

Searching for Kafka

Don Flynn

The Anatomist of Power: Franz Kafka and the Critique of Authority

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Black Rose Books.

This brief book sets out a robust claim of the part of a dedicated anarchist to have Kafka as a comrade, with the particular aim of demolishing Max Brod's suggestion that his great friend was a 'non-political writer'

Despiniadis picks through the texts of his novels and short stories, augmented with references to his diary and surviving letters to reveal a Kafka with unquestionable anarchist sympathies and an outlook on the world that was fully apart of that philosophy.

The critique of the insanities of bureaucratic power is obviously central to works like *The Castle* and *The Trial*. The intensity of his vision of corridors, waiting rooms, minor officials and incomprehensible proceedings that make up the subject of these novels makes it unlikely that Kafka's stance was a generalised alienation from the world, more to do with religious feeling than a political outlook.

A second manifestation of alienated power which is a common theme in anarchist thinking is that of the patriarchal family. Kafka's writing on this form of authority stretches across three principal works, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Judgement* and the first chapter from *Amerika* which started life as a short story entitled *The Stoker*. All depict troubled father-son relationships which Kafka experienced in his own childhood.

The final component of Kafka's analysis of power is the compulsion to strive for the approval of the established social order, best illustrated in *The Metamorphosis*. The central character, Samsa, is crippled by his transformation into a giant insect but it seems that, in the first instance, his mortification comes from his inability to attend to the obligations of his employment. The family is deeply implicated in this fall from grace, since Samsa has to forego his role as the main breadwinner of his household. But his anguish is intensified by the loss of his ability to go out in the world and be seen as the sort of citizen who might win the approval of his society.

Having read the novels and short stories it seems surprising that the view of Kafka as a non-political writer could have held sway over the years. Analysed as an 'anatomist of power', this book goes to the heart of his absorption in the detail of human subjection. Alienation is our lot because patriarchal capitalist society that grinds people down through its mastery of the power of castles, trials, and ultimately, the family.

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