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“Last Man” and Seismographic Critique: The Power of Satire and the Discourse of Cultural Critique¹

Abstract: One of the recurrent stereotypes of most critical work on Karl Kraus consists in stressing the absolute uniqueness of Krausian satire and the incomparable qualities of his satiric endeavour. A closer look, however, will not fail to discern striking parallels between the tenor of satirical discourse in *Die Fackel* and the contemporary discourse of cultural critique in the social sciences – e.g. the Weberian image of the "last man", inspired by Nietzsche, and the recurrent lamentations in Max Weber's work over the loss of individuality and creativity in the "iron cage" of modernity. Accordingly, this paper aims to analyze the affinities, which until now have gone largely unnoticed, between Kraus's satirical discourse and the discourse of *Kulturwissenschaften* at the beginning of the century. This comparative analysis will look in particular at Weber's outline of a pathogenesis of modernity as well as at the microsociological method developed in the context of Georg Simmel's "sociological impressionism".

"Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved".² It is somewhat ironic that the source for this well-known quotation toward the end of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* could not yet be identified. Its Nietzschean flavour, however, is rendered particularly evident by the occurrence, a few lines earlier, of the image of the "last man". This image was to reappear in another central text by Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, of 1917. The context here is particularly illuminating:

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² "Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz; dies Nichts bildet sich ein, eine nie vorher erreichte Stufe des Menschentums erstiegen zu haben." (Weber, 2000: 189). The English translation is from the online edition of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Moriyuki Abukuma (http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro_eth_frame.html).

After Nietzsche's devastating criticism of those 'last men' who 'invented happiness', I may leave aside altogether the naive optimism in which science – that is, the technique of mastering life which rests upon science [techno sciences], has been celebrated as the way to happiness. Who believes in this? — aside from a few big children in university chairs or newspaper editorial offices.³

The Nietzschean image of the last Man highlights an essential perspective of Weber's critique of modernity; it signals the rejection of the naïve belief in a progress automatically brought about by technoscientific development and points at an altogether tragic vision of the predicament of culture in a context where the “last men” have forsaken every hope of subjective fulfilment and of meaningful relationships and where the productive chaos of individual creativity has been annihilated by being subjected to the discipline of a social order to which Weber applies the no less well-known image of the iron cage (“stahlhartes Gehäuse”).

It is highly significant to my view that throughout Weber's texts we find the dominant register of scientific argumentative discourse to be again and again interrupted (I use this verb quite consciously) by the pathos of polemic or even of satire, articulated in imagetic language. Indeed, the powerful diagnosis of a pathogenesis of modernity is not simply carried out from a standpoint of distanced objectivity, but engages the author personally, very much in the sense of “Zeugenschaft”, of the obligation to bear witness demanded by an ethics of responsibility.

“Zeuge”, also in the literal juridical sense of the witness in a court of law, is, as is well-known, one of the main satirical masks adopted by Karl Kraus. "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved". This has not, but could very well have been written – or quoted – by Kraus. Indeed, I chose Weber's quotation as a starting point for my paper because I want to

³ “Dass man schließlich in naivem Optimismus die Wissenschaft, das heißt: die auf sie gegründete Technik der Beherrschung des Lebens, als Weg zum Glück gefeiert hat — dies darf ich wohl, nach Nietzsches vernichtender Kritik an jenen ‘letzten Menschen’, die ‘das Glück erfunden haben’, ganz beiseite lassen. Wer glaubt daran? — außer einigen großen Kindern auf dem Katheder oder in Redaktionsstuben?” (Weber, 1995: 25). The English translation is from the online edition of *Science as a Vocation* by Moriyuki Abukuma (http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/lecture/science_frame.html).

examine in short some significant connections between the discourse of satire and the discourse of cultural critique at the beginning of the 20th century.

This is going to lead me not only to some references to Weber, but also to Georg Simmel. It is important to bear in mind that the core of the scientific endeavour of the two outstanding founding fathers of sociological thought at the turn of the century – Weber and Simmel – does not simply lie in the development of a formal sociology, in the formulation of a methodology or the establishment of a sociological systematics, but, to a significant extent, in an approach to the problem of modernity essentially based on a critique of culture. Small wonder that important aspects of both the anatomy of modernity found in Weber’s analysis and Simmel’s micro-sociology of modern life can easily be recognised as lying also at the foundation of Kraus’s satire.

Of course, I am not hinting at some kind of direct influence. It is most unlikely that Kraus would ever have read anything by Weber. And while it is not improbable that he might have read Simmel, considering the latter’s extensive collaboration in several newspapers, some of them, like the Viennese *Die Zeit*, easily available to Kraus and indeed often referred to by him, this has left no direct trace at all in *Die Fackel*.⁴ The glossary compiled by Franz Ögg (1977) registers just three mentions of Simmel: one of these is quite significant, but it occurs in a text by Kurt Hiller; the other two have a totally random character. So what I am hinting at is simply that central motifs of Weber’s and Simmel’s sociological inquiry into the problem of modernity are also central motifs in *Die Fackel*.

The association of Kraus’s satire with sociology may at first glance seem inadequate. In his influential essay on Kraus, Walter Benjamin passed an apparently definitive judgement on this topic by stating that for the Viennese satirist “the sociological sphere never became transparent” (Benjamin, 1980: 353). While it is certainly true that Kraus’s approach to the “sociological sphere” may often be questionable, I believe Benjamin’s judgement to be fundamentally wrong. Kraus’s literary strategy, as could be expected, is intent on the intensification of an ethical-aesthetic perspective, rather than on socio-economic analysis.⁵

⁴ For Simmel’s publications in Austrian newspapers, see Frisby, 2000.

⁵ This has been repeatedly stressed by, among others, Edward Timms (1986).

Kraus was by no means unaware of the economic foundations of social and political behaviour: “I know very well,” he writes in the central essay “In These Great Times” (“In dieser großen Zeit”), “that at times it is necessary to transform markets into battlefields so that these might turn into markets again.”⁶ The decisive insights he has to offer on society lie, however, elsewhere, in cultural analysis and language criticism. Max Horkheimer alludes incisively to this in his radio speech on “the sociology of language”, where he emphatically attests to the sociological relevance of Kraus’s immanent method of language criticism:

Observing the mutilation of words and sentences, he recognizes the dehumanization of people and the relations between people, the destruction of the spirit through market-value and degenerative methods of competition.⁷

By choosing the problem of modernity as the common denominator linking Kraus’s satire to the sociological approach of Weber and Simmel, and, more than that, by affirming the sociological relevance of Kraus’s satirical approach, I am assuming that the satirist’s fierce and uncompromising critique of modernity does not amount to the simple rejection mechanism suggested by the label of a “cultural conservative” all too often attached to him. Well, yes, Kraus was in several respects a cultural conservative. But we should see this as the beginning, rather than the end of the story. Indeed, the notion of “progress” runs through Kraus’s entire oeuvre as a metaphor for the dark side of a modernity that failed to fulfil what it had promised and that he sees as having been totally subdued by the *Diktat* of instrumental rationality. But this refusal of “progress” has nothing to do with nostalgia for a world not yet transformed through technique. The notion of “Ursprung”, the Origin, that builds the utopian horizon of Kraus’s satire has by no means simply a regressive meaning; as a matter of fact, it functions as the central metaphor for the sphere of values dramatically put in question by the logic of modernity’s essential blindness to any notion of meaning. Let me quote a brief passage from the conclusion of the satire “The Discovery of the North Pole” (“Die Entdeckung des Nordpols”), published in 1909:

⁶ “Ich weiß genau, dass es zu Zeiten notwendig ist, Absatzgebiete in Schlachtfelder zu verwandeln, damit aus diesen wieder Absatzgebiete werden.” (*Die Fackel* 404, December 1914, 4). The English translation is by Harry Zohn (1984: 73).

⁷ “An der Verschandelung der Wörter und Sätze wird er der Entmenschlichung der Menschen und ihrer Beziehungen inne, der Zerstörung des Geistes durch Marktwert und entartende Konkurrenzmethoden” (Horkheimer, 1989: 22-23). The English translation is mine.

The discovery of the North Pole was inevitable. It is a light seen by all eyes, especially blind ones. It is a sound heard by all ears, especially deaf ones. It is an idea grasped by all brains, especially those no longer capable of grasping anything. The North Pole had to be discovered some day.⁸

A few pages before, one could read sentences like the following:

Progress celebrates Pyrrhic victories over nature. Progress makes purses out of human skin.⁹

What is in question here is the belief that total control over nature brought about by technoscientific development, here symbolised by the “conquest” of the North Pole, will by itself spontaneously generate a superior stage of civilisation. Those who, in the terms of Kraus’s satire, can neither see nor hear nor think are the Nietzschean – and Weberian – “last men” who dwell in an uncritical state of self-satisfaction, unaware of the fact that fundamental human values have become irretrievably lost in the process. One of the keywords for this self-satisfaction and a main target of Kraus’s satire is “Gemütlichkeit”, “cosiness”, as the social and mental attitude defining the hated Viennese. Thus, the idea of apocalypse in *Die Fackel* is not presented in the terms of an eschatological perspective, but rather as an expression of everyday life, of the current state of affairs:

The state in which we live is the real end of the world: the steady end of the world.¹⁰

Regulation, not emancipation, is the defining feature of modernity, brought about by the triumph of that technoscientific rationality that in Kraus’s eyes has colonised every aspect of life and that he finds epitomised in the mechanical clichés of the language of the press. It is from this point of view that Kraus conducts his devastating criticism during World War I. Central motifs of this criticism are the suffocation of quality through quantity; the

⁸ “Die Entdeckung des Nordpols war unabwendbar. Sie ist ein Schein, den alle Augen sehen, und vor allen anderen jene, die blind sind. Sie ist ein Ton, den alle Ohren hören, und vor allen anderen jene, die taub sind. Sie ist eine Idee, die alle Gehirne fassen, und vor allen anderen jene, die nichts mehr fassen können. Der Nordpol musste einmal entdeckt werden [...]. (*Die Fackel* 287, September 1909, 13). The English translation is by Harry Zohn (1984: 57).

⁹ Zohn, 1984: 56. “Er [der Fortschritt] feiert Pyrrhussiege über die Natur. Der Fortschritt macht Portemonnaies aus Menschenhaut” (*Die Fackel* 287, September 1909, 11).

¹⁰ “Der Zustand, in dem wir leben ist der wahre Weltuntergang: der stabile” (*Die Fackel*, 445, January 1917, 3). The English translation is mine.

incommensurable disproportion between the increasingly sophisticated technical instruments and the spiritual condition of those who have the power to use those instruments; or the perverted dialectics of means and ends. All these motifs play a central role in the speech “In These Great Times”. One brief quote from this speech:

Culture is the tacit agreement to let the means of subsistence disappear behind the purpose of existence. Civilization is the subordination of the latter to the former.¹¹

Such a diagnosis of the inverted relationship between means and ends (particularly reinforced in the quoted passage, and in several others in *Die Fackel*, by the pun on “Lebensmittel”) is totally congruent with Max Weber’s strict methodological distinction between the spheres of science, on the one hand, and of values, on the other. The orientation towards values pertains, according to Weber, to the realm of ethics and aesthetics as sites of meaning and it is precisely the task of an aesthetic rationality to break the rules of accepted social consensus or of a strictly rational organisation of life. It is in a similar vein that Kraus repeatedly states that it is up to the “poets of humankind” to generate chaos, to “bring disorder into life”. This requires an attitude of refusal and asceticism, the assuming of the stance of embattled isolation that defines Kraus’s position as a satirist, but is also characteristic of the position of the scientist faced with the responsibility of “holding one’s own in a godless and prophetless time” (“Standhalten in einer gottfremden und prophetenlosen Zeit”), as one can read in Weber’s *Science as a Vocation* (Weber, 1995: 41).

The hypertrophy of means over ends is also a central issue in the last chapter of Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money*. In the course of time, the problem of the inversion of the relationship between means and ends came to be translated in Simmel’s theory of culture into the concept of the tragedy of culture: with the increasing complexity and fragmentation of society, the seemingly infinite development of “objective culture”, there remains less and less space for “subjective culture”, i.e. for the affirmation of individual values and meanings. This, in Simmel’s eyes, is completely inevitable, as the forceful consequence of the process of modernity; that is perhaps the reason why his essayistic style is almost completely devoid

of polemical pathos and evinces as a rule a consciously distanced point of view. The tragedy of culture is not experienced by Simmel in the tragic mode; instead, he responds to the demise of “subjective culture” by developing a method of inquiry that accepts the modern world as given, avoiding cultural pessimism and dwelling in the apparently most insignificant objects in order to capture their meaning in terms of their relation to the whole.

For Simmel, as is well known, the idea of modern culture is essentially derived from the experience of the metropolis. It is tempting to look at this a little closer, since Kraus’s position towards the problem of modernity did find one of its most revealing expressions in the series of mostly aphoristic reflections he dedicated to the opposition Vienna-Berlin towards the end of the first decade of *Die Fackel*. These reflections, when read against the background of Simmel’s essays on the modern city, disclose interesting analogies. The perhaps most famous of those essays, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, poses right at the beginning what is also Kraus’s central problem:

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.¹²

It is Simmel’s contention that it is precisely in the metropolis that “the individual person can cope less and less with the overgrowth of objective culture”; he becomes nothing but “a mere cog in an enormous organisation of things and powers”. In the end, however, the essay turns out to be also an eulogy of the metropolis, as a place where, paradoxically, the “merciless objectivity” of social relations may provide unforeseen opportunities for the development of a new kind of subjectivity. Since “modern life has become more and more calculating”, the organisation of everyday life offers new possibilities for subjective freedom;

¹¹ “Kultur ist die stillschweigende Verabredung, das Lebensmittel hinter dem Lebenszweck abtreten zu lassen. Zivilisation ist die Unterwerfung des Lebenszweckes unter das Lebensmittel.” (*Die Fackel* 404, December 1914, 5). The English translation is by Harry Zohn (1984: 73).

¹² “Die tiefsten Probleme des modernen Lebens quellen aus dem Anspruch des Individuums, die Selbständigkeit und Eigenart seines Daseins gegen die Übermächte der Gesellschaft, des geschichtlich Ererbten, der äußerlichen Kultur und Technik des Lebens zu bewahren. (Simmel, 1995: 116). The English translation is by Kurt Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press, 1950 (http://condor.depaul.edu/~dweinste/intro/simmel_M&ML.htm).

the very forces that seem to threaten individuality with dissolution also provide the conditions for the development of individuality.

One of the aspects emphasised by Simmel is the protection offered to the self by anonymity in the big city, protection, namely from “the imponderables of personal relationships” that tend to overweigh in the village or the small town. This course of argument fits exactly with the way in which the opposition Vienna-Berlin is construed in *Die Fackel*. Vienna, as we can read in Kraus’s journal, in still another variation of the inversion of means and ends, is a city where streets “are paved with culture, while others are paved with asphalt”.¹³ A recurrent topic of Kraus’s satire is the ill-functioning of the mechanisms of everyday life in Vienna, a city saturated with culture and tradition and, precisely because of that, essentially hostile to art. By contrast, to quote another of Kraus’s aphorisms on this subject, “When one drives by the monuments of some city in an automobile, they can no longer do any harm.”¹⁴ The other pole of the opposition, Berlin, is presented as a city where the mechanics of progress do not interfere with the space of the subject. On the contrary, the fast pace and the perfect organisation of modern urban life provide the artist with the time he needs for himself and for his work. Kraus writes, for instance, “I need motor cabs in order to arrive quicker at myself,”¹⁵ or, “the mechanisation of outward life is the way to an inner culture.”¹⁶ One day he might very well decide, he fantasises, to use the name “Kempinsky”, the well-known modern Berlin restaurant, as a designation for his “philosophical system” (*Die Fackel* 309-319, October 1910, 1).

In this mythologised Berlin, the distinction between “the means of life” and “the ends of life”, which is so crucial to Kraus’s system of values, is one of the beneficial effects of modernisation. In the light of this construed opposition, Vienna is equated as a matter of fact

¹³ “Die Straßen Wiens sind mit Kultur gepflastert. Die Straßen anderer Städte mit Asphalt.” (Kraus, 1986: 146). The English translation is by Zohn (1986: 122).

¹⁴ “Wenn man an den Denkmälern einer Stadt in einer Automobildroschke vorüberkommt, dann können sie einem nichts mehr anhaben.” (Kraus, 1986: 45). My translation.

¹⁵ “Ich brauche Automobildroschken, um schneller zu mir selbst zu kommen.” (Kraus, 1986: 146). My translation.

¹⁶ “[...] die Mechanisierung des äußeren Lebens [ist] der Weg zu einer inneren Kultur.” (*Die Fackel* 309-319, October 1910, 3). My translation.

with the small town of Simmel’s reflections: it is hostile to art because it simply is not modern enough.

“Wien, ein Stadtverhängnis” (“Vienna, the city as fate”): this would have been the title of the book on Vienna planned, but, in the end, never written, by Kraus (*Die Fackel* 296-97, February 1910, 45). This “fate”, however, seems to constitute a vital condition for satire. The aesthetic identity of the satirist is totally incongruent with the image of the artist retreated into pure interior experience thanks to the perfect organisation of modern life. On the contrary, satire needs the constant irritation of the interruption by the stimuli of “life outside”; satire, according to Kraus’s definition in the central essay “Nestroy und die Nachwelt” (“Nestroy and Posterity”), is nothing else than “the poetry of obstacles” (“die Lyrik des Hindernisses”) (*Die Fackel*, 349-50, May 1912, 10). Accordingly, the satirist is forced to pay the closest attention to the trivia of everyday social and cultural life as they present themselves to him in the pages of the daily newspaper.

Closest attention to detail is also the method of Simmel’s seismographic criticism (the very same image, by the way, used by Horkheimer when alluding to the explanatory and anticipatory power of Kraus’s language criticism). Indeed, finding in each of life’s details the totality of meaning is the essential purport of Simmel’s sociological impressionism (Frisby, 1991). Around the turn of the century, he published in the Munich journal *Jugend* a series of social vignettes, several of them in the satiric mode, entitled “Momentbilder sub specie aeternitatis”. Such a title would perfectly suit many of Kraus’s satirical glosses. I can, however, no longer pursue this connection in detail, and I will just add some concluding remarks.

The technique of the satirical gloss is, to my view, one of the most distinctly modern aspects of Kraus’s writing. In the pages of *Die Fackel* this genre has become a true poetics of the objet trouvé, the object being in this case the fragment of discourse quoted from the press. Such a poetics of quotation is intent on producing new levels of meaning; by putting the quoted text into perspective, the symptomatic and exemplary meaning of the apparently petty object of satire is revealed and an aesthetic and moral value is highlighted; the process amounts to what Kraus once referred to as “spiritualization of the material” (“Vergeistigung

des Stoffes”) (*Die Fackel*, 827-33, February 1930, 107). That is why the satirist also would insist that his glosses needed commentary, in order not to be too easily understood.¹⁷ And that is why the cliché “one shouldn’t generalize” (“Man darf nicht generalisieren”) is recurrently satirised in *Die Fackel*: one *should* generalize is indeed a vital tenet of satire.

This is one of the paradoxes of Kraus’s satire, which I will not be able to pursue here any further: Kraus’s poetics is grounded on distinction, on the ascetic refusal of commodified culture and commodified language. However, such a refusal is not simply formulated from a distance, it operates through incorporation of the object of criticism, which, while being negated, notwithstanding becomes part of the immense dialogical web that is the discourse of *Die Fackel*.

The postulate of the absolute singularity of Kraus’s satirical endeavour has been a motif of Krausian devotion for far too long. I wouldn’t want to be misunderstood: such a singularity is certainly there – but it will best be singled out if Kraus’s work is put in relation with other contemporary approaches, philosophical and sociological cultural critique being one of the most obvious subjects of comparison. This has in some way been done in relation to Walter Benjamin and, more recently, to Adorno.¹⁸ My absolutely sketchy observations had no other intention than to suggest that we should also go a bit further backwards in time, back to the founding fathers of “Kultursoziologie” at the turn of the century.

¹⁷ “My glosses need a commentary. Otherwise they are too easily understood.” (Zohn, 1986: 57). “Zu meinen Glossen ist ein Kommentar notwendig. Sonst sind sie zu leicht verständlich.” (Kraus, 1986: 287).

¹⁸ On Kraus and Benjamin, see Thornhill, 1996; Schulte, 2003. On Adorno and Kraus, see Djassem, 2002.

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