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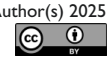

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Kafka and Organization Studies

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Abstract

Organisation scholars frequently refer to Franz Kafka to shed light on various dark sides of organisations, in particular the dysfunctional aspects of bureaucratic organisations commonly associated with the word "Kafkaesque." In this essay, we take the hundredth anniversary of Franz Kafka's death as an occasion to revisit his work and life as a source of imagination for organisation scholars. We start by introducing Kafka's "office writings," produced during his daytime job as an accident insurance lawyer for industrial workers and, so far, largely overlooked by organisation scholars, as well as facets of his biography. We then propose that a more comprehensive analysis of Kafka's oeuvre offers organisation scholarship a unique perspective on two pressing, contemporary challenges of organising. First, Kafka's work and life illuminate the inherent contingency and futility of organising in the face of uncertainty, while also highlighting its necessity. Second, his writing provides a nuanced understanding of enigmatic, inescapable organisations that resonate with today's digital and algorithmic forms of organising. Through his work, we find examples of individual and organisational acts of resilience and resistance, including a leveraging of bureaucratic institutions to fight inequality and injustice. These themes directly speak to current debates on the role of organisation in times of crisis and disruption, marked by the erosion of democratic institutions, the rise of digital and algorithmic organizing, and ecological collapse.

Keywords

bureaucracy, contingency, crisis, Kafka, organisation studies, organisationality

"Whatever I touch, crumbles to pieces." (Kafka, *Literary Remains*)

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Introduction

We take the hundredth anniversary of the death of Franz Kafka (1883–1924) as an opportunity to revisit his work and contribution to organisation studies. Here, Kafka's work has first and foremost been used to illustrate the dark, distancing, and "dysfunctional encounters with bureaucracies of various kinds" (Warner, 2007, p. 1019; similarly, Hodson, Martin, Lopez, & Roscigno, 2012; Khare & Varman, 2016; McCabe, 2015) often described as "Kafkaesque." In this essay, we make a case for considering the contemporary relevance of Kafka's work far beyond this notion. In doing so, we draw on literary experts who have related Kafka's fictional writing to his largely overlooked "office writings," texts which Kafka produced while working as a lawyer for the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Caygill, 2017; Corngold, Greenberg, & Wagner, 2009; Corngold & Wagner, 2011). Additionally, we draw on insights into Kafka's life provided by the recently published, extensive biography by Reiner Stach (2023b, 2023c, 2023d).

In his daytime job, Kafka not only proved to be a talented writer on themes such as risk classification, accident prevention, and auditing; he was also capable of using the emerging Austro-Hungarian insurance system to protect workers from the perils of capitalist production. Kafka's role as not only a bureaucrat but a "brilliant innovator of social and legal reform" (Corngold, 2019, p. 19) has remained largely unexplored in the context of organisation studies. However, when following his biographer and literary experts, Kafka's literary oeuvre can only be understood in the context of his private and working life. Reading both Kafka's literary and office writings yields a picture of Kafka as both a critic of bureaucracy and its defender, if not reformer. Unable to change the basic structural conditions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that made the accident insurance system highly dysfunctional, Kafka called for more rules and stricter bureaucratic procedures to protect workers from the hazards of industrialisation. Thus, we invite organisation scholars to engage more deeply with Kafka's oeuvre and life to "expand the imaginary of organisation studies" (Beyes, Costas, & Ortmann, 2019, p. 1974) and "think organisations differently, or anew" (Beyes & Holt, 2019, p. 105) in at least two directions.

First, we currently live in times of multiple, overlapping crises where the breaching of planetary boundaries creates ever more uninsurable and unforeseeable problems (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Spee, 2015; Jarzabkowski, Chalkias, Cacciatori, & Bednarek, 2023) and where taken-for-granted social institutions are under attack. A similar sense of transformation, of a disruption of the existing order, is evident in much of Kafka's writing (e.g., Wagner, 2019). For example, the unlikely, yet in Kafka's writing very real, situation of waking up as a giant beetle serves as a strong metaphor for the unimaginable and hence also uninsurable disruptions that may lie ahead. Gregor Samsa's attempt to go on with his daily chores reflects human efforts to uphold normality even in the light of profound transformation. We suggest that Kafka's oeuvre can be read as different yet complementary attempts to deal with the unresolvable contingency (Caygill, 2017) and fundamental futility (Ortmann, 2019), as well as the necessity and potentiality of (formal) organisation.

Second, the spread of ubiquitous and intransparent algorithmic decision-making and generative AI makes Kafka's literary accounts of the unaccountable, hidden, self-referential, and self-perpetuating dynamics of organising eerily contemporary, if not premonitory. At the same time, Kafka's work is rich with glimpses of hope, emancipation, and humour, offering valuable insights for studying, supporting, and practicing various forms of resilience and resistance to injustice. In sum, we argue that a joint reading of Kafka's literary and office writings gives organisation scholars an important message in a world marked by geopolitical, social, ecological, and technological shifts that are threatening the existence of many and grant largely unconstrained power to a few.

Kafka's Reception in Organisation Studies: A Critic of the Bureaucratic Form

Organisation scholars have used Kafka's fictional work to explore various issues in and around organisations, with his texts "enrich[ing] the imagination of work and organisation" (Ossewaarde, 2019, p. 2) and helping "in alienating us as researchers from our established ways of writing about organisational phenomena" (Huber, 2019, p. 1823). Engaging with selected passages of Kafka's *The Trial*, Costas (2019) explores the status of violence and power in organisation studies. Ossewaarde (2019) takes the work of Kafka to reveal the "obscene, sadomasochistic image of organisation and management." Staying with the topic of power, Huber (2019), discussing the chapter entitled "In the Cathedral of The Trial," explores the role of subjects in their own subjectification. Others use Kafka's work to explore topics as diverse as mythologies and potential counter-mythologies (Munro & Huber, 2012), the symbolic role of the labyrinth as a principle of organising (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2015), disgust in organisation (Pelzer, 2002), animals in organisation (Sayers, 2016), office intellectualism (Schoneboom, 2015), or e-mail communication (Keenoy & Seijo, 2009).

Most often, Kafka's fictional work is linked to bureaucratic organisations. Warner (2007, p. 1032) sees Kafka as a "commentator, observer and satirist, if not as theorist" of bureaucratic organisations. Scholars typically refer to Kafka to criticise bureaucratic organisations as well as their inner workings—often in comparison to the ideal form of Weber's bureaucracy (e.g., Munro & Huber, 2012; Ossewaarde, 2019). Hodson et al. (2012), for instance, argue that Kafka's literary writings "offer a compelling counter-image to the formal-rational model derived from Weber" (p. 1252). It is a counter-image including features such as particularism, chaos, contested goals, the abuse of power, and fear. Noting that Kafka and Weber were contemporaries, Clegg, Cunha, Munro, Rego, and de Sousa (2016) contrast Weber's and Kafka's understandings of bureaucracy, highlighting how encounters with Kafkaesque bureaucracy create perceptions of inactiveness, helplessness, and meaninglessness—perceptions that are described as the "purposeful product of meaning, practice and emotional work" by those working for the bureaucracy (p. 174) rather than being inherent to bureaucratic organisation per se.

Others are inspired by Kafka—or rather his reception in organisation scholarship—to highlight the absurdities of bureaucratic procedures and their effects in organisations. In this light, Alvesson and Stephens (2025) show how employees' perception of ethical clearance procedures at universities as absurd spills over to them seeing the entire university as dysfunctional. A common characteristic of bureaucratic organisation often problematised with the help of Kafka's literary work is that of distance in bureaucratic organisations (McCabe, 2015) or moral distance in organisational ethics (Huber & Munro, 2014), highlighting the impersonal or alienating aspects of bureaucratic organising (see also Curchod, Patriotta, & Neysen, 2014). Nisar and Masood (2020) explore how street-level bureaucrats partake in creating and reproducing social inequality in more informal ways.

Although some organisational scholars have acknowledged that Kafka himself was a bureaucrat (Beyes & Holt, 2019; Clegg et al., 2016; Czarniawska, 2019; Hodson et al., 2012; Warner, 2007), his role as an advocate of bureaucracy and innovator of bureaucratic reform and social insurance has been largely neglected. As an exception, McCabe (2014) reads *The Trial* as an account of the possibilities of resistance and defiance. This argument, we argue, can be strengthened by studying Kafka's office writings in addition to his literary work, inspiring organisation scholars far beyond a critique of structures of power, domination, helplessness, and estrangement.

Towards a Wider Reading: Kafka's Personality, Politics, and Professions

Kafka's personal life

Several aspects of Kafka's life are seen as common knowledge, at times turning into a cliche of the lonesome, dull weakling of a writer. His biographer Stach (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d), who has dedicated his life to Kafka, presents a more nuanced picture of Kafka as partially introvert, depressed, and severely sick, but also as witty, confident, and agentic at other times. Stach concludes that Kafka himself was not a dark but a kind person and profound humanist: "Kafka always sought to find the good in others" (Willeke, 2024).

Franz Kafka was born to Hermann and Julie Kafka on 3 July 1883 in Prague, Bohemia, Austria-Hungary. He was the oldest of four children, having three younger sisters (two younger brothers died while still very young). His parents, both Jewish, owned a business for haberdashery and fashion articles and were thus relatively wealthy. The Kafkas spoke German at home, but Czech with servants. As such, they belonged to a minority within a minority: German-speaking Jews in the German community in Czech Prague. Kafka's relationship to his family, especially to his father, was complicated, with conflicts revolving around Kafka's literary pursuits and lack of interest in the family businesses (Stach, 2023b). Kafka had to hide his creative and "soft" side from his father and so retreated inwards; his imagination grew. His father's attempts to turn Kafka into a businessman led to intense family disputes that even tempted Kafka to end his own life (Stach, 2023c, pp. 123–140; Wagenbach, 1983, pp. 116, 128).

Despite his father's reservations, Kafka was sent to the humanist high school in Prague (Stach, 2023b). After finishing school in 1901, Kafka took up legal studies at the German University in Prague in the same year, finishing with a PhD in 1906. He started writing while at university and continued to do so while employed, first as an assistant at the insurance company Assicurazioni Generali (1907) and then at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia (1908). Because of his daytime-job at "the Institute," Kafka's fictional writing was mostly limited to working during the night. Regardless, he had incredibly productive periods in which he not only produced some of his novels in a rather short period of time but also wrote a plethora of letters to friends and his fiancées as well as diaries. Kafka's literary imagination may have resulted not only from frustration with his daytime job but also from the complicated relationship with his father: Kafka, in his (never sent) *Letter to the Father*, describes him as gigantic (both physically and psychologically) and terrifying.

This relationship, as well as seeing how poorly his father treated his employees, allowed Kafka to empathise with industrial workers who were helpless against both their employers and the State—a theme that is central to his novels and may have contributed to Kafka developing an interest in socialist philosophy (Wagenbach, 1983, p. 31). Over the years, and with Kafka regularly witnessing cases of labor injustice, this interest and Kafka's unease with capitalist production grew, developing his socialist politics. Kafka is known to have taken part in political assemblies to listen to speeches by socialist leaders, including meetings of the Czech Anarchists (Wagenbach, 1983, p. 121). He was also an outspoken admirer of the socialist Lily Braun, and even joined the "Young Generation Club"—a group whose members were mainly Czech socialists (Wasserman, 2001, pp. 474–475). Kafka's understanding that society was responsible for protecting workers from the sufferings of capitalism is expressed both in his office and his literary writings. While in his office writings we can witness his various efforts to protect workers against ruthless employers, some of his stories, such as *America*, have been read as capitalist critique (Wasserman, 2001, p. 474; see also Adorno, 1967).

Throughout his adult life and despite daily exercise (Stach, 2023d, pp. 32–34), Kafka struggled with health issues and was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis in 1917, a condition from which he died in a sanatorium in Klosterneuburg in Lower Austria on 3 June 1924. Despite having instructed his close friend Max Brod to destroy all his writings after his death, Brod ensured that Kafka's work was published post-mortem.

Kafka as a bureaucrat-novelist

Having started as an assistant at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia, Kafka was soon promoted to the position of Senior Legal Secretary and has been described as a "dedicated industrial reformer" Wasserman, 2001, p. 473; see also Corngold, 2019). The Institute was a semi-governmental agency, providing insurance for over 200,000 enterprises and their three million workers. Founded in 1889, it was tasked with representing the new rights of workers to accident protection and prevention. However, it barely executed this task in its early years due to a monetary deficit resulting from employers' reluctance to pay higher insurance premiums (Wagenbach, 1983, p. 95). Kafka joined the Institute under a new director, Robert Marschner, committed to reform. As a trained lawyer of "exceptional competence" (Corngold & Wagner, 2011, p. 111), Kafka, the Institute's Principal Compliance Officer (Corngold et al., 2009, pp. 334, 259), was charged with bringing employers into line. This involved setting and obtaining premiums for industrial enterprises such as farms, quarries, or toy and automobile manufacturers and defending the Institute against the subterfuge of employers resisting their assigned risk classifications (Corngold et al., 2009). He also represented the Institute against employers in court (Stach, 2023c, p. 322) and convinced the public as well as employers of the necessities of accident prevention and insurance by writing propagandistic texts (Wagenbach, 1983, p. 95).

These tasks required him to visit factories, which exposed the hardship of workers through in-person experience. Kafka must have been quite effective at his job and his work shows that he knew how to "work the system," doing so with great skill and concern for the well-being of workers and their families (Stach, 2023c). He proved both diplomatic and persuasive in his reports and public opinion pieces, defending the Institute's interests against recalcitrant employers. He also engaged in various innovative efforts to improve safety at work-sites. For instance, after attending lectures on mechanical technology at the German Technical University in Prague, he proposed modifications for wood-planing machines that would prevent workers from having their fingers or hands cut off (Corngold et al., 2009, pp. 109–115; Wasserman, 2001, p. 478). Likewise, observing that quarry owners were providing their workers with large amounts of alcohol during work (Corngold et al., 2009, pp. 278–280), he sought to reduce alcohol-related accidents, contributing to the passing of legislation around alcohol consumption at quarries (Wasserman, 2001, p. 474). In 1915, Kafka supported the establishment of a hospital to treat neurological and psychological disorders, which was the first of its kind in the Kingdom of Bohemia (Corngold et al., 2009, pp. 336–354; Wasserman, 2001, pp. 478–479).

Due to his writing skills, Kafka was entrusted with the production of various texts for the Institute, many of which have been collected and made public as *The Office Writings* by the world-leading Kafka experts Corngold et al. (2009). This collection includes texts as diverse as speeches that Kafka himself or his superiors gave on various occasions, letters to employers or the public authorities, reports, and newspaper articles in which Kafka advocated for worker insurance or support for disabled veterans during the war, as well as treatises on topics such as accident prevention and risk assessment. Many of these texts show the bureaucratic organisation of the Institute as well as the difficulties attached to formally organising risks. For instance, the audit process of factories insured by the Institute was strictly divided into different tasks and responsibilities. They included

on-site observations, the authoring of an oral or written report and the classification of risks based on these reports, which finally need to be "entered in all manuals and statistical compilations" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 304). All these tasks were fulfilled by different people, among them trade inspectors, clerks, and the Institute's board of trustees, showing the "tendency towards specialization" that is specific to bureaucracies (Clegg, 2012, p. 61).

The office writings show that Kafka grappled with the bureaucracy but also defended it when it functioned properly. In various documents he complains about inspectors transcending the limits of their authority and not fulfilling their tasks in line with the rules given by the Institute as well as the Accident Insurance Law (e.g., Corngold et al., 2009, pp. 134, 127). Regarding the assessment practices of trade inspectors, he wrote: "instead of merely examining the facts [at the factory], as they are solely authorised to do, they occupy themselves primarily with evaluating the classification," that is, the interpretation of the facts, a task which Kafka saw as being within the authority of the Institute alone (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 127). He even refers to the trade inspectors surpassing their assigned tasks as an "encroachment on the Institute's sole legal rights" and the "first illegal step," setting loose a chain of further illegalities such as the inspectors' openness to "outside influences," i.e., corruption (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 135).

To counter such problems, Kafka attempted to expand the Institute's inspection procedures. He always did so with a keen eye on protecting workers and was not shy in speaking the truth to employers. In response to one of the most severe industrial accidents, a quarry disaster that killed several workers in 1911, Kafka sought to reform the Institute's as yet limited rights to independently and thoroughly inspect the work-sites it insured, thereby aiming to tighten the Institute's surveillance mechanisms. To this end, he presented a sequence of 15 photographs of Bohemian quarries in the report, proving the necessity for further inspections, which the Institute was not permitted to undertake at that time. He argues "that only systematic and continuing inspections can help to reduce accidents in quarries, while sporadic inspections often serve to conceal actual conditions rather than clarify them" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 284). He goes on to harshly criticise the depicted quarries, complaining about the excavations at the quarries being "performed without regard to the regulations" (Caygill, 2017, p. 116) or about workers not wearing safety goggles (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 280). With an eye to employers, he describes one of the depicted quarries as fundamentally unsafe despite the employer's assurance that his site was safe (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 286), arguing that "the quarry should be shut down altogether, at least at this site" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 285).

According to literary experts, "[o]ne can see Kafka's entire literature as a widening outward of the focus he employed in the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague" (Corngold, 2016, p. 28; similarly, Ortmann & Schuller, 2019). Examples range from stories of accidents (e.g., *America*) and land surveyors (*The Castle*) to legal arguments and court-like scenes (*America*, *The Trial, The Penal Colony*). Vice versa, we can find evidence of his literary work wandering back into his work for the Institute. As Corngold (2019, p. 22) argues, "Kafka's stance of distributing responsibility equipollently between contesting parties—a stance informing his fiction and generally arousing displeasure among his readers—in fact reflects the spirit of pragmatic negotiation that he employed at the office." Texts such as reports, reviews, letters, appeals, speeches, manuals, schemes, tables, and articles were so ubiquitous in Kafka's work for the Institute that he also considers himself as an author (*Schriftsteller*) in his daytime job (Corngold, 2009, pp. 2–3). The combination of both worlds is manifest in the persona of Kafka as a "bureaucrat-novelist" (*Beamten-Schriftsteller*) (Wagner, 2019, p. 24).

Reimagining Contemporary Dilemmas of Organising through Kafka

Organisation scholars have often been inspired by literature (e.g., Beyes et al., 2019; Czarniawska, 1998; De Cock & Land, 2006; Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2006), with fiction seen as "complementing, illustrating and scrutinizing logico-scientific forms of reporting" (Czarniawska, 1999, p. 23) and contributing to our understanding of organisations by "extending the virtual tendencies of the given world" (De Cock & Land, 2006, p. 526). A *literary study of organisations* makes use of literary writing "less as an object of analysis than a generative mode of thought: an aesthetic force of inventing alternative sensoria for organisational life and of reconfiguring what is visible and sayable about it" (Beyes et al., 2019, p. 1798). Kafka is particularly suitable for aesthetic engagement because his work is so rich in tropes and "allegorical moments" (Adorno, 1967, p. 245) that, although at times seeming to come from an entirely different reality, evoke feelings many can relate to and situations that could be contemporary. In fact, the timelessness of Kafka's literary writing, which tends to be decidedly free from concrete historical contextualization (Corngold, 2002), allows continuous re-interpretations of his work, with changing interpretations telling us more about the readers and the time they live in than about Kafka himself (Beyes & Holt, 2019).

In what follows, we highlight two such contemporary developments where Kafka's work can inspire organisational imagination anew: the necessity and simultaneous impossibility and contingency of organising risks and uncertainty and the hidden, unaccountable dynamics of organising spurred by digital technology. In both contexts, Kafka's humanism, politics, and professional activism reveal possibilities for acts of defiance and resistance—including a reflexive use of the tools of bureaucracy for social reform.

Perpetual organising to ensure the uninsurable and unimaginable

Historically, Kafka's work falls in a period of broad social and technological change marked by class conflict and impending war. It is in this context of both emerging and collapsing social order (Wagner, 2019) that his writing reveals a more fundamental dilemma of organising, one going beyond recognition of the dual sides of bureaucracy (e.g., Adler, 2012; Du Gay, 2000): its impossibility but simultaneous inevitability, creating illusions of certainty and security which may be fragile, yet are necessary to create security and protection. This dilemma clearly comes through in Kafka's treatment of the topos of the accident, which features broadly in both Kafka's literary and office work and has been explored in depth by Caygill (2017) as well as Corngold and Wagner (2011). The latter highlight that already "the term 'accident insurance' is stricto sensu an oxymoron" because while "[a]ccident insurance aims to undo the effects of an accident by the restitution of damages, [. . .] it cannot succeed in principle and cannot succeed most evidently at the hands of an impersonal bureaucracy. The main difficulty of erasing the accident is the plain disparity between personal trauma and cash award" (Corngold & Wagner, 2011, p. 203).

Probably because of this fundamental impossibility of doing justice to personal, human needs, Kafka became fascinated by the theory of insurance (Caygill, 2017, p. 55; Corngold & Wagner, 2011, p. 203). "His fiction is shot through with the fantasy of a benefit equalling or mollifying the victim's sense of injury. Kafka's fiction is as sensitive to this intention as it is to the difference it cannot close" (Corngold & Wagner, 2011, p. 203). *The Trial*, for instance, provides us with insights into Kafka's struggles with the Austro-Hungarian legal system, echoed in Josef K.'s attempt to make sense of what is happening to him and how the system works. In his office writings, Kafka complained about the "rapidly changing interpretations by the legal authorities" (Corngold et al.,

2009, p. 54) that, ultimately, led to a "sense that legal security is lacking" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 59). This legal volatility made the effective and efficient work of the Institute difficult and—according to Kafka—could lead workers to "only conclude that it is *chance rather than principle* that governs insurance" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 60, own emphasis).

In his daytime job, however, Kafka did not feel powerless vis-a-vis the bureaucracy of the Institute and the Austro-Hungarian legal system: "Kafka was anything but a victim of bureaucracy; he was not an anonymous cog in an inscrutable machine, but made independent decisions and maintained the free view of the executive employee, reaching beyond the stooped backs of accountants and copyists" (Stach, 2023c, p. 332; own translation). Caygill (2017) goes so far as to suggest that Kafka's work is a quest into the possibility of defiance in light of the inevitability of accidents, errors, and contingency. As Kafka's office writings indicate, the larger and more unpredictable the problems to be managed, the more organisation may be needed, yet the more futile it becomes, triggering a recursive loop of organising. Kafka's "double narrative," *The Building of the Chinese Wall* and *An Old Manuscript*, indicates this simultaneous necessity and futility: "To paraphrase Adorno, readers of the double narrative experience nothing other than the *dismantling* of the Chinese wall: the questioning of its technical expediency and the exhibition of the devastating consequences of this inadequate *homeland security*" (Wagner, 2019, p. 30). Wagner (2009, 2019) links this theme in Kafka's writing to the concept of securitization (Wæver, 1995) and the idea that the creation of a security discourse creates new insecurities and uncertainties. Here, Kafka's writing provides insightful accounts of the challenges of organising risks (Hardy & Maguire, 2016; Hardy, Maguire, Power, & Tsoukas, 2020; Maguire & Hardy, 2013), many of which resemble today's debates about the audit society in general (Power, 1997, 2021) and labor inspection and protection more specifically (Piore & Schrank, 2018).

While skilfully using the tools of the law and bureaucratic organising to hold employers to account and protect workers in his daytime job, Kafka, in his literary writings, expresses the "groundless grounds" and hence the contingency on which these efforts are built (Ortmann, 2019). Kafka's novella *The Burrow* about a mole building his underground burrow provides an illustrative example. The text starts with the mole being content with his efforts: "I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful" (Kafka, 1933[1931], p. 354). Later on, however, the mole complains that the center of the burrow, where the main square was to be built, was built on sand: "My labors on the castle keep were also made harder, and unnecessarily so (unnecessarily in that the burrow derived no real benefit from those labors), by the fact that just at the place where, according to my calculations, the castle keep should be, the soil was very loose and sandy [. . .]" (Kafka, 1933[1931], p. 357). Hence, while the structures we create provide an illusion of security and certainty, the ground on which these securities rest is utterly shaky.

These feelings of groundlessness are not just conveyed by what Kafka writes, but also by *how* he writes. Kafka's writing has a particular temporal structure that breaks up linear chains of cause and effect, thereby creating a sense of discontinuity and unsettledness (Ortmann & Schuller, 2019). There is often a sense of imminent danger, of illusory security. As the mole from *The Burrow* says: "But the most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness. Of course, that is deceptive. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over" (Kafka, 1933[1931], p. 356). Kafka's writing style itself thus plays with the illusion of certainty and security. In Kafka's novels and stories, something completely unimaginable often happens (e.g., waking up as a beetle, being arrested without reason), but this unimaginable is then discussed in such a matter-of-fact way (e.g., Gregor Samsa worrying mainly about how he can get to work in his state as a giant beetle) that it presents itself as normality.

The contemporary era is diagnosed by many as marked by multiple overlapping, interrelated, and persistent crises. Recognition of the impossibility and simultaneous inevitability of

organising risks and uncertainty might entail seeing reliability as a (never-ending) process of organisational becoming, as a continuing practice of future-making (Wenzel, 2022) and as an ongoing engagement with the yet-to-come (Derrida, 1991). The problem of re-insurance, for instance, creates a perpetual need to develop new insurance instruments and becomes increasingly pressing in the light of extreme weather events (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015, 2023). Yet, these instruments are always just temporary fixes and insurance gaps are expected to grow as climate collapse continues. Similarly, new disclosure and reporting requirements such as the EU Taxonomy Regulation, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) or the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) aim to make corporations accountable and responsible for social and environmental damage caused by their activities by increasing transparency. At the same time, seeing is always a way of not seeing, as making something transparent is drawing attention to one thing and away from another thing, which may then become "unmanaged" (Quattrone, 2021). Nevertheless, Kafka's concern with reducing the risks of industrial accidents indicates that he would have supported such regulatory measures, necessarily imperfect, but needed to protect the powerless, such as workers upstream in global supply chains. His insistence can be a powerful reminder for organisation scholars that it might be worthwhile to insist on the protective potential of formal organising, including in the form of regulation that is quickly discredited as "too bureaucratic."

Inescapable, enigmatic digital organising

The dysfunctional bureaucracies that have become so firmly associated with the notion of the Kafkaesque hence can be seen as a consequence of a deeper dilemma—the necessity and simultaneous impossibility of bureaucratic, formal organisation. Today, we see not only an explosion of further risks and uncertainties that may trigger perpetual loops of organising, but also an increase in digital and algorithmic forms of organising able to handle large amounts of information in novel ways. On the one hand, this development promises to provide "fixes" to the inefficiencies of bureaucratic organisation; on the other hand, it bypasses and obscures formal organisational procedures, shifting power and knowledge away from accountable bureaucrats towards technical engineers removed from public scrutiny. Especially Kafka's fictional writings provide accounts of such "inverted" bureaucracies.

As Ortmann and Schuller (2019, p. 7) observe: "If Weber had in mind a well-organised, purposefully functioning, 'soulless' bureaucracy, then with Kafka organisations have become enigmatic, inscrutable and inaccessible and have taken on the character of fate, contradiction and mystery." *The Castle*, ". . .which runs on principles reminiscent of Kafka's insurance institute. . ." (Corngold, 2019, p. 20), "radicalizes the contingency of organisational operations into matters and situations of miraculous chance" (Caygill, 2017, p. 1841). In *The Castle*, K. talks to Olga (Barnabas' sister) about his messenger job and the uniform promised to him, which he has not yet received.

> . . . but in things of that kind the Castle moves slowly, and the worst of it is that one never knows what this slowness means; it can mean that the matter's being considered, but it can also mean that it hasn't yet been taken up, that Barnabas for instance is still on probation, and in the long run it can also mean that the whole thing has been settled, that for some reason or other the promise has been cancelled, and that Barnabas will never get his suit. One can never find out exactly what is happening, or only a long time afterwards. We have a saying here, perhaps you've heard it: Official decisions are as shy as young girls. (Kafka, 1945[1926], p. 224)

Similarly in another scene:

> It's as if the administrative apparatus were unable any longer to bear the tension, the year-long irritation caused by the same affair—probably trivial in itself—and had hit upon the decision by itself, *without the assistance of the officials*. Of course a miracle didn't happen and certainly it was some clerk who hit upon the solution or the unwritten decision, but in any case it couldn't be discovered by us at least, by us here, or even by the Head Bureau, which clerk had decided in this case and on what grounds. (Kafka, 1945[1926], p. 90, own emphasis)

The notion that "The world of the castle is marked by a traffic in script that circles around higher authority at an immeasurable distance" (Corngold & Wagner, 2011, p. 117) has its roots in Kafka's real-world experience in the particular context of Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, where "a decentralized network of arbitrary courts consisting of employers and employees issued verdicts without a possibility of appeal" (Wagner, 2009, p. 25). Appeals could only be lodged with district authorities. This resulted in intense administrative work, leaving district authorities "on the verge of suffocating in files" (Wagner, 2009, p. 30). Frequently, files went missing and emerged in unexpected situations years later—a fact that reminds us of numerous situations in *The Trial* and *The Castle.*

Today, organisation is not conducted through paper files but digital files or "virtual tape" and algorithms, working in ways even more removed from the understanding of organisational stakeholders and "with no easy way of unloading our aggression on a human bureaucrat" (Czarniawska, 2019, p. 151). Arguably, digitalisation has not only created more fluid forms of organising such as digital platforms or online collectives who exert yet try to conceal their organisational actorhood (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Kirchner & Schuessler, 2019); it has also established algorithmic decision-making structures that, powered by machine learning and artificial intelligence, are so incomprehensible from the outside that they appear "divinatory" (Esposito, 2022). Digital data and control over algorithms are centralised, creating highly asymmetrical forms of control that increase predictability for those owning and accessing the data, but create unpredictability for everyone else (Rahman, 2024).

Notions such as algorithmic bureaucracies (Rahman, 2024), algorithmic profiling and prediction (Weiskopf, 2020), or algorithmic self-referentiality (Spence, Xu, & Millo, 2024) also indicate that algorithmic decision-making structures are inescapable, as the boundaries between input and output and past and future become blurred. Such entanglement between rules and their application is a common theme in Kafka's work (Ortmann, 2019), most prominently in the penultimate chapter of *The Trial*, where ". . . the proceedings gradually merge into the judgment." If the trial itself is already the punishment, there is no escape, no possibility of appeal. Do we not find ourselves in a similar situation when intelligent algorithms know what we want to buy before we know it, when the "weapons of math destruction" (O'Neil, 2017) pre-empt our possibilities for shaping our lives going forward based on data we have produced in the past? And while algorithmic prediction may fundamentally change our engagement with the future, not least in the light of—finally?—being able to predict accidents and radically reduce uncertainty about the future, the performativity, recursivity, and incomprehensibility of these algorithms produces new blindness and unpredictable complexity (Esposito, 2022). Where predictive practices based on algorithmic decisions produce organisationality, yet evade the possibility for appeal, and where these practices conversely hold "people accountable for actions that are not really their fault" (Kiviat, 2019, p. 1134), we find situations that are eerily similar to those experienced by the protagonists in Kafka's novels.

But as McCabe (2014) discussed in relation to Kafka's *The Trial*, the figure of K. is not just a victim, but also an agent of his own fate, openly contesting and questioning the authorities or seeking allies. His tragic fate is concluded only once he has given up resistance. Here, organisation studies can seek inspiration by a combined reading of Kafka's office and literary writings.

K.'s struggles may echo the sentiment of Kafka's own relentless—possibly at times futile—efforts to hold employers to account and change the rule of law for improving workers' lives, i.e., for changing the system (Wasserman, 2001). The intransparent, self-referential, and centralised algorithmic decision-making structures and communication systems may seem equally as or even more impenetrable than the court in *The Trial* or as Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy. Yet, Kafka's work shows us that the tools of oppression can also be used as tools of defiance and emancipation. Kafka not only used his expert knowledge to fight for the enforcement of rights or for changes to the legal system; he also employed his writing skills, empathy, and imagination. His fictional characters provide ample examples of self-organisation (Wagner, 2019), of bootstrapping (Ortmann, 2019), and of advocacy (often literally in the role of a legal advocate) in the light of impermeability and injustice. Camus (1973) goes so far as to read both Kafka's actual and literary engagement with the law as a "gigantic scream of hope," because his analyses mix feelings of empathy and solidarity with the belief in a better and more just legal system and societal order (Fischer-Lescano, 2019, p. 279).

Today, organisation scholars, as experts in organisation, need to reflect on the tools available for combatting the totalizing influence of digital technology (Scherer, Neesham, Schoeneborn, & Scholz, 2023) in an increasingly impenetrable internet-industrial complex (Flyverbom, Deibert, & Matten, 2019). It is not surprising, for instance, that the Trump administration and Elon Musk's "Department of Governmental Efficiency" (DOGE) target rational-legal political administration and seek to replace it with a technological system where AI tools that evade democratic governance take decisions (Salvaggio, 2025). After all, aren't bureaucrats—such as Kafka himself—a key source of democratic control and resistance to authoritarian and arbitrary power? Just as K. learns throughout his trial that his initial assumption of living in a "constitutional state," where "all laws were decent and were upheld," is no longer correct (Kafka, 1968[1925], p. 3) since its central institutions have become a mockery of themselves (such as the court being held in an attic and not a courtroom), many citizens today are witnessing a hollowing out of democratic institutions. Here, organisation scholars can contribute their professional knowledge to reveal the processes and mechanisms by which key pillars of a democratic social order are becoming gradually dismantled. This includes revisiting the political and normative order of which bureaucracy—as an institution and not a specific organisational form—is a central part (Olsen, 2006) and offering a critical perspective on the current hype around "debureaucratization," particularly when it is accompanied by the establishment of algorithmic bureaucracies instead.

As scholars, here we can also connect to Kafka's more creative side. For instance, if writing is or can be an act of resistance, how can we not only write differently (Boncori, 2023; Gilmore, Harding, Helin, & Pullen, 2019; Nathues, Leybold, & Nadegger, 2024), but also defend the act of writing as a generative practice against artificial intelligence tools (Bechky & Davis, 2025)? What other methods of resistance to a technochratic order can we practice, theorise, and—e.g., via our teaching—diffuse in order to strengthen and revitalise trust in democratic institutions?

Conclusion

In this essay we have argued that we limit ourselves if we restrict our engagement with Kafka to a critique of bureaucracies. Reading his office writings together with his literary work and in the context of his biography, we argue that Kafka's work reveals a more fundamental dilemma of organising, namely its impossibility and simultaneous inevitability, particularly in times of crisis and disruption. The resulting perpetual and self-referential dynamics of organising are, arguably, intensified by the possibilities provided by digital technology and generative AI. Just as the emergence of the accident insurance system in the 19th century showed that industrial accidents were a

"normal" part of industrial production, today we need to recognise that the transgressing of planetary and social boundaries is an inherent part of capitalism, while digital technology supports a centralization of power in the hands of a few. As the problems and crises to be managed accumulate, so will the rules and regulations designed to deal with these problems. Kafka's work, on the one hand, supports arguments for the need for formal organisation under extreme circumstances (Du Gay & Lopdrup Hjorth, 2024). However, it also reminds us of the many absurdities, illusionary securities, and never-finished self-legitimizing procedures inherent in such attempts. Here, the humanism and activism evidenced in Kafka's everyday professional work, as well as the strong imaginaries provided by his fiction, provide inroads in studying, supporting, and practicing various forms of bootstrapping, resilience, and resistance; often futile, these are nonetheless always necessary to strive for a more just, democratic, and sustainable social order.

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