grotesque sight, worthy of being immortalised in something as mind-boggling as *The Castle*. But ultimately, what is so incomprehensible in the novel isn't the procedures of the officials, nor the mores of the peasants, it's K.'s persistent efforts to be acknowledged and accepted by the bureaucracy that evidently breeds nothing but disgust and distrust in him. Why did he work so hard to be welcomed into their ranks? Why did he strive so desperately to be employed by the castle? In a talk with the village chairman, K. gives a direct response:

> I shall list for you certain things that keep me here: the sacrifices I had to make to get away from home, the long difficult journey, the reasonable hopes I held out for myself of being taken on here, my complete lack of fortune, the impossibility of finding suitable work at home, and finally, my fiancee, who comes from here. (23 on page 73)

But the talk K. later had with his fiancée, Frieda, complicates things. She says to him

> "I cannot stand this life here. If you want to hold on to me, we must leave and go somewhere else, to southern France, or to Spain." "I cannot go abroad," said K., "I came here in order to stay here. I will stay here." And in a contradiction he didn't bother to explain, he added as if speaking to himself: "Now what could have attracted me to this desolate land other than the desire to stay?" (23 on page 136)

The desolate, snow-bound land, with the inhospitable village and the nonsensical, despotic castle ruling over it … yet that's where K. wants to stay. Even though he had allegedly travelled far, he doesn't want to travel anymore, not even to much nicer regions, with a committed companion and a life partner by his side. It would seem he wants the post from the castle that badly. Yet what is it about that position – of a bureaucrat, a civil servant – that makes it so attractive? The connection with the castle notwithstanding, K. knows there are no riches nor leisure to be had in its service. Alfred Weber, Max's younger brother, was, as chance would have it, part of the final tribunal in the last of the three doctoral exams Kafka had to pass to become the Doctor of Laws, and also acted as Kafka's *Promotor*, which was a merely formal role in the degree ceremony reception (25 on page 50). He was of the opinion that

> [t]he danger of a people's descent into the apparatus differs widely according to country. Some peoples by temperament are immune to it; some can distance themselves from this clattering monotony of the machinery. You will never reduce a Frenchman to a mere bureaucrat. Monsieur can calculate, formulate, decree and parry off problems without being swallowed up by routine, for he habitually whistles at everything that bores him and always seeks a change, excitation or warmth when life becomes

[2] A couple of pages later, Olga says, speaking of Barnabas: "He can enter an office, though it doesn't even seem to be an office but rather an anteroom to the offices, and perhaps not even that, perhaps it's a room intended for all those who aren't allowed into the real offices." (23 on page 181).

> troublesome. We Germans, on the other hand, are quite different. (26 on page 52)

This is incredibly ironic because it was precisely in the French context of the 1750s that the word was coined by the merchant, physiocrat and one of the earliest proponents of free trade, Jacques Claude Marie Vincent de Gournay, who bewailed how "we have in France an illness that takes a terrible toll; this illness is called bureaumania." (27 on page 16) Now, it is true that "in comparison with England or the United States (where the state administration to a large degree lacked a professional bureaucracy)," the two empires of central Europe, Germany and Austro-Hungary, had consolidated and wide-ranging bureaucracies (21 on page 472). But should the reasons for that really be chalked up to "an idolatry of officialdom" peculiar to Germans, which leaves them "beholden to state action" and impoverishes "every spirit of self-reliance" in them (26 on page 55)? Alfred Weber relies on and cites his brother Max's phrase "metaphysics of officialdom" (26 on page 55), and indeed, with his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Weber senior championed what could in Marxist parlance be termed superstructural explanations for the changes in the economic base. However, as Max Weber became more familiar with Marx's works, instead of their popularised version (28), Marx's influence arguably began to take hold so in his posthumously published magnum opus *Economy and Society* (of which his key essay, "Bureaucracy" is a part) one can find this, much more materially based explanation:

> The relative reliability for financial provision of the civil servant [Beamte], and the remuneration by a relatively high social appreciation, makes the position of a civil servant [Beamte] attractive, *especially in countries without "colonial" opportunities to make money*. These advantages for a civil servant [Beamte] allow salaries to be set at a comparatively low level. (5 on page 84; emphasis mine)

In 1850, the leading Victorian man of letters, Thomas Carlyle (2 on page 143), condemned bureaucracy as a distinctly "continental nuisance" and saw "no risk or possibility2 of it arising in England, since 2democracy is hot enough here". Maybe, we could reply to the Right Honourable Carlyle that the hotness which inhibited the sprawling of bureaucracy didn't, as he claimed, come from bustling democracy firing on all cylinders in England, "with its Newspapers [and] its Parliaments" (2 on page 143), but from the Equatorial colonies that were theirs to plunder.

While Weber noticed that having colonies prevented state bureaucracies from becoming as all-important as they did in the German context, Hannah Arendt[3] (29 on pages 207–208) understood their initial development to have occurred precisely because of the colonies and the type of "administration by which Europeans had tried to rule foreign peoples whom they felt to be hopelessly their inferiors and at the same time in need of their special protection." For her, "legends dreamed up by the British intelligentsia" in an effort to justify their colonial rule, "have played a decisive role in the formation of the bureaucrat."

In light of this, Kafka's case is most illuminating. Before he began working for the Institute, he was employed for a little less than a year at the private insurance company and Italian economic giant Assicurazioni Generali. It was thanks to his maternal uncle from Madrid, Alfred, that he got a job, and what gave him hope at first was the possibility of getting to travel to distant places on business (13 on page 315). A living example of that was his second uncle, Joseph, who had "a venturesome colonial career that took him from one continent to another", from being a commercial agent and chief accountant "in the hell of the Belgian Congo" and a "bank officer in China", to a "director of an investment firm in Canada", and a "man of independent means in Versailles." (13 on page 315) Kafka similarly entertained "hopes of someday sitting in armchairs in faraway countries looking out of the office windows at sugar cane fields or Mohammedan cemeteries, and the whole world of insurance interests me a great deal, but my current work is dreary." (13 on page 316)

Almost immediately, the quotidian dreariness of working in the insurance company quashed all the colonial aspirations and wanderlust Kafka cherished. As he was "receiving the paltry salary of a temporary assistant while putting in regular working hours of 8 a.m. to noon and 2–6 p.m., six days a week" (13 on page 317), Kafka soon decided to take the necessary courses that would enable him to vie for a position at the Institute. He was doing that by night while working long hours at his day job, but such was his determination to get away from the private insurance firm and get employed at the Institute where he would have to work only six hours a day, leaving him with enough free time to pursue his true vocation – writing fiction. This might have seemed like a simple change of employers, but in actual fact, "Kafka had changed sociopolitical sides, because from this point on, he was no longer working for an abstract profit margin but instead for the interests of the insured." That meant, however, that "he was now working at a chronically bankrupt industry that would not survive more than a couple of months without the constant influx of tax money." (13 on page 353). Or as Kafka (17 on page 153), writing in the name of the Institue, amusingly phrased it in a 1911 newspaper article[4] – "the Institute seemed simply to be a corpse, whose only living element was its growing deficit" – before assuring the public that, from 1909 on, things started to change for the better.

Kafka's was one of the innumerable instances where the private sector curbed and crushed the creative spirit far more than the public one did, but the Weber brothers, who were dyed-in-the-wool liberals, didn't see it like that. Both brothers were

[3] On Kafka's influence on Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, see 30.

[4] It is a sequel of the one we already quoted and they have the same title ("Workmen's Insurance and Employers"), but the first was published on September 13, 1911, while the second was published on November 4, 1911.

members of "the most celebrated of academic institutions dedicated to the study of social policy" – the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Association for Social Policy) – which was founded in Germany in 1872, "the same year as the meeting of the governmental delegations of Germany and Austria-Hungary, a meeting which sparked off the development of social legislation" (21 on page 475), and which took place after Bismarck and Beust already agreed on the general course of action.

The Association brought together political economists who strongly opposed both revolutionary socialism and laissez-faire liberalism and endorsed "legislative interventions by the state into the economy, which would benefit the common good rather than selfish class interests and, above all, take the edge off the social question through economic and social emancipation of the working class." (31 on page 88) They advocated for a non-radical, non-dialectical type of mediation, one that is essentially palliative, relieving symptoms without dealing with the underlying causes.

It's no surprise that the Weber brothers found themselves in the minority there, because while they, like the rest of their colleagues, were in favour of social reforms and against monopoly capitalism, they also stood for "free trade against protectionism, for spontaneity in social progress, against excessive cartelization [and] against increasing bureaucracy in political life." (31 on page 90) During the Association's 1909 Vienna conference, the disagreement between the brothers and the rest of the members came to a head as Alfred Weber made a widely noted speech in which he sharply attacked in emotive terms effectively the rest of the people in attendance for exalting the state and bureaucracy. He said that "our entire society is being rendered narrow minded and philistine" and creates a new type of human being who is "German, loyal and pensionable" (31 on page 95), to which Max Weber added how the world is becoming "filled with nothing but small cogs, that is, nothing but people who are glued to little jobs, striving towards a little job that is just a bit bigger." (6)

This admonishment of the bureaucracy was given noteworthy expression in a popular essay Alfred Weber (26 on page 58) wrote in 1910 called "Der Beamte" ("The Civil Servant")[5], a part of which, on Frenchmen being temperamentally unable to be real bureaucrats, we already pulled from, but, to that we may add this gem: "It will be accepted that the state requires human capital for a few limited functions of public order and policing, but we will reject its way of enslaving us through its newly acquired control over the economy, education and corporeal health." (26 on page 58) In other words, no need to defund the police, but don't you dream of providing us with free healthcare and education, our sense of individuality and personal self-initiative wouldn't be able to take it.

Bureaucracy, immanent and infrastructural to Kafka's literature

> *Kafka had one problem and, one only, and that was the problem of organization.* Bertolt Brecht, as recorded by Walter Benjamin (1 on page 108)

For our present purposes, Alfred Weber's essay serves as a felicitous segue to ways bureaucracy appears immanently in formal aspects of Kafka's literary works. Kafka almost certainly read it, and there is credible textual evidence that he took over Weber's metaphorical language about bureaucratic apparatus and applied it to an actual machine – an intricate torture and execution device from "In the Penal Colony" (32), thus literalising the metaphor to a deadly effect.[6] But the writings on bureaucracy, and Kafka's lived experience inside one, provided him with more than just stylistic flourishes or the hair-splitting argumentative logic of many of his characters.

It supplied him with superior technical knowledge and allowed him to mine directly from the belly of the beast the most explosive and penetrating insights about the ongoing tectonic shifts of modernisation. Aestheticist writers of his time, perched on top of their Parnassian mountain peaks, had nothing on Kafka – a mole deep inside capitalism's furnace and the governments' scrambling and shambolic attempts to control yet live off of it. Kafka was burrowing through the maze of bureaus and gathering invaluable intel from the ceaseless flow of official documents and papers while the rest of his peers that formed the Prague Circle (Max Brod, Franz Werfel, Egon Erwin Kisch, Oskar Baum), had nothing but great literature and other arts to go on (33 on pages 204–206).

Stanley Corngold, the most attentive and assiduous of Kafka readers – who always engagingly argued for an immanent approach that doesn't collapse Kafka's transcendent brilliance back into empiricism of his historical and cultural background (34 chapter 11) – readily acknowledged that the office Kafka found so troubling and debilitating when it came to his true literary calling, was, in fact, "an indispensable basis for the dreamlike transmutations of his art" and that "not every day's residue would have produced dream images with the power to rouse us a century later" (9 on page x), as the leftovers and detritus from his day job as an insurance agent did.

And it's not just that; the specific procedures Kafka engaged in his work provided him with the very structure behind his specific literary approach and the peculiar, divided shape of his fictional worlds. Lubomír Doležel, in a strict, possible-worlds analysis of Kafka's narratives "semantic macrostructure" (35 on page 130), distinguished between the hybrid world

[5] It could also be translated as "The Offical", "The Functionary" (32 on page 41), or simply, "The Bureaucrat".

[6] That Kafka was taking metaphors back into (literal) reality was how Günther Anders (36 on pages 42–45) explained the strange power of his stories.

of most of his short stories where there is "a coexistence, in one unified fictional space, of the physically possible and physically impossible fictional entities" (37 on page 187) and the divided or two worlds of *The Trial* and *The Castle* where the visible and the invisible realms are partitioned and never mix. Recall the description of the castle's large office chamber lengthwise divided in two by a single high desk with a narrow section for the officials, and a wide one for interested parties, messengers and servants – we can call it a spatial embodiment of this narrative principle.

The invisible world remains inaccessible: there is no telling what the court or the castle bureaucracies are really about, though there are plenty of people who will tell, and talk and talk, of nothing else. They are mediators between the visible, explicitly described world and the epistemically and ontologically unapproachable other world (it's enough to remember that when K. had set his sights on the castle in the attempt to reach the building, he never actually managed to; and Josef K., despite a preliminary hearing before the examining magistrate, never stood before the judge or learned what he stood accused of). Mediators are all of the characters from which we learn something about the invisible world, but they can't even explicate and settle on how, for instance, one castle official, Klamm, looks like, let alone how, why and to what end do the intricate bureaucratic structures work. Doležel remarks how "the visible world is primarily a world of distinct individuals while the invisible world is a world of social institutions." (35 on page 133)

Benno Wagner (38 on page 190) examined documents and internal procedures of the social institution Kafka worked for and uncovered how exactly the forms for the accident report that were used transformed the actual occurrences of harm and the specific narratives of hurt into the order of general probability bearing only "on the statistical body of a population of workers." Kafka was the real-life mediator in Doležel's sense; he worked in the chasm – and had to grapple with – the relation between "the individual (physiological) body and the social (statistical) body." In other words, Kafka was a doorman before the law, a translator and a bridge[7] between the discourses of "the individual life's story and the institutional rules and procedures for calculating loss and compensation." (38 on page 207) Wagner contends that this position "marks the origin of Kafka's narrative worlds and assures the special calm of his writing."[8] (38 on page 190)

Doležel and Wagner, working independently of one another and with opposing – intrinsic versus extrinsic – approaches, still arrived at the same conclusion about the core of Kafka's storytelling. Doležel explained how the mercurial offices and institutions from Kafka's last two novels were presented through the two-worlds narratives; Wagner, through meticulous research, showed how these macrosemantic structures not only depicted but also deployed bureaucratic principles Kafka had to use daily in his workplace.

Getting back to the beginning, we should stress that Kafka not only literalised Weber's metaphorical description of bureaucracy but also used bureaucracy as "a capacious metaphor" for the otherness in himself, as Corngold (41 on page 16) remarked while immediately noting that Kafka assigned the inhumane, alien other deep within himself to one other phenomenon only – his literary writing. But how can this be said? Wasn't the bureaucracy in the guise of his day job and the horrors of the office the very anathema and the principal obstacle in Kafka becoming a real, full-time, professional writer? Kafka said as much many a time, among others to his publisher Kurt Wolff in 1917:

> [...] at the moment I am not concerned with royalties. After the war, however, that would change entirely. I will give up my job (giving it up is really my most intense hope), will marry and move away from Prague, possibly to Berlin. To be sure I will not depend entirely on the proceeds of my writing (or so I still have reason to believe). Nevertheless I—or the deep-seated bureaucrat inside me, which is the same thing—have an oppressive fear of this future. (18 on page 134)

This is an exceptionally important letter to which we will return below, but for now, suffice it to serve as an example of Kafka bemoaning the work he had to do to get by. Only at the very late stage of his short life, did he manage to enact a dialectical sublation of the highest order – fuse the two contradictory things that were the deep-set, and by the same token, strange and overpowering aspects of himself. This is how Corngold (41 on pages 17–18) reads "the sly good humor that glances off the pages of *The Castle*", namely, as "Kafka's bliss in joining, at the order of this fiction, his two alien worlds: the being of the writerly life, the being of bureaucracy. What a happy thing to make the hell of bureaucracy redound to the benefit of his fiction." The invisible world of the Castle stands for the joys and terrors, ecstasies and exasperations, of literary writing, or as Corngold put it elsewhere[42], what is "striking about Kafka's last novel is that his personal castle, the 'house of writing' into which he forever sought entry, wears the features of bureaucracy, so that in the end these two kinds of being become indistinguishable."

While Corngold doesn't use this particular example to buttress his point, let's take the following little comic scene taking place in the by now familiar castle office divided in two by a high desk:

> The official doesn't give any explicit order, there's no loud dictation to be heard, one barely notices that someone is dictating; on the contrary, the official seems to continue

[7] It goes without saying that Kafka has a short story "The Bridge" told from the perspective of a bridge just before collapse. "I was stiff and cold, I was a bridge, I spanned an abyss; my toes were dug in one side, my hands in the other[.]" (39 on page 108)

[8] Brech called it the "tone of superior calm" (1 on page 110), while for Heinz Politzer[40] it wast "an almost cruel serenity, such as no other writing has ever exhibited."

> reading, only he begins to whisper and the copyist hears it. Often the official dictates so softly that the copyist cannot hear it sitting down, he must constantly jump up, catch the dictation, sit down and make a note of it, jump back up, and so on. (23 on page 178)

Is there a better representation of the writer's inspiration than this? Where before muses sang to an epic poet who reclined under the pines by the sea, with Kafka we have an overcrowded office and a barely audible dictation of a nebulous official a writer, who is a mere copyist, must keep jumping up and down to have a hope of catching and putting on paper. This is the only way Kafka's type of literature could be composed – by being forced into making a mockery of oneself, into being cartoonish, clownish, slavish and subordinate; by being a small, negligible part of the vast apparatus whose aims and actions you fumblingly try to interpret,[9] understand and emulate, but who can say to what avail. Kafka previously claimed in a letter (43 on page 279) to Felice Bauer that "writing and office cannot be reconciled, since writing has its center of gravity in depth, whereas the office is on the surface of life. So it goes up and down, and one is bound to be torn asunder in the process." But as he gradually grew more aware that his day job served as an ideal "conduit of contemporary experience" (9 on page x), so this going up and down – previously representing a lack of complete and utter commitment that the true literature is due and cannot be created without – could now be reframed as the real source of inspiration and energy which powers his writing to go as far and fast as it did.

While Corngold and Wagner refreshingly, revealingly and rightfully emphasised that it wasn't only at the level of the content and themes, but also of the narrative form and style that Kafka's day job of accident insurance and his bureaucratic know-how were integrally present in his literary writings, we will argue that we need to take one step further and go even beyond the immanent plain of the literary text, to the infrastructural aspects of the institution of literature as such. It is at that level that bureaucracy is equally indispensable for Kafka's kind of writing to thrive.

Kafka's stance on bureaucracy isn't one-sided[3] – just like his own office job wasn't simply a drudgery unrelated to his literary vocation, and just like he wasn't unrecognised and reduced to being a mere cog in the machine, but was indeed highly respected precisely for his writing ability within the Institute – so with bureaucracy, we can see Kafka oscillating between seeing it as an ultimate obstacle towards becoming a fully-fledged literary author (*the deep-seated bureaucrat inside me*), and intimating in some of his most perspicuous passages that good bureaucracy would be needed on the infrastructural level for the goal of becoming a professional writer unbeholden to the whims of the market to become a viable option.[10]

Kafka knew by experience that there are only two ways for something complex, intensive and interpersonal to last and grow in society: either by being commercially successful and profitable, in which case it needs no further justification, or else by having bureaucratic institutions and, as is mostly the case, the state support behind it. Milena Jesenská (44 on pages 243–245) commented in her letter to Brod how "things like money, the stock market, currency exchange, a typewriter are utterly mystical" to Kafka. They are "the strangest riddles" and a "mystical secret" to him, standing as they do for something "he cannot attain and something he holds in high regard, with a moving, pure naïveté, because it is 'good at business.'" Really, what was there left for Kafka but inspired ingénue stance over things commercial, when his writing – the deepest imperative of his being and the purpose of his life – would have never been able to turn a profit and so ensure him the longed-for complete immersion in literature without the remainder of the day job.

We can interpret Kafka's marvel over anything that could be a success on the market as stemming from his knowing full well – as he once put it in a letter (18 on page 347) to Brod – that his "weird kind of writing" aiming only at "his own salvation or damnation" could never find wide purchase. Kafka couldn't have lived on royalties; his books sold nowhere near enough for that.[11] Even when he imagined moving away from Prague, marrying and quitting his job, like in the letter to his publisher, he was still fully aware, as he wrote in a diary entry years before, in 1911, that he "couldn't live off literature if for no other reason than the slow emergence of my works and their special character." (22 on page 17) Said *special character* and the *weird kind* of his literature made monetising it extremely difficult, if not nigh-on-impossible.

There's another thing that Jesenská (44 on page 243) mentioned in the same letter besides lucrative exploits as amazing Kafka – "[a]ny official position, including his own, is something very puzzling to him, very admirable, like a locomotive is for a small child." This leads us to the conclusion that a great bureaucratic apparatus – and the models from *The Trial* and *The Castle* can't fail to come to mind – would be needed for literature to function as an institution dedicated to its autonomous

[9] Kafka said in a letter to Oskar Baum: "The new and reformed procedures for issuing passports are wonderful. Our fumbling interpretations are powerless to deal with the complexities of which the bureaucracy is capable, and what is more, the necessary, inevitable complexities springing straight out of the origins of human nature, to which, measured by my case, the bureaucracy is closer than any social institution." (18 on page 327)

[10] The most clear-cut example would be the final fragment from *Amerika: The Missing Person* (45 on pages 267–289) on The Nature Theater of Oklahama.

[11] "Kafka's first book publication, *Contemplation* … was printed in November 1912 in a numbered bibliophile edition of 800 copies… The retail price was 4.50 marks (softcover, Japanese binding) or 6.50 marks » (half leather binding). Kafka received royalties of 37 pfennig per copy sold. It is no longer possible to reconstruct the sales figures precisely; however, they were so low that there was no thought of a second printing. … According to the publisher's 1915 to 1918 royalty accounts, 258 copies were sold the first year, 102 the next, and only 69 the following year. It appears that the book did not sell out until 1924, the year of Kafka's death." (14 on pages 100–101)

aesthetic ideals and goals and not driven by heteronomous forces like profit. This may seem like a height of irony, but the inhumaneness of bureaucracy is needed to ensure that Kafka's type of inhumane, alien writing – the one that doesn't pander nor appeal to readers but shocks them to the core – can be created and received on a large scale, that is across the population.

On the face of it, it is a preposterous proposition: can one think of anyone worse than the bureaucrats from the Court and the Castle adjudicating who should and who shouldn't be a writer? They all seem to be hopelessly corrupt and wanting in intelligence, insight and informedness. This little snippet from *The Castle* (23 on page 214) illustrates it all: "even though bribes are indeed accepted in our offices for the sake of simplicity and to avoid needless talk, they don't get you anywhere." So, corrupt, sure, but also incapable and inefficient. Or from *The Trial* (46 on page 115): "K. had no doubt already learned from his own experience that the lowest level of the court system is not entirely perfect, that it includes some employees who forget their duty and can be bribed, which in turn produces breaches, so to speak, in the strictly closed system of the court."

Here we have arrived at the dual nature of bureaucracy. On one hand, Weber, following his ideal-type understanding, concludes that a strictly bureaucratic administration "run by trained, individual *Beamte* [bureaucrat]—produces an optimal efficiency for precision, speed, clarity, command of case knowledge, continuity, confidentiality, uniformity, and tight subordination." (5 on page 96) On the other, Kafka's portrayal of bureaucrats strikes us as anything but fanciful; it hits, rather, too close to home.

The two approaches have been fruitfully interfaced numerous times (24, 47–49), and one of the common conclusions is that Weber gives us a top-down and Kafka a bottom-up overview of the same structure[50]. In other words, Weber shows us how bureaucracy works based on its own logical principles, while Kafka shows us how humans cope inside that machinery, both as employees and as parties who have to use it and put themselves through its wringer.

It is plain to see how in every single key aspect Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy deviates dramatically from the facts on (the castle) ground – the castle bureaucrats, for one, behave in anything other than *sine ira et studio* fashion (47 on page 11) – but from one of them, Bürgel, who is a secretary of one of the castle officials, we do get to hear what, in Weber's view, is probably of the ultimate importance for the modern, rational bureaucracies: "The secretaries are always inconsiderate towards the parties … This inconsiderateness, or in other words this iron-clad pursuit and performance of duty, is the greatest consideration that the parties could possibly desire." (23 on page 262) This is indeed a succinct and brilliant summary of Weber's central thesis:

> the more bureaucracy implements this principle of "dehumanizing" its tasks, the more perfect it becomes. Instead of personal sympathy, favor, mercy, or gratitude by gentlemen of the old system, the modern society demands a strictly objective, humanly detached, and dispassionate "specialist" for the [administrative] apparatus. The more complex and specialized modern culture becomes, the more it demands human detachment. The bureaucratic form of administration provides all these in the most beneficial combination. (5 on pages 78–79)

But what about the other side of bureaucracy, where it stands for everything opposite of this, principally, for corruption and ineffectiveness of the highest order? Claude Lefort (51 on page 120) reproached Weber for understanding bureaucracy only as "a formal system of organization" when it should be approached as "a system of meaningful behaviour" of a certain group of people. For Lefort, the rules and impersonal relations Weber bases his analysis on are but a mask that hides "the proliferation of unproductive functions, the play of personal contacts and the madness of authority." (51 on page 109)

But it was probably Benjamin (52 on page 810) who, in his essay on Kafka, in a passing and briefest of remarks, clarified most scintillatingly the relation between these two directly opposed sides of bureaucracy. "This much is certain: of all of Kafka's creatures, the animals have the greatest opportunity for reflection. *What corruption is in the law*, anxiety is in their thinking. It messes a situation up, yet it is *the only hopeful thing about it*." (emphasis mine) What we can read from this is that corruption is the one human trait of bureaucracy; trying to lean into that side of it is the only way to navigate administrative waters with any chance of not foundering on unsurpassable formalities.

Inhumanity is what makes the bureaucratic system absurd as it spins off ever farther from what it was supposed to do; humanity is what makes it corrupt, giving it a bad name and turning it into the opposite of efficient, effective and rational manner of organisation. Abstractly, inconsiderateness, that is, impartiality of bureaucracy, is what we most desire and understand to be most fair; but in any concrete situation, *the iron-clad pursuit and performance of duty* can't work to our benefit, so we strive to soften and bend it to our will. Everyone wants an impartial and efficacious bureaucracy, but no one can escape pleading about how special their specific case is.

While otherwise seemingly directly at odds, the understanding of bureaucracy we get from reading Kafka, and the one Weber carefully laid down in his theoretical works, absolutely converge on one point: bureaucracies tend inexorably towards secrecy, insularity and irreproachability. Weber (5 on pages 116–117) observes how "nothing is more fanatically protected by bureaucracy than the concept that secrecy is necessary, an attitude which is not objectively warranted", if the information couldn't be used by competing economic enterprises or foreign governments. For young Marx also, the "general

spirit of the bureaucracy is the *secret,* the mystery, preserved within itself by the hierarchy and against the outside world by being a closed corporation." Even though bureaucratic apparatuses, specifically state ones, were supposedly created to serve society, bureaucrats seek to distance themselves and lord over the people for whose benefit the office they hold exists to begin with. Secrecy is then a welcome veil and the corrupt underbelly logical continuation of the general state where "passive obedience", "faith in authority", and "the *mechanism* of fixed and formalistic behaviour", allow individual bureaucrats to make of various state departments their "*private property*". (53 on page 47)

4. Are the mystification and goal-displacement inevitable for bureaucracies?

> *'And so, Disciple Kafka, you have conceived a horror of the organizations, property relations and economic forms within which you live?' - 'Yes.' - 'You can't find your way about them any more?' - 'No.' - 'A share certificate fills you with dread?' - 'Yes.'* Bertolt Brecht imagining a conversation between Kafka and Lao Tzu, as recorded by Walter Benjamin (1 on page 109)

Is the secrecy there inevitably so? Must a bureaucracy be a two-faced, hypocritical, mystery-mongering institution? Is that a feature or a bug? And here, if it turns out to be a bug – hell, even a vermin – that would be great news because metamorphosing society into a post-capitalist future, which wouldn't be as monstrous as the present pernicious state of things really seems to be impossible without bureaucracy.

The reason Marx was introduced here wasn't only to show how much he anticipated Weber's famous points of bureaucracy;[12] it was also because Marx provides a framework through which we will attempt to find an answer, though not in his explicit pronouncement on the subject. On that last matter, it should be noted that Marx hailed the Paris Commune – the same one which forced the hand of the German and the Austrian empires to turn more benevolent, bureaucratic and biopolitical – as supplying historical proof that, while administrative jobs would not be done away with in the revolutionary or in the resulting communist societies, bureaucracies in such setting could then finally be shorn of their insidious influence and cloak-and-dagger modes of operation by making all civil servants "elective, responsible and revocable." (54 on page 332)

Weber (5 on page 108) was aware of such ideas which found a solution in the democratisation of bureaucracy through striving "for short-term staffing of *Amt* [the government offices] by revocable election, without binding the *Amt* [the government offices] to any professional qualification" but thought that they were ultimately unresolvably conflicted with the mass character of modern societies. Another way to conceive of this conflict is Weber's fine distinction between formal and substantive rationality of economic action where the former stands for "the degree of calculation that is technologically possible for that activity" while the latter is concerned with "a value-rational standard" against which outcomes of the activities must be measure (56 on pages 172–173).

Bureaucracy in a purely formal sense tends towards a type of efficiency which makes it slip away from democratic, substantive goals of egalitarianism, equality and accountability; but democracy trying to rely only on the substantive, directly democratic and similar means of organising becomes completely inefficient incredibly soon and ends up undermining democratic institutions and goal. Max Grünberg (57 on page 152) has recently taken Weber's distinction to argue how "any communist project with hopes of success" must deftly balance between putting too much weight on either type of rationality because to do so means falling into "the traps of either technocracy or luddism, authoritarianism or economic infeasibility."

What goes for the economy goes for bureaucratic organisations. Weber (56 on page 351) is right that, ultimately, there is "only a choice between 'bureaucratisation' and the 'dilettantisation' of administration" and that, while "[t]he need for constant, firm, intensive, and calculable administration was created historically by capitalism [...] [a]ny rational socialist system would simply have to adopt it and intensify it." But how to intensify it without exacerbating and solidifying the dark side of bureaucracy, the need for furtiveness and unaccountability supposedly inherent to it?

Arguments which would claim that it is simply not possible because bureaucracy inevitably tends in that direction are very specious. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (58 on page 159) has challenged such usual ideas because in 'blaming "the system"' as unfixable, we give credence to those bureaucrats "who excuse their less laudable actions on the grounds that these were dictated by the system or by its supreme officials" which, to point to the most extreme case, was exactly "the defense argument at Nuremberg."

Someone who, nonetheless, recognised that such a trajectory for bureaucracy wasn't set in stone and unavoidable was, of all people, Theodor W. Adorno. The great decrier of the administered world was much more of a Marxist than he is usually given credit for, and was always far too dialectical a thinker not to realise that

> [a] rational and genuinely free society could do without administration as little as it could do without the division of labor itself. But all over the globe, administrations have tended under constraint towards a greater self-sufficiency and independence from their administered subjects, reducing the latter to objects of abstractly normed behavior. (59 on pages 273–274)

Adorno doesn't specify in this essay what the nature of the constraint which spurred bureaucracies to turn their backs on

[12] Marx also "beats Weber to the punch in recognizing and underscoring the pivotal role of Protestantism in the historical development of European capitalism." (55 on page 209)

societies they administer is, but from the constellation of his overall work, and among other pieces, very pointedly in his essay on Kafka, that becomes gradually clear. Adorno (60 on pages 259–260) observed that the jobs Kafka's characters have reflect how "in the era of defective capitalism, the burden of guilt is shifted from the sphere of production to the agents of circulation or to those who provide services, travelling salesmen, bank employees, waiters." Though there's no mention of bureaucrats here, they are, in fact, the best representative of this group, as Kafka, working in his Institute, which drew so much ire from the public, knew firsthand. Along with the immigrants, civil servants of various stripes are one of the ultimate, always-ready-to-use scapegoats.

That should hardly come as a shock, given that the word itself began as a term of abuse. Its originator, Gournay, was tellingly the same person who most likely came up with the phrase *laissez-faire*, not meaning that one as denigration, but an aspiration (27 on page 127). Gournay was dismayed at the French government "putting too much effort into protecting the consumer [given] 'the public must know best what suits them'" and advocated for the removal of "harmful" regulations and formalities that "tend to strangle trade," which would have the added benefit of slashing the number of clerks and converting them "from 'idle people' to 'people who work to produce' and thus 'make the State rich.'"61[13] Anna Joukovskaïa insightfully notes how "the discourse linking and opposing productive labor to administrative jobs" was there from the beginning, baked in with the word bureaucracy[61].

It was precisely this distinction between productive and unproductive labour that Adorno had in mind when he talked about shifting the burden of blame to the workers employed in the retail and service sectors. Consequently, the constraint he mentioned was one of the production in accordance with the law of value.[14] Under capitalism, which operates on this principle, only labour creating surplus value is productive. An immediate objection that gets raised – that so many other types of labour contribute indirectly, but indispensably, to realising profit, such as sales departments – misses the point. As did Pellegrino Rossi when he criticised Adam Smith for using this distinction because, according to it, the labour of, say, a magistrate would be considered unproductive, which in Rossi's view was short-sighted, because "without the magistrate's labour' the production is almost impossible." (62 on page 190)

But Marx, who took up this contrast between productive and unproductive labour from classical political economy, readily retorted that "this labour which participates indirectly in production … [is what] we call unproductive labour. Otherwise we would have to say that since the magistrate is absolutely unable to live without the peasant, therefore the peasant is an indirect producer of justice. And so on. Utter nonsense!" (62 on page 190) The concept of productive and unproductive labour remained very contentious, and even many Marxists wanted to get rid of it,[15] but Marx made it clear that in his usage, "there is no question of moral or other standpoints in the case of either one or the other kind of labour." (62 on page 26)

Moreover, it is not a type of labour that one does that makes it productive or not, but its form. The same kind of work, gardening or tailoring to stick to Marx's examples, can be performed by the same worker, but whether it is done "in the service of an industrial capitalist or on behalf of the immediate consumer" (64 on page 1045) is what determines whether they are a productive or unproductive worker (they remain wage labourers in either case). And the labour in question doesn't have to create a tangible product to be regarded as productive, either. "A schoolmaster who instructs others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who works for wages in an institution along with others, using his own labour to increase the money of the entrepreneur who owns the knowledge-mongering institution, is a productive worker." (64 on page 1044).

Once again, Kafka's professional career gives us an excellent opportunity for clarification; while his labour in Assicurazioni Generali was productive, his work at the Institute, despite being much more socially useful and valuable in a common sense of the word, was decidedly not. This allows us to circle back to our question about the bureaucracy and its insulating tendencies. As one "ethnographer of public policy management[16] has observed, 'the most basic goal of any bureaucrat or bureaucracy is not rational efficiency, but individual and organizational survival.'" (58 on page 5) So, does this bureaucratic *conatus*, this will to survive, create, of necessity, structures that are best summed up by the moniker organisational gothic[65]?

Our attempted answer and main contention is that while the law of value is in effect (which is to say capitalism and all hitherto *really existing socialisms*) bureaucratic jobs are unproductive labour, and that fact, indirectly but forcefully pressed upon bureaucracies at large by the economic system underpinning them, gnaws away at them and prompts them toward self-mystification.

[13] Parts in double quotations are direct quotes from Gournay.

[14] This is more precise than simply saying in capitalism, because in really existing socialisms with planned economies, the law of value which is the key feature of capitalism, continued to be in full effect (63 on pages 234–236).

[15] For a short and effective defence of the concept see 66 on pages 81–83. For a summary of the controversy surrounding the productive and unproductive labour in Marxism and further defence and exposition of Marx's use of it, see chapter 7 and appendix C of 67.

[16] Gerald M. Britan in *Bureaucracy and Innovation: An Ethnography of Policy Change* – cited by Herzfeld in quotation mark.

The bureaucratic apparatus of civil and public services, and even of private companies when it comes to things like customer services, have generally good and sensible goals, but they are all perched atop the economic base inimical to those goals if they don't directly facilitate profit-making. "Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines," Marx (68 on page 87) reminded in "Critique of the Gotha Programme", his comrades rushing to create a large, unified German socialist party. That doesn't mean we cannot envisage a more just society, nor that we can't attempt to put it into practice – we can – but in the medium to long term, and much more often, already in the short term, it will cease to be sustainable if the base continues to operate in the same profit-driven direction.

Given that the bureaucracies of public services in particular can never satisfactorily and completely fulfil their stated goals under capitalism, the only thing left for them to do is to find their fulfilment in self-perpetuation and their solace in adding numerous supplementary steps that put distance between them and their stated objectives. Eduard Bernstein, in his paean to evolutionary socialism (i.e. strictly parliamentary, as opposed to up-till-then dominant revolutionary kind), provides a quintessential example of this with his maxim "To me that which is generally called the ultimate aim of socialism is nothing, but the movement is everything." (69 on page 202) This is the insular, goal-displacement logic of bureaucratisation at its finest, spelt out by the most important early Marxist revisionist. For Marx (53 on page 306), it was the other way around – "communism as such is not the goal of human development, [but] the form of human society" – it is worth fighting for not for its own sake, but rather because it can best enable the expansion and flourishing of human freedom.

In organisational sociology, this dynamic we have described as bureaucracies' drive to self-mystification and insulation has been known by Robert K. Merton's (70 on page 563) term goal displacement, though, it hasn't, by and large, been linked to the underlying economic base,[17] but was mostly used to highlight "the phenomenon whereby the original goals of an organization are displaced by goals for the maintenance and enlargement of the organization and its leadership." (71 on page 251) However, what led the individual bureaucrats time and again in that direction was not specified. The weight of one's labour being unproductive in the existing economy and the precarious mediating position between individual cases and the general principles, and so prone to being scapegoated, would be those reasons, not some inherent inclination of large organisations and administrations towards sabotage of their purported aims.

[17] There are some notable exceptions like Huizinga[71]. While we arrived at our attempted answer following Marx's general economic framework and a few passing but extremely perspicacious remarks made by Benjamin and Adorno in their respective essays on Kafka, a very similar conclusion has been reached on an empirical basis and from a strictly sociological perspective by Huizinga who explained how budget cuts have led to greater goal displacement in public regulatory enforcment agencies in the Netherlands.

5. Conclusion

> *Yet it is necessary to clarify Kafka, that is to say to formulate the practicable suggestions which can be extracted from his stories*. Bertolt Brecht, as recorded by Walter Benjamin (1 on page 110)

If we don't want to leave the production and preservation of literature to chance, then we would have to organise it, and how else than bureaucratically? When Marx wrote about the difference between the productive and unproductive worker, he gave an example tailor-made for Kafka:

> Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, a writer who turns out work for his publisher in factory style is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of his own nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who produces books … at the behest of his publisher is pretty nearly a productive worker since his production is taken over by capital and only occurs in order to increase it. (64 on page 1044)

Kafka knew that literature couldn't be left to the market forces. Still, without the anonymity and the apparent democratic bottom-up possibilities of voting with one's wallet, the other alternative would be the same one he was employed in at the Accident Insurance Institute. There would have to be mediators and gatekeepers who would stand between the reading public and those who wish to be writers.

In his last finished story, "Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People", Kafka took up directly the question of how an individual can justify being a writer before society. Or in other words, who gets to be an artist, to have it as a profession? Who is allowed to live off of it? Who can determine what is good or bad art? Is someone who wants to fanatically pursue the arts depriving society of anything useful they as individuals may provide? Or as the anonymous mouse chronicle which tells the story has put it: "[...] Josefine has fought to be excused from all work in consideration of her song; she expects to be relieved of the cares of earning her daily bread and everything else connected with our struggle for existence and—presumably—shift the burden to the whole populace." (39 on page 104)

But even before this swang song of his – which in keeping with Kafka's humorous self-deprecatory attitude had to come from something as low as mice – we can read much more extensively in his two worlds of the court and the castle, not only the expression of the metaphysical aspects of writing as Corngold brought to light but similarly, of the institution of

literature in its specific materiality that the sociology of literature teaches us about (72–74).

If Albert Camus urges us to imagine Sisyphus happy (75 on page 111),[18] Kafka dares us to envisage his bureaucracies and the people that are part of them as capable of enabling, promoting and sustaining great, uncompromising literature. Inhumanness of writing – writing unbeholden to niceties and not in conformity with the established expectations – together with inhumanness of the future institution of literature, which wouldn't be partial and corrupt, this double inhumanness would be widely possible only if we get rid of phantasmic, alienating commodity fetishism in the sphere of production. It is only on a humane economic basis that the creative, inspiring inhumaneness can sustainably spring.

But that would only be a first step, tantamount to having all the scenes from *The Trial* and *The Castle* take place in less makeshift, shabby and dilapidated settings. Much more would be needed to avoid the particular filth and squalor that emanates from these corrupt, petty worlds. Kafka held out hope for this, at least insofar as virtually all of his characters are able "to argue long, ingeniously and convincingly." (76 on page 71)

Suppose the institution of literature really gets entrusted into the hands of these characters and the shadowy organisations that run their lives. For all the screamingly obvious shortcomings of such a set-up, in that case, we'll at least be dealing with the interpreters of the first order and the excessive formalism and pedantry; the unending poring over papers and writing of reports; all the enervating effects bureaucracies give rise to – could be put to best possible use.

[18] For Camus's take on Kafka, see his essay "Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka" (75 on pages 112–125).

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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Dear Authors,

Thanks for the submission. There's a genuinely interesting paper here, especially the way you keep two strands in play (Kafka's day job and bureaucracy-as-form) and try to show how insurance techniques bleed into narrative structure. To get this to publishable strength, the big claims need to be stated more plainly and backed more precisely.

You've chosen a strong center of gravity: Kafka's role at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. The link you draw from administrative practice (classification, files, legibility) to "two-worlds" narrative architecture is the most original part. The sections on the Institute's public image and "civil servant in all but name" also add helpful texture.

The revisions required
Say clearly what's new, right away.
In the first page, spell out in two or three sentences what this paper adds (e.g., a concrete mapping from statistical bodies/risk techniques to macro-form; the idea that certain "good" bureaucratic capacities are preconditions for literary autonomy). Circle back to those same sentences in the final paragraph.

Add a short "how I'm reading this" paragraph.
A few lines on approach will help non-specialists: what evidence you use (archival/biographical, period journalism, theory, close reading) and how you weigh it across the two strands.

Back the Alfred Weber In der Strafkolonie link.
Keep the claim, but show 2–3 concrete correspondences (Weber metaphor and machine element or procedure in the story). Mark what is certain versus plausible, and cite precisely.

Pin down institutional facts with exact sources.
Please give authoritative references (edition/page or archival) for:
• the Institute's coverage (e.g., ~33,000 enterprises);
• the Institute's legal status (semi-governmental) and Kafka's rank/pay grade;
• contemporary reception (e.g., "most hated institutions");
• the Marschner wartime detail.

Make the "infrastructure of literature" claim do real work.
The coda is intriguing but rushed. Anchor it in one or two frameworks (e.g., Bourdieu on the field and state supports; policy histories of cultural funding). Be concrete about which administrative capacities (record-keeping, standard procedure, auditability) map onto which formal features in Kafka.

Keep theory tied to scenes; trim scope drift.
The Deleuze & Guattari architecture and the "old vs. new bureaucracy" contrast are most persuasive when nailed to moments in The Castle (e.g., Barnabas/Olga's office description, the divided desk, the large chamber). Cut ~10–15% of the general genealogy and use that space for close readings that move your thesis forward.

Acknowledge counter-literatures.
Add one short paragraph situating your synthesis alongside alternatives (Luhmann on decision premises; James C. Scott on legibility; David Graeber on the "utopia of rules"). A few sentences are enough—show that you know the terrain and why your route adds something.

Explain "civil servant in all but name."
A note will do: the Austro-Hungarian administrative categories, the Institute's exact status, the Dienstpragmatik campaign (names/dates/associations). This heads off avoidable pedantry.

Style and housekeeping (small but important)

Use Habsburg (keep "Hapsburg" only inside quotations), keep diacritics, and hyphenate Austro-Hungarian consistently.

Italicize primary titles (In der Strafkolonie, The Trial, The Castle).

Identify the editions/translators the first time you quote Kafka and keep page references consistent; block-quote longer passages and credit translators.

Give the full bibliographic trail for Kafka's 1911 newspaper piece ("Workmen's Insurance and the Employers"), periodical, date, pagination, or where it's reprinted.

Trim repeated lines about the Institute's reception so you don't say the same thing twice.

Add a one-sentence road map at the start of each main section and stitch the two strands together before the conclusion.

Quick final checks before you resubmit

Abstract then Intro then Conclusion: name your one-to-two original claims in the abstract, promise them clearly in the first 2–3 paragraphs, and echo them in the last paragraph.

Weber link: show at least two textual correspondences and label certainty vs plausibility.

Scope control: trim the genealogy; add scene-based readings.

Counter-readings: one compact paragraph (Luhmann/Scott/Graeber).

Define Dienstpragmatik once

Unify citation style across the paper.

With these revisions, the paper will read like the contribution it wants to be: a concrete, historically grounded account of how administrative technique shapes literary form, and why that matters in Kafka's case.

With thanks, and looking forward to the revision,

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Bureaucracy; street-level bureaucrats; public policy implementation; AI in management; behavioral public management.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of

expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.