

On Kafka's The Metamorphosis

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JOSHUA FENLON, JUN 21 2013

The Metamorphosis: Is this fable “revolting” in a political sense?

To revolt, in a political sense, means to rebel against control. According to Karl Marx, the structure of capitalism causes the individual worker to play a minor role in the entire capitalist system.[i] Consequently, the worker feels no true worth or attachment to his work, or the “alien” products of it.[ii] In Kafka’s fable, *The Metamorphosis*, when Gregor Samsa wakes to discover that he has transformed into a “monstrous insect”, he finds himself “helplessly” struggling to manoeuvre his new form. [iii] It first appears as if his body is behaving contrary to his expectations and is revolting against his control. Prior to his transformation, as a human worker, Gregor represents a cog in the capitalist machine. In his attempt to financially provide for his family Gregor becomes trapped in his role as a travelling salesman, “a mere tool of the chief, spineless and stupid”. [iv] In his original human form, Gregor is a representation of the insect he later becomes, a worker within a capitalist nest. The nineteenth century theories of evolution and degeneration resulted in people being susceptible to the notion of the “animal within” human beings. [v] The idea that people evolved from animals, but could also regress and lose certain capabilities that distinguished them from animals, left mankind appearing closer to nature. As a human, Gregor has a small, unfulfilling job within the larger capitalist system. This illustrates Gregor operating in a similar way to an ant or termite worker, playing a specific, limited role for the benefit of its society. In this respect, Gregor’s body does not revolt; it merely becomes the manifestation of the insect mentality which capitalism forces upon his mind. Gregor represents the reverse of Marxist alienation. This is because his “self” does not remain detached from his labour.[vi] Gregor’s body becomes a representation of the role which his work requires, an insect working for the good of the structure in which he functions. Gregor’s body conforms to the capitalist system he is part of by morphing into the insect he had already mimicked in work. Thus, despite Gregor’s discomfort with his new form,[vii] the novel cannot be easily considered “revolting” because his body does not, in a political sense, revolt.

As a “travelling salesman”, [viii] Gregor, according to Marx, represents an unsatisfied worker, alienated from the products of his labour due to his resentment of his work. Karl Marx’s belief in alienation is outlined in his text, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. This belief was centred on the subordination of workers to the capitalists who owned the means of production.[ix] In effect, the notion that workers were controlled by the capitalist system that bought and sold their labor. The alienation which Marx refers to is the separation of the individual from his labour. The labour becomes a “supra-human law”, [x] which essentially governs the worker through a combination of capitalist force and the necessity of the worker to provide for himself and his family. Marx believed that “human law” gives the capitalist owners the ability to control and, if desired, neglect the workers they employ.[xi] Thus, the workers become detached from the products of their own labour. This is due to the capitalist owners controlling the means of the production, and the workers being isolated from this means of production. Furthermore, the detachment between workers and their labour, caused by the bureaucratic nature of a capitalist system, leads to both the labour and the worker becoming separate commodities.[xii] The detrimental circumstances the worker is faced with are emphasised by his continued working, since “the worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates.” [xiii] The worker, therefore, is alienated from his labour. He needs to work in order to provide sustenance for his family. However, the worker’s labour is isolated from his “self”, as he does not gain pleasure from his work and it is not inherent to his nature.[xiv] Thus, according to Marx, because the worker only has a minor role in the entire bureaucratic, capitalist system, he has no true worth or attachment to his work, or the products of it.[xv] The more the worker labours the less value he actually has, as he is reduced to being a mere

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commodity, creating the “alien world of objects” which capitalism requires.[xvi]

As a human worker, Gregor represents the alienated worker which Marx discusses. Upon awakening to discover that he has become an insect, Gregor's initial reaction is one of bemusement, “what has happened to me?” [xvii] His confusion is quickly replaced by his fear of missing his train to work, “I had better get up, for my train goes at five.”[xviii] Gregor's dependency upon his role within the capitalist structure is demonstrated immediately after his awakening as an insect. He experiences immediate concern regarding his job, rather than the alarming bodily changes which have overcome him. This shows Kafka's focus on humans as components of the capitalist system, rather than as autonomous individuals. Gregor continues to explain himself, or rather his previous, human self, as “a mere tool of the chief, spineless and stupid”.[xix] This illustrates that Gregor considers his own role in the capitalist system demeaning. Furthermore, it demonstrates similarities between Gregor's present, insect bodied spinelessness, and the cowardice in his previous, human incarnation. This portrays the initial state of dualism which overcomes Gregor. For, despite the terrible transformation which has occurred to his body, his mind remains detached from the horror. Gregor is still thinking like a worker within the capitalist system, not like the insect he has become. Gregor, initially, conforms to the mentality associated with Marxist alienation. He is a worker who has no control over his work and the products of it, and he is dissatisfied with his job. Consequently, because of the constraints of his employment, Gregor is severely limited in his ability to control his own actions and is reduced to being a minor component of the capitalist system.

After Gregor's transformation, his role within the household is left vacant and others must labour in order to provide for the family. This function is in part filled by his sister, Grete, who begins to assist his mother with the cooking.[xx] Nonetheless, it is mostly filled by the transformation of his father, from a sickly old man, to a hardworking provider for the family. Due to the continuing demands of his family, Gregor's father changes from being “hardly capable of getting to his feet”.[xxi] to being a bank messenger, a “fine, upright figure”.[xxii] This demonstrates how, in accordance with Marxist beliefs regarding alienation, labour has turned the individuals within Kafka's novel into working commodities. This is due to the capitalist ethos which requires workers to provide for their families. Gregor eventually dies, due to a culmination of starvation and injuries, caused by his family's mistreatment of him as an insect.[xxiii] However, Gregor's body does not revolt against his control, for he has abrogated control of his body to his labour, and by proxy to the capitalist system he is within. Gregor's body merely changes to become that which he mentally embodied previously, a worker insect. Furthermore, in a similar, but less hyperbolic fashion, his family also conforms to the capitalist system. This is because their bodies and ways of life adapt to accommodate Gregor's change and maintain the functions of the household within the capitalist system.

The acceptance of literary works which considered human beings' animal tendencies stemmed from the nineteenth century theories of evolution and degeneration. Darwinism and social Darwinism had a large influence on social perceptions during the years after their publication. The idea that people originated from animals[xxiv] and could also degenerate and lose certain capabilities[xxv] was radical. “Darwin's theory of descent... tore down the barrier that had been arrogantly set up between men and beasts.”[xxvi] Darwin's work made both humans appear more animal, and animals appear more human.[xxvii] Consequently, when *The Metamorphosis* was released in 1915, the public was open to literary works which considered the “animal within”[xxviii] human beings. Darwin himself had been an avid observer and collector of insects, keenly observing their numerous habitats and recording the various phenomena which occurred, such as beetles living within ant nests.[xxix] Furthermore, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, due to the colonial acquisition of distant lands, Europeans began to live in exoticised locations, such as Africa and Asia.[xxx] The popularity of entomology increased, and comparisons between human and insect societies ensued. The nineteenth century geologist Thomas Belt was one such traveller who drew comparisons between insect and human behaviour.[xxxi] In his analysis of Nicaraguan ants he admirably noted how cohesively and efficiently they dealt with hardships. Belt described the differences between the ants and the “laziness and profligacy” of the native humans.[xxxii]

The specific roles of numerous creatures within insects' nests led to comparisons between insects in nests and humans within the capitalist system. For instance, the variety of jobs which humans undertake is analogous to the many different tasks performed by “patroller”, “nurse” and “forager” ants.[xxxiii] Furthermore, due to the efficient nature of insect nests and hives, parallels could be drawn between the societies of insects and the capitalist system,

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which sought to efficiently utilise human work. The nineteenth century had been a period of extraordinary progress. Advancements encompassed new scientific theories and material developments, especially in communications, for example the railway, telegraph and telephone.[xxxiv] Nonetheless, the perceived dominance which mankind had over nature, and by proxy all other species, was now being challenged by insects. For whereas man was now considered to have adapted and evolved over a huge period of time, insect fossils were being discovered that, though millions of years old, were almost identical to present day insects.[xxxv] This persistence and longevity caused people to question whether it was man who was the dominant species, or whether “the dominant visible life form has been and remains, if not the roach itself, certainly the insect.”[xxxvi]

The similarities between mankind and the insect world, through both our societies and dominance, provoked much comparison while Kafka was constructing his novel. Darwinism and social Darwinism left humans appearing much closer to nature. As a human worker, Gregor demonstrates insect characteristics. This is because his work is carried out for the good of the capitalist structure he is part of, just as a worker insect labours for the benefit of a hive or nest. Furthermore, as an insect, Gregor is a metaphor of the twentieth century idea of the removal of the boundaries between humans and animals. The perceived similarities between human and insect societies enabled twentieth century readers of Kafka's novel to identify with Gregor's animal nature. This allows Gregor to physically conform to the requirements of his role in the capitalist system, and become the insect he previously behaved as. Thus, Gregor's transformation was due to his conforming to the capitalist system. This demonstrates how the story is not, in a political sense, revolting.

Both the Marxist theory of alienation and Darwin's theory of evolution are useful when explaining the nature of Gregor's transformation. Despite this, Marx was highly critical of Darwin's work. In his attempted slighting of the “self-styled natural scientist”, [xxxvii] Marx claims that Darwin's radical theory is merely an adaptation of Thomas Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Hobbes' doctrine claims that the natural state of existence for mankind is effectively the “war of man against every man”. [xxxviii] [xxxix] Marx states that Darwin's evolutionary belief, in the continuation of the strongest animals within a species, is merely a transfer of Hobbes' theory “from society to living nature”. [xl] Nonetheless, in Marx's own work he describes, in an economic context, the “war of all against all”, [xli] when referring to individuals pursuing selfish financial gains. Furthermore, Marx uses the exact phrase “bellum omnium contra omnes” in his 1843 work, *On The Jewish Question*. [xlii] Within this text Marx describes the social transition of religion, “from the state” and “into civil society.” [xliii] Marx's use of the same terminology as Darwin demonstrates the similarities between Marxist and Darwinist theory. This is further shown through Darwin's biological theories of evolution and degeneration also being socially applicable. The social relevance of Darwinist evolution is shown in two ways. Firstly by Marx's belief that Darwin's theory of evolution is merely an adaptation of Hobbes' work. Secondly by Marx's opinion that Hobbes' work applies to societies. Darwin, according to Marx, merely transformed social theories, which Marx himself believed in, and utilised them to claim an entirely new theory based upon humanity's evolution from animals. Gregor's transformation is a demonstration of the overlap between social Marxism and biological Darwinist theory. This is because Gregor's body changes, conforming to the capitalist system, and becomes biologically that which Gregor had previously mentally and socially embodied, a worker insect.

Marx's theory of alienation is his belief that the individual worker only plays a minor role in the entire capitalist system and consequently feels no connection with his work or the “alien” products of it. [xliv] The theories of degeneration and evolution from the preceding nineteenth century radically altered how the public perceived themselves and society. Subsequently, humans appeared more like animals and animals appeared more like humans. [xlv] Individuals such as Thomas Belt noted the similarities between insect and human societies and sought to compare some supposedly lax human societies against efficient insect colonies. [xlvi] *The Metamorphosis* represents a combination of Marxist alienation and the belief in a successful capitalist system mirroring the efficiency of an insect nest. In becoming a “monstrous insect”, [xlvii] Gregor is merely physically becoming that which he mentally embodied previously, a worker within a capitalist nest. Just as an insect colony would replace the loss of individual insects, his family members replace him within the capitalist system. Gregor's body is not revolting by becoming an insect. Rather, it has transformed into the creature that represents his role in both society and his family. Gregor began as a human component of capitalism; he was initially productive for himself, his family and the system. Gregor's morphing into the epitome of working efficiency, an insect, removes him from the capitalist system. Nonetheless, his transformation is due to his body conforming to the requirements of his worker role within the capitalist structure he is

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in. Thus, despite the failure of Gregor's new body to allow him to continue his work, and his painful demise as a result of his transformation, Kafka's novel cannot be considered "revolting". Both Gregor and his family experience changes as a consequence of the demands of the capitalist system. They become what the system requires. Although Gregor's transformation is extreme, he and his family's changes merely demonstrate that they are conforming to the requirements of capitalism.

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