POLITICAL ALLUSIONS IN THREE WORKS BY FRANZ KAFKA

Bahram Meghdadi
Tehran University

Franz Kafka could not participate actively in any political organization in Prague because of his linguistic, cultural and religious alienation. Although he had some inclinations towards socialism and his awareness of the dialectic methods of socialism can be noticed in some of his works such as *America*, "in the Penal Colony," and "The Great Wall of China," he was not active in any political party. Since Kafka seldom expressed his politics in overt political acts, we must look to his writings for clues to his political thought. As Franz Baumer has stated:

> During his first year at work, Kafka also took his political bearings. He attended election rallies and listened to the speeches of the National Democrats, the Socialists, and the National Socialist Party.* While he never became active in political organizations, he was an attentive listener.

> He also attended the meetings of "Klub Mladych" (Young Men's Club). Czech writers were also members of this anarchic group whose program was pacifist and anticlerical. It was dissolved in October 1910 by the Prague satraps ' for propagating antimilitaristic and other ideas dangerous to the state '.[1]

Kafka's interest in socialism developed during his high school years. Hugo Bergman, one of his classmates, has reported that at the age of sixteen Kafka expressed his political tendencies by putting a red carnation, which at that time in Europe was a symbol for socialism,[2] on the lapel of his jacket. While many critics have ignored the impact of Czech culture on Kafka, we should bear in mind that Czechoslovakia had been under the subjugation of the Hapsburgs for three hundred years. The Hapsburgs were known to be bureaucratic,dictatorial, reactionary, feudalistic and fanatically religious. They were extremely ambitious and power oriented and Czechoslovakia (or Bohemia, as it was formerly known) was the linch pin of their power base, for, as Bismarck noted, whoever rules Bohemia will eventually rule Europe.

The Austrians not only imposed Catholicism on the Czech people but they also forced them to communicate in German. During this period the Catholics took charge of Prague University and most high schools in the country but the Czechs fought to preserve their language, literature and culture and did their best to resist the cultural influences of the ruling nation and there is no doubt that Kafka felt these attempts at cultural preservation to be political or that he felt them deeply: in his short story " In the Penal Colony," the condemned man does not understand the language of the officer because the latter speaks French. The symbolism was clear. Nor was there any doubt as to where Kafka stood in this cultural rivalry. As Kate Flores has stated:

> The ' kingdom of Bohemia ' which in 1918 became Czechoslovakia after three centuries under Hapsburg rule was the battleground par excellence of the German-Czech struggle. Like Joyce, Kafka belonged to

> a strongly nationalistic minority group while writing in the major tongue of the oppressing nation. Kafka sympathized with the Czech resistance movement which before the first World War sought to establish an autonomous Bohemian state within the Austro-Hungarian empire. While never politically active, he studied the Czech language and literature and attended mass meetings and discussions.[3]

The social corruption of the Hapsburg rule is reflected in some of Kafka's works. In *The Trial* it is symbolized by the corruption of the court. In *The Castle*, the corruption in the castle authorities, which we see by their promiscuity, their forcing the women of the village to have illegal sexual affairs with them, their total neglect of all moral principles, and their decaying bureaucratic system, is a not-so-oblique reference to the political corruption of Kafka's time. Kafka's message in both novels is that a corrupted government, symbolized by the court in *The Trial* and the castle authorities in *The Castle*, should be overthrown and that if people do not attempt to overthrow the corrupted government, they themselves will be destroyed. As can be seen in both novels, the major protagonists eventually meet their deaths.

Political allusions are obvious in *America*, where Kafka criticizes westren capitalistic society which he feels destroys an individual through dehumanized economic competition. Kafka harshly criticizes class differences in this novel through his contrast of the life of capitalists and stockholders with that of the working class. The mechanized and industrial society of America in which an individual is absorbed into the melting pot of a bourgeois society is also criticized here. As the primitive man was victimized by nature, modern man is victimized by the society in which he must live. Everyone who lives in an organized society must abide by all the rules and regulations that have been determined by that society. In a capitalistic society, man is like a cog in a wheel and therefore is easily replaceable, as we see Karl Rossman, the protagonist of *America* being replaced immediately after he leaves his job at the elevator for just a few minutes. In such an organized society an individual

has no will of his own but is helpless under social pressures beyond his control. In *America* we see the conflict between "individual" and "social" life. Everyone who lives in a bourgeois society must sacrifice his private life so that he can have a successful social life. Everyone must suffer in such a system, a theme which also runs through The *Metamorphoses*, where a human being prefers to be a cockroach, rather that a man, in order to escape from such pressures. Even Karl's uncle, who is economically prosperous, worries about his position in society to the point that he rejects his nephew because he could not follow the norm.

In order to comprehend *America* better, we must investigate Kafka's interests in socialism and his participation in such political organizations as "Klub Mladych." In his youth, and while he was a student at the University of Prague, Kafka showed some inclinations towards socialistic movements. Although he never officially registered in any party, deep in his heart he resented the policy of power being used unjustly. *America*, of course, is about the injustices that exist in a capitalistic society and since Kafka's socialist tendencies were strongest while he was writing this novel, the last chapter, in which Karl Rossmann reaches the promised salvation, must indicate the Ideal Society that the socialists believed in.

During the early twentieth century, for various political and social reasons, America was thought to be the Promised Land. In *America*, this Promised Land has been reduced to an Inferno, in which its statue of liberty holds the sword of aggressiveness and capitalistic competitions, instead of a torch. Thus, America, in this novel, is a Paradise Lost, or a land in which no one can survive. Martin Greenberg has described Kafka's America thus:

> The actual America that Karl Rossmann finds himself adrift in is torn by ' futile strife ' and is in no way ' better off ' than the Old World. It is a capitalistic America divided between the swollen rich in their great houses and hotels and the suffering poor damned in tenement rooms.[4]

Gustav Janouch in his *Conversations with Kafka* reports that once he

showed Kafka a book with illustrations by George Grosz. One of the illustrations showed a fat man in a top hat squatting on the money of the poor. After seeing it, Kafka said to Janouch:

> '...The fat man in the top hat sits on the necks of the poor. That is correct. But the fat man is Capitalism and that is not quite correct. The fat man oppresses the poor man within the conditions of a given system. But he is not the system itself. He is not even its master. On the contrary, the fat man also is in chains, which the picture does not show. The picture is not complete. For that reason it is not good. Capitalism is a system of relationships, which go from inside to out, from outside to in, from above to below, and from below to above. Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul.[5]

In *America*, the Natural Theater of Oklahoma is the only safe place for Karl to take refuge from this oppressive system. In the last chapter Karl, after reading an advertisement regarding the equal employment opportunities in this theater, decides to find a job there. This theater is like a paradise to Karl, who was tormented by living in the bourgeois society of America. But the Natural Theater was different from the capitalist American society. It was also basically an illusory and surrealistic land created by Kafka's imagination. It does not accept only professional artists. Therefore, everyone, regardless of color or other reasons for being a social minority, could be admitted. This is why Karl does not show his true identity there: he doesn't have to. The Natural Theater is not only free from capitalism but also from all contrasts that may oppress an individual. Since complete freedom exists in this place, it may reflect Kafka's views of an Ideal Society; a kind of classless society where no one competes and every individual has a role according to his capabilities.

The impact of World War I and the terror which it had created in the world is reflected in "In The Penal Colony." In a letter which Kafka wrote to his editor, Kurt Wolff, on October 11, 1916, regarding this story, he stated

that it was a reflection of the horrifying conditions prevalent in his time. Kafka, in this story, discusses how everything, including death, had become mechanized during World War I and how the whole society was dehumanized.

While Kafka was writing "In The Penal Colony," not only the war but also the oppression of African countries by Europe was publicly discussed. For instance, the French influence in Guinea was so widely discussed that even a subjective writer like Kafka could not refrain from being involved in it. In this story, an explorer, who symbolizes an outstanding diplomat from a neutral country, protests against the method of administrating law and the consequent torture and murder of political prisoners. Regarding this explorer, Kafka states, "He was neither a member of the Penal Colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged."[6]

The officer, whose duty is to torture the victims, decides to express his loyalty to the torture machine and its inventor (the old commandant) by going under the machine in order to prevent the explorer from forcing the New Commandant to abolish this method of applying law. He lifts the condemned man from the machine and gives it the statement, "Be Just!" so that the machine will tatoo it on his own body. But when he goes under the machine, the explorer sees the machine, which apparently worked well when the condemned man was under it, suddenly go out of order and kill the officer in a horrifying manner in front of his eyes.

Although Kafka never explicitly states the locale of this story, he does give various clues. The numerous references to fishing, cane chairs, and the nearby sea, all suggest a coastal area, probably in Africa, considering the relationship between African colonies and their European rulers at the time the story was written (October, 1914). Likewise, the condemned man, who is not even allowed to defend himself, probably represents these subjugated lands, which had lost their own identities: "...the condemned man looked so like a submissive dog that one might have thought he could be left to run free on the surrounding hills and would only need to be whistled for when the execution was due to begin."[7]

Although the setting of the story is tropical, the officer comes from the

colder climates of western Europe, a fact which is manifested in his clothes. Kafka alludes many times to the unbearable heat of the tropics, "...the glare of the sun in the shadeless valley was altogether too storng, it was difficult to collect one's thoughts...."[8] Yet the explorer notes that the officer's "...uniforms are tod heavy for the tropics...."[9] to which the officer replies "...but they mean home to us; we don't want to forget about home...."[10]

Similarly, the language differences between the officer and the condemned man indicate that each belongs to a different country. "...the officer was speaking French, and certainly neither the soldier nor the prisoner understood a word of French...."[11] Therefore, we can infer that the condemned man belongs to one of the countries colonized by France, and his "blubber lips"[12] may indicate that he could have been an African.

Since the officer himself used to obey the Old Commandant, the latter might represent the forces which supervise oppression in a subjugated country. The Old Commandant was the designer of all such plans, consequently the officer admits that "...the organization of the whole penal colony is his work...."[13] and the Old Commandant's successor could symbolize a leader who has been elected by the oppressed people, but who cannot attain his goals because "...even with a thousand new schemes in his head, [he] would find it impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come...."[14]

Although the New Commandant has apparently accepted the agents of the oppressing nation, secretly he tries to limit their influences. As the officer comments, "...The New man has certainly shown some inclination to interfere with my judgments, but so far I have succeeded in fending him off and will go on succeeding...."[15] The New Commandant also expects to use the explorer in his plans, for the officer claims, "...Although he is powerful enough to take measures agianst me, he doesn't dare to do it yet, but he certainly means to use your verdict against me, the verdict of an illustrious foreigner..."[16]

The explorer is hopeful that some day the New Commandant would bring in, "...although gradually, a new kind of procedure which the officer's narrow mind was incapable of understanding...."[17] The New Commandant is against the torture machine and has consequently limited its budget. In contrast, in

the reign of the former Commandant, all its spare parts were available to the officer; now if the officer applies for even a new strap, they ask for the broken old strap as evidence, "...and even the new strap takes ten days to appear and then is of shoddy material and not much good...."[18]

The inhabitants of the Penal Colony have not been so oppressed that they would never be able to rebel. Because of their constant protests, the agents of oppression have gradually lost their power. Therefore, they cannot treat the people of the colony as ruthlessly as before. As the officer confesses, "...Nowadays the machine can no longer wring from anyone a sigh louder than the felt gag can stifle...."[19] Also, the officer's inhuman methods of torture are now under attack, and the officer realizes that, "...conferences are already being held in the Commandant's office from which I am excluded...."[20]

The machine could be a symbol of the government which is controlled by oppressive agents and therefore performs their cruel commands, but we notice that there is always a problem when it is working. This, in turn could refer to the revolutionary forces which create problems in the function of the government. Whenever the officer sees these troublemakers, he immediately fires them, just as he immediately replaces the worn out parts in the machine. In spite of all his attempts, a "discordant noise"[21] spoils the working of the machine because a wheel in the Designer (the part of the machine that designs the tatoo) is always creaking.

When the officer throws himself under the machine in order to express his faith in it and in the former Commandant who invented it, we realize how the machine works perfectly in order to destroy the officer and all the factors which support his policy. "...The explorer had been staring at it quite a while before he remembered that a wheel in the Designer should have been creaking; but everything was quiet, not even the slightest hum could be heard."[22] The wheels, which represent the agents of the oppressive forces, are immediately expelled from their duties as soon as their leader is killed:

> Slowly the lid of the Designer rose up and then clicked wide open. The teeth of a cogwheel showed themselves and rose higher, soon the

> whole wheel was visible, it was as if some enormous force were squeezing the Designer so that there was no longer room for the wheel....[23]

There are many such wheels and this may imply that the oppressors were quite influential in the government of the Penal Colony:

> ...But a second wheel was already rising after it, followed by many others, large and small and indistinguishably minute, the same thing happened to all of them, at every moment one imagined the Designer must now really be empty, but another complex of numerous wheels was already rising into sight, falling down, trundling along the sand and lying flat....[24]

At the end of the story we see the poor people living in the Penal Colony who have endured such heavy social and economic pressures that they have gradually become completely poverty stricken, "...They led the explorer right up to the back wall, where guests were sitting at a few tables. They were apparently dock laborers, strong men with short, glistening, full black beards. None had a jacket, their shirts were torn, they were poor, humble creatures...."[25]

Eventually, the soldier and the condemned man prefer to leave their country with the explorer because they no longer have hope there. They have been confronted with the bitter reality that their only hope, i.e. the New commandant, is helpless because the oppressing nation does not give him a chance. Therefore, he cannot save his people and they can never have a government of their own. The best solution for them is to leave.

Kafka also seems to be involved with social problems in "The Great Wall of China," which resembles an essay rather that a story. The main theme of this story or essay is the lack of communication between the Emperor in Peking and the masses of Chinese people throughout the country. The narrator does not know why the Great Wall has been constructed in a piecemeal fashion, but he presumes that the reason was to prevent the people

from getting bored with the construction of one long wall. He is aware that the people of China have been submerged in ignorance,but since they are used to their condition, they do not protest. For instance, they still presume that long dead emperors are still alive but the truth is that the emperors never existed in the first place.

In "The Great Wall of China," the Chinese Empire may represent the Austrian Empire, which had oppressed the people of Czechoslovakia, and the Emperor may be an allusion to Franz Joseph I, the leader of the Hapsburgs. We should remember that Kafka wrote this story in 1918 (only six years before his death), the same year that Czechoslovakia gained its independence and managed to prevent Austria from intervening in her internal affairs. In this story Kafka criticizes the Chinese Emperor (and thus the Austrian Emperor):

> ... It is true that the basic responsibility for it [the lack of communication between the Emperor and his people] lies with the government, which in this most ancient empire on earth has been unable or else too preoccupied with other things to develop imperial rule into an institution of sufficient clarity for it to be immediately and continuously effective right to the furthermost frontiers of the land....[26]

The Czechs, who had lost their independence through the Thirty Years War, (about three hundred years ago), always tried to achieve it again. There had been many attempts to overthrow the dominance of the reactionary Hapsburgs in the nineteenth century, and many Czech political leaders were quite active outside of Czechoslovakia. The most influential among them was Thomas G. Massaryk, who openly protested against the dictatorial and oppressive rule of Austria. Massryk succeeded in publishing his manifesto in the United States on November 14, 1915, which marked the first time the Czechs opposed Austrian dominance openly outside Czechoslovakia in order to gain their freedom. Eventually the Czechs succeeded and United States morally supported the Czech uprising of May 29, 1918. France was first to

recognize the new government of Czechoslovakia on June 29, 1918. The United Kingdom also recognized Czechoslovakia on August 9 of the same year as a united nation whose army was fighting against the influences of Austria, Hungary and Germany. Finally, the United States officially recognized the new government on September 3 of the same year, and consequently the Czechs managed to release themselves from Austrian interference in their internal affairs.

In "The Great Wall of China," Kafka refers to the Emperor's malevolence and the rebellions going on in the country against him. He also finds it ridiculous that the Great Wall has been constructed to satisfy the ambition of the emperors, not for the benefit of the commn people. Because the wall has been constructed in a piecemeal fashion, the peoples of the north can still attack the nation:

> And for that reason no impartial observer can believe that the high command was not also capable of overcoming it, if it had seriously wished to, the difficulties that stood in the way of building the wall continuously. One is forced to conclude, therefore, that the command deliberately chose the system of piecemeal construction. But piecemeal construction was only a makeshift and was inexpedient. So one is forced to conclude that the command willed something inexpedient. Strange conclusion, indeed....[27]

Therefore, the men have to leave their home towns, their parents, their weeping wives and children and, because the high command has willed so, go to the farthest corners of their country and participate in the construction of a wall which offers them no protection. But the emperor is totally unaware of their problems because he is immersed in his megalomanic dreams.

The emperor has started a nation-wide propaganda campaign to persuade people to participate in the construction of the wall. He has allotted all the country's natural resources to this purpose and even utilizes the people's religious beliefs, "...They saw forests being felled to provide scaffolding for the

wall, mountains being hammered into blocks of stone, in the holy places they heard the chants of the faithful praying for the wall's completion...."[28] The emperor is totally alienated from the common people because his system of government requires such a condition; as we see in the story the emperor's messenger can never give his message to the common people:

> There is a parable which expresses this relationship well. The emperor, so it is told, has sent a message expressly to you, his solitary wretch of a subject, the insignificant shadow that has fled from the imperial sun into the furthest distanced; expressly to you the emperor has sent a message from his death-bed. He made the messenger kneel by his bed and whispered the message to him; so much store did he set by it that he had it repeated in his ear. Then with a nod he confirmed the accuracy of the words. And before all the spectators of his death -- every obstructing wall is torn down and on the wide and loftily sweeping staircases there stand in a ring the great princes of the empire -- before all these he dispatched his messenger. Immediately the messenger set out on his way, a powerful, an indefatigable man, a swimmer without equal; striking out now with one arm, now with the other, he cleaves a path through the throng; if he meets with resistance he points to his breast, which bears the symbol of the sun, and he makes progress too, with incomparable ease. But the throng of people is so great, there is no end to their habitations; if he could reach open country how fast would he fly, and soon you would no doubt hear the majestic hammering of his fists on your door. But instead of that, how vainly he wears out his strength; he is still only forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace, never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that, nothing would be gained; down the stairs he would have to fight his way; and if he succeeded in that, nothing would be gained; the courts would have to be traversed, and after the courts the second outer palace; and again stairs and courts; and again a palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate -- but never, never can

> that happen -- the capital city would still lie before him, crammed to the rooftops with all its dregs. No one can force his way through here, and least of all with a message from a dead man to a shadow. But for your part you sit at your window and dream of it when evening falls.[29]

The death of the emperor may symbolize the end of Austrain dominance in Czechoslovakia. As we see in the above passage, the long distance which separates the emperor from his people can never be traversed. This chasm plus the suppression of the people by their emperor eventually leads to a revolution:

> ...The nature of man, flighty in its essence, made like the swirling dust, can abide no bondage; if it fetters itself it will soon begin to tear wildly at the fetters, rip all asunder -- the wall, the binding chain and tiself -- and scatter them to the four quarters of heaven.[30]

The chinese people, after having been suppressed for so long, reach a point where they cannot endure any more. therefore, they rebel against all oppressive forces and free the nation. In Czechoslovakia, the same thing happened.

FOOTNOTES

* It had no connection and nothing in common with Hitler's Party, trans.

1. Franz Baumer, *Franz Kafka*, trans. Abraham Farbstein (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971) p. 62.
2. Klaus Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka* (Bern: Francke, 1958), p. 62.
3. Kate Flores, "Biographical Note," in *The Kafka Problem,* ed. Angel Flores, (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1963), p. 7.
4. Martin Greenberg, *The Terror of Art: Kafka and Modern Literature,* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968), p. 100.
5. Guastav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc., 1953), p. 86.
6. Franz Kafka, *In The Penal colony,* trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1976), p. 206.
7. Ibid., p. 191.
8. Ibid., p. 193.
9. Ibid., p. 192.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 194.
12. Ibid., p. 197.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 198.
16. Ibid., p. 211.
17. Ibid., p. 199.
18. Ibid., p. 206.

19. Ibid., p. 209.
20. Ibid., p. 208.
21. Ibid., p. 209.
22. Ibid., p. 222.
23. Ibid., p. 223.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 226.
26. Franz Kafka, *Shorter Works: Volume I,* trans. Malcom Pasley (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), p. 74.
27. Ibid., p. 68.
28. Ibid., p. 65.
29. Ibid., pp. 71-72.
30. Ibid., p. 67.