

ADDITIONAL PUBLICATIONS

Marxism in a Bug-Shell

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Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," written in Germany in 1915 amidst the first World War, is a story about a traveling salesman named Gregor Samsa who finds himself transformed into a bug overnight. Kafka, being heavily influenced by Marxist theory, builds this story around a proletariat, or working class, family that experiences oppression as a result of their class standing. The parents of the household, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, represent the lumpen-proletariat, or the underclass that does not recognize or acknowledge their own class placement and so take advantage of other people within their class. The Samsas shamelessly take advantage of their son Gregor's success, and once he is no longer of use to them and dies, they turn to their daughter Grete to support them by seeking a way to find her a husband that will care for the family. Throughout this story, Kafka shows the Samsas lack of regard for the humanity of their children to make a statement about class struggle and the psychology of alienation, to ultimately show the necessity of breaking out of a life of exploitation.

Kafka's "Metamorphosis" begins with the waking of Gregor, and his immediate awareness that he is an insect. Gregor, rather than wondering how he transformed into a bug, worries that he slept through his alarm and will thus be late for work. Gregor Samsa's superior, the chief clerk, then arrives at Samsa's home when Gregor does not report to work for the first time in five years. Even Gregor is shocked by this, exclaiming that "the smallest omission at once gave rise to the greatest suspicion" (Kafka, 182), as the company expects all its working-class to devote their lives to the success of the company even through sickness and adversity. Marxist critics, as argued by Straus, read Kafka's "Metamorphosis" as a fable that represents "tyrannical bureaucracy," "class warfare between appropriators and expropriators," and "conversion of workers ... into dehumanized things whose labor is exploited" (654). These representations are confirmed as the chief clerk represents the bourgeoisie, or the capitalist class who own the majority of society's wealth and means of production,

and Samsa the proletariat. Kafka intentionally includes the chief clerk admonishing Gregor to show the oppression that the working-class faces, as the bourgeois chief considers himself so much higher than Gregor that at the sound of Gregor's voice he claims "That was no human voice" (Kafka, 184).

Kafka's choice of subject for the metamorphosis is symbolic of the view that the bourgeoisie has of the proletariat, as he intentionally chooses an insect, or in some translations vermin, for Gregor's transformation -- a pest that is met with feelings of disgust. Kafka creates a literal character transformation into a bug to imply that the working class are just as good as bugs to the upper class. Gregor's family sees their own son as an insect as well, showing not only class struggle between classes, but also within classes. Gregor's lumpen-proletariat parents are devoid of class consciousness and do not see themselves as being on the same social level of others within the underclass, causing them to reject their son's humanity once he is no longer working and providing. Gregor's father views himself as the capitalist employer, as "the money Gregor brought home every month -- he had kept only a few dollars for himself -- had never been quite used up and now amounted to a small capital sum" and the capital sum, being not kept by Gregor as he keeps little for himself, is expropriated by his father (Kafka, 192). This visual representation of class struggle forms the base of Kafka's argument, as class struggle leads to alienation and, eventually, to the loss of one's humanity.

Upon Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug, he immediately experiences alienation from his parents. In Marxist theory, the concept of alienation is "a many-dimensional expression of psychological dissociation and powerlessness," and "is a critique of experienced realities of oppression by the state, bureaucracy, ideology, and the organization of work and everyday life" within advanced industrial societies (Horton and Moreno, 1). It is a critique of domination, representing "class struggle *against* the workers' movement" (Horton and Moreno, 2, *original italics*), as alienation occurs within the working class as a separation of the worker from his labor. The labor produced by

the worker has power over the worker himself, in that the work produced determines the means it is produced by, as opposed to the worker having power over what he produces. Kafka portrays this concept by creating a family that values their son's work, not their son himself. Gregor is then alienated and treated as a separate, lower entity from the labor he once produced.

"The Metamorphosis" demonstrates a manifestation of the psychological impact that alienation can have on a worker. Gregor's parents lock him in his room, and his sister Grete is the only person to go into his room at any time until months after his transformation. Because of their constant disregard for Gregor, his mind begins to change. In the beginning of the story, Gregor maintains his selfless thoughts as a vermin, hiding himself in order to "help the family to bear the inconvenience he was bound to cause them in his present condition" (Kafka, 189). Gregor would even "rather starve than draw [his sister's] attention to the fact" that he did not like the food she was bringing to him (Kafka, 190). In addition to his selfless thoughts, he remains quite active as a bug after his transformation, emerging from his room several times and finding satisfaction in crawling around on ceilings and furniture. However, his family lacks compassion and imprisons Gregor inside his bedroom, removing furniture and later using Gregor's own space as their junk storage room. Their inattention causes Gregor to lose what happiness he has left, impacting him both physically and psychologically. Gregor, who once was active, now "would lie motionless for hours," "eating hardly anything" (Kafka, 202). These changes in Gregor's behavior display the negative effects of alienation, and how it impacts one psychologically and can destroy a person. It is not until Gregor's family starts treating him like a bug that he begins to act like one.

However, Gregor attempts to maintain his humanity. According to Marxist theory, alienation is experienced by the proletariat worker in four distinctive ways: alienation of the worker from the product of their work, from the act of production, from other workers, and from their species-self. Gregor experiences all four types of alienation,

resulting in a physical transformation to show the extent of his alienation from his own species, without even the capability to continue his human ways. The idea of human self-alienation "always implies the individual's estrangement (Entfremdung) from his humanity or 'human species being,' i.e., from the individual's membership in the human species. The individual is estranged from himself insofar as he is alienated from his essential nature as a human being" (Sokol, 215). Despite Gregor's self-alienation, he has resilience to hold onto his humanity and desires to break away from exploitation by fighting against the first principle of alienation. This way of alienation in Marxism is an alienation of the worker from their work, as they do not get to put their own personal touch into their work nor keep it.

When Gregor wakes as an insect, one of the first things he observes is "the cut out of an illustrated magazine" that he had "put into a pretty gilt frame" (Kafka, 179). This is an example of his own work that he personalizes and keeps for himself, defying conformity that comes with industrialized work. The only genuinely human relation in the labor process, which is an objectification of human powers, is when the worker sees their product as an expression of their own essence. In this sense, Gregor attempts to protect his own essence when he clings to his artwork while his family is removing the furniture from his room. Gregor protects his self-expression "which was entirely hidden beneath him," and makes sure that it is "going to be removed by nobody" (Kafka, 196). Gregor's insistence to protect his own work shows his desperation to maintain his humanity, as the "freedom of doing one's work for its own sake, for the joy it affords the worker, is the factor that, according to Marx, distinguishes human from animal productivity" (Sokol 216). This human versus animal contrast is also seen in the subject of Gregor's personal work, as the picture he framed and protects is that of a woman "with a fur cap on and a fur stole" and whose forearm is vanished by a "huge fur muff," representing animal characteristics (Kafka, 179). Gregor has an artistic sensibility that he tries to develop but cannot due to his obligation to society's class order and its mechanical treatment of workers. The fact that Gregor's personal artistic subject is

somewhat inhuman shows that even in attempted individuality, Gregor is limited to the same thinking towards others as has been imposed upon him.

Franz Kafka crafts a story of a working-class family led by parents who share a lack of regard to their children's humanity, and who are oppressed by a bourgeois character, to stress the class struggles both between classes and within classes. He uses this base of class struggle to introduce the concept of alienation, to ultimately stress the psychological effects it can have on the one being alienated. Kafka shows, through use of his character Gregor, how one can be complacent with their own exploitation, but once they realize how the world views them, they begin to see themselves as the vermin the upper class view them to be and slowly deteriorate. This serves to show the necessity of noticing and fighting exploitation, as it can eventually lead to your demise.

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