

THE LONGEST SICK DAY: GREGOR SAMSA IN THE SOVEREIGN DOUBLE BIND

Many analyses of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* proceed by treating key moments in the larger narrative as self-contained and symbolic of the modernist subject's powerlessness, solitude and futility and the apparent meaninglessness that these convey. Abundant evidence exists for such a reading, not least of which the tragic and increasingly isolated inner monologues Kafka composes. While any number of such scenes are in themselves poignant comments on Gregor's isolation and psychological torment, examining Gregor's relationships with the deputy director of the company for which he works, and with his family, will instead reveal a continuous and consistent theme of psychological, economic and physical abuse of Gregor. The scenes that best demonstrate this lend themselves well to a more political reading of the text, rife with meaning for, and resonance with, our present historical moment. Subject to the will of his father and that of the deputy director, Gregor becomes victim to the decisions these characters make regarding his destiny, decisions which take on a sovereign character, in the sense of the term elaborated by Agamben in *Homo Sacer*. I submit that reading the *Metamorphosis* as a detailed depiction of the ways in which such power can be exerted in the economic as well as the juridical realms will also reveal the correlations between the treatment of Gregor-as-insect and the treatments of so-called vagabonds and vagrants in early capitalist England. His recollections of life as a worker, his transformation and the violence that this transformation invites upon his body, his subsequent imprisonment in his room and finally his death are all moments that resemble the consequences inflicted upon those who transgress and/or exit the coercive dynamic capital exerts on one's life and labor.

Gregor dies of starvation, a starvation which begins not because of any lack of food in the household, but because of a lack of care for Gregor as a dependent, an oversight which reaches its apex in Grete's statement that this "thing" is "not Gregor."¹ Clearly, though, through Kafka's narration of Gregor's thoughts and feelings it is evident that the roach body and mind have a psychological state and thought process that is coherent with what we know of Gregor's personality prior to his transformation, and so for readers this "thing" is indeed Gregor, though not in his physical form. Kafka's emphasis throughout the text on work and capital indicates the extent to

¹ Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 52.

which these define the characters, from the deputy director to the lodgers to Mr. Samsa and the Samsa family's maid. So perhaps the real distinction of any significance in the story is Gregor's incapacitation in a world defined by motion, defined by work, and the idleness and rest needed to regenerate. Gregor's inability to convert the motions of his body into a wage-generating enterprise – or into any activity whose intention can be even remotely recognized by other characters – is then what makes him “not Gregor.” For Gregor is only himself, in the scope of the story, if he is working.

Thus, the starvation which afflicts him is the result of a neglect born out of this realization, which occurs to the father much sooner than to Grete, for whom it remains an unspoken truth until the final pages of chapter three. In any case, Gregor must rest after his incapacitation, and in a sense he must starve as a result of his rest, his idleness. It is as a result of this double bind that Agamben's concept of sovereignty can be a useful framework with which to understand Gregor's relationship to a world whose parameters seem quite starkly defined: a division between those who labor themselves into total exhaustion and those who do not. While Agamben's concepts of sovereignty point most evidently towards state power, I see Gregor's idleness as a clear violation of the sovereign power work and capital exert on the body of the worker, who finds psychological suffering and torment and exhaustion in life as a worker, and physical and psychological torment in an idleness that seems much needed for somebody as overworked as Gregor. In his “imprisonment” in his room, we see implied punishment and ostracization, and in this sense Gregor is excluded physically but included politically. Such an exclusion is only the result of his idleness, which is in itself a violation of the coercive dynamic capital sets out for each individual who must either work or starve.

Vagrancy law can also provide a useful historical lens with which to ground this view of idleness as a violation of capital and productivity. It is entirely possible that Kafka was aware of such laws and the force they exerted in England from the 18th century onwards. These laws held that those found wandering without work would be subject to imprisonment, forced labor or deportation to the colonies. In this case too, people were caught in the sovereign state of exception, both excluded, by being branded as vagrants and thus outside labor, their rights relinquished, and included by being punished, imprisoned, deported, etc. It is in this sense that Gregor's existence outside labor yet inside capital's laws for individuals enforced through imprisonment, starvation and abuse is revealed to be the result of being caught in the sovereign bind. Vagrancy laws can also help demonstrate the degree to which capitalist law could not be distinguished from judicial code and political systems.

From the start of the story readers can see quite clearly that Gregor's only concern is, in the words of his mother, work, but that this concern also creates

in him a deep-seated resentment. While later in the chapter Gregor and his family go to great lengths to prove his industriousness to the deputy director of the company for which Gregor works, it is on the second page of chapter one that readers glimpse for the first time the beginnings of an antagonistic relationship with the productivist demands placed upon him by the family and the company:

What a grueling job I've picked! Day in, day out – on the road. The upset of doing business is much worse than the actual business in the home office, and, besides, I've got the torture of traveling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, constantly seeing new faces, no relationships that last or get more intimate. To the devil with it all!²

Indeed, from this passage readers cannot help but notice the extent to which Gregor's life prior to his transformation has been dominated by the demands capital exerts on him, demands which stem, no less, from his father's indebtedness to the deputy director. We are also shown here Gregor's inability to engage in relationships "that last or get more intimate," indicating that even prior to Gregor's transformation into a roach, he suffered the degradation of being excluded from human interactions, yet this exclusion only occurs by dint of his own inclusion and participation in the capitalist economy. This contradiction, this paradox, is for Giorgio Agamben essential to understanding sovereign power, which is exemplified in the sovereign decision's ability to exist, as Agamben notes, both "inside and outside the juridical order."³ As Marx and many others since have shown, capital exerts a coercive force in workers' lives, workers who are forced without choice into lives of servitude for the capitalist classes. In this way the lives of the workers are often subject not strictly to legal and juridical decisions that exercise power over their lives, but they are also subject to economic decisions that owners, employers and bosses make in a context that protects property rights over human rights, as Bruno Gulli, has shown.⁴ We can see the blending of the two domains in the chapters on primitive accumulation in *Capital*. There, Marx discusses the enclosure acts and their relation to the early capitalist classes' ability to accumulate wealth while relying on newly established legal codes to do so.⁵ The expropriation of the commons on which farmers and peasants had previously subsisted was the result of this exercise of legal power. Indeed, scholar Wayne Price, in his book *The Value of Radical Theory*, has noted that "when discussing primitive accumulation, Marx was quite clear about the key role played

² Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 4.

³ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

⁴ Gulli, Bruno, *Earthly Plentitudes: a Study on Sovereignty and Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 99.

⁵ Marx, Karl, *Capital: a Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1979), 746.

by the state and other forms of organized violence. While capitalism may be said to have created the modern state, the state may also be said to have created capitalism.”⁶ So while Agamben clearly sought to reconceptualize state power without necessarily interrogating the realm of political economy, it is clear that the two cannot be entirely disentangled.

The coercion that capital enforces shows itself in a life of torment for Gregor even before his transformation into a roach. Gregor’s life had been defined by a grueling work schedule determined by the deputy director, and each of his grievances about his job in the quote above is the result of the deputy director’s sovereign decisions regarding his employee’s life, which has been dedicated to the company. Thus the deputy director as sovereign decides the terms for Gregor’s continued employment, excluding Gregor from the ostensible guarantee of stability and survival that drives workers to work in the first place. As the deputy director exists in relative comfort compared to Gregor, his decisions suspend this guarantee of comfort and rest for Gregor, while maintaining the company’s ability to benefit and profit from these decisions, which ultimately derive power and meaning from workers like Gregor. It is, in any case, never Gregor’s comfort that results from any of this work, but that of his parents and sister: “What a quiet life the family has been leading,” Gregor said to himself, and while he stared rigidly in front of him into the darkness, he felt very proud that he had been able to provide such a life in so nice an apartment for his parents and his sister.”⁷

Again this participation is not voluntary but coerced. We learn part of the way through chapter two of *The Metamorphosis* that Gregor’s family has a savings account that can support them without the labor of their son, and that the majority of this money had been accumulated from the money Gregor had been bringing home over the years. This money could even be used, Kafka reveals, to support the family for up to two years.⁸ Furthermore, Grete and the father begin working, he as a bank attendant and she first as Gregor’s caretaker, and later as a salesgirl in a shop. Kafka notes that until Grete began helping with household chores, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa “had frequently been annoyed with her because she had struck them as being a little useless,” further revealing the family’s prioritization of work over familial bonds, a prioritization which has clear consequences for Gregor’s health, happiness and overall wellbeing.⁹ More importantly for our analysis, though, is how blatantly this savings account, and the father’s and sister’s decisions to return to work, demonstrates that the family not only could have worked and contributed to the household income all along, but that the hoarded money had presumably

6 Price, Wayne, *The Value of Radical Theory: An Anarchist Introduction to Marx’s Critique of Political Economy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2013), 62.

7 Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 22.

8 *Ibid.*, 28.

9 *Ibid.*, 31.

been a secret kept from Gregor, to continue to maintain the illusion that he must work tirelessly, if only for his own good. While readers might quickly assume that it is only the deputy director in *The Metamorphosis* that symbolizes the managerial class in the broader class struggle, there is within the Samsa household a mirror of that exploitative dynamic, with the father as the bourgeois parasite extracting labor from his son and sitting idle all the while.

Despite Gregor's continuous inner resentment and the antagonism towards the capitalist world it implies, early in chapter one he and his family consistently attempt to prove his industriousness and selfless dedication to the deputy director and the company. These overtures reach their apex in Gregor's conviction at the end of the first chapter that the deputy director cannot be allowed to leave the apartment without him understanding that if it were up to Gregor he would have been at work on time. As a result, Gregor-as-roach begins chasing the deputy director, not realizing that his roach-voice cannot convey the thoughts inside his head, which are concerned primarily with proving his worthiness to his boss. Reacting to this, Mr. Samsa brandishes a cane at his son which "threatened to come down on his back or his head with a deadly blow," and he eventually shoves Gregor through the doorway into his room, injuring his body and a few of his legs.¹⁰

At this moment, the door is locked. Though this is evidently the first time in his adult life that Gregor is allowed to be idle at home, this idleness is ironically accompanied by his forced imprisonment in his room. With the exit of the deputy director from the apartment, Gregor's father begins to occupy the role of the sovereign, solidifying his power over Gregor's life. From chapter two onwards, this sense of imprisonment grows, with Grete playing the role of the benevolent guard who brings her brother food once a day, and Mr. Samsa playing the role of warden, catching Gregor's life in the power of the sovereign decision. Continuing the reading of the story as a reflection of Agamben's theory of sovereign power, Gregor's imprisonment, which is the result of his inability to work, can be said to represent retribution for this violation of not only the terms of his employment as a traveling salesman, but the terms of his existence in the apartment and in the family, which were previously defined by his ability to produce wealth. It is as a result of this violation that he becomes further victimized by these laws of productivity and capital. As stated above, he is excluded physically in his imprisonment in his bedroom, but included politically by being punished for his incapacitation. However for Gregor this distinction matters little – we as readers are presented only with the torment and loneliness that imprisonment inspires. Concerning the sovereign decision's implications for individual lives, Agam-

¹⁰ Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 10.

ben notes that it is always life itself that is included in the sovereign decision, life that “animates [the decision] and gives it meaning.”¹¹ What is caught in the paradox, both included and excluded, is Gregor’s biological existence regardless of the form of his body, for his psychological state as roach is continuous with what we know of his life as a human, and it is this continuity, this coherence, that creates in readers a sense of sympathy and compassion for the protagonist’s plight. Elaborating this inclusion of biological existence in the sovereign decision, Agamben writes, “The sovereign decides not the licit vs. the illicit but the originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of law.”¹² The living body is excluded politically when law’s application requires the suspension of the same law by which the person is defined, yet the living body is also clearly included by being subject to, and defined by, law’s force in the first place. It is in this sense that the “sphere of the living” is able to give law meaning.¹³ In this case it is the law that has evidently menaced Gregor ever since he became employed, and that is the law that capital enforces through coercion, exhaustion and misery in employment and carceral retribution – and ultimately starvation – in idleness.

But many intervening moments ensue in *The Metamorphosis* before Gregor’s tragic death, and every day between the protagonist’s transformation and his death is spent in his bedroom, the resemblance of which to a prison grows more evident the closer we get to the final pages. Shortly after Gregor comes to the full realization that his transformation is not reversible, Kafka, in detailing his daily habits, writes the following of the protagonist’s new daily routine:

Or, not balking at the huge effort of pushing an armchair to the window, he would crawl up to the window sill, and, propped up in the chair, lean against the window, evidently in some sort of remembrance of the feeling of freedom he used to have from looking out the window.¹⁴

It is notable here that Kafka does not write that Gregor was engaged in a remembrance of freedom itself, but of its impression, its feeling. Paired with earlier quotes in the book that detail the intensity and fervor with which Gregor was compelled to work, it would make sense that even before his transformation freedom was only a feeling. Today neoliberal economists use the term “free” to describe the “choices” that workers – described instead as human capital – make in an economy increasingly defined by precariousness and structural inequality, both of which leave people with little choice but to settle for subpar employment.¹⁵

11 Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 26.

12 *Ibid.*, 26.

13 *Ibid.*, 26.

14 Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 29.

15 Spence, Lester, *Knocking the Hustle* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015), 10-11.

As a worker who, rather than choosing freely to work, works a job he dislikes primarily to pay off his family's debt, neither Gregor's labor nor the compensation received from it belong to him, and the circumstances which drive him into it are furthermore beyond his control. If we consider the savings account that the family had kept secret, then the impression that Gregor freely *chose* the working life that caused him so much misery is further shown to be false. This pretense of freedom, in the sense that the sovereign decision always reserves the right to eliminate or curtail that freedom, can be said to underpin many modern democracies, and it is here that we can note yet another overlap with Agamben's theory of sovereign power, a power which "guarantees" rights, but which does so by creating and presupposing the conditions for the often violent suspension of those rights, a power which is constantly "in force without signifying."¹⁶ The ostensible guarantee that after Gregor pays off the debt that his father owes, the money he earns will finally be his own is suspended and shown to be both hollow and contingent upon the fact that such a guarantee can be eliminated at the slightest transgression of the "law" of economic productivity. The suspension of Gregor's right to movement and autonomy through his exclusion in his room thus seems to motivate and underpin the father's ultimate decision to return to work, as the coercion that labor under capital entails finds another member of the family subject to its force. Gregor's imprisonment demands that someone take his place in the workforce. In this dynamic, though, the above-cited longing Gregor feels for freedom is equally important. The fact that he must long for such freedom only indicates that he knows that now it is no longer an option, so it can no longer be even a feeling, let alone a reality. This reveals the present sense of imprisonment in his locked room, but also shows that even prior to his transformation there was, for Gregor, only the feeling of freedom, demonstrating Kafka's awareness, perhaps, that for many workers freedom remains only an impression. But the source of his present imprisonment – the crime that invited punishment – is also important to emphasize, as it further emphasizes the violence that transgression of capitalist law invites. Gregor's transformation is not only a change *into* insect-form, it is also an exit *from* the able-bodied laborer who had thanklessly supported his family. It is as a result of this exit from the realm of a human form defined by its labor-power (a transgression of the tacitly agreed-upon role he will play vis-à-vis the family's economic arrangements) that he is imprisoned and punished. That his transformation is not in fact a choice adds another, poetic layer of commentary to his lack of choice in a life determined by economic decisions, punishment among them. Examining Gregor's idleness after his transformation we can then see a correlation between the punishments he receives and the punishments visited upon vagabonds under British vagrancy law.

From the first moments of Gregor's imprisonment in his room at the end of the first chapter and into the second it is evident that the family's control of

¹⁶ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 52.

Gregor's movements is of a disciplinary character, and this is especially so when considering the few times he comes into contact with his father. Part-way through chapter two, Mrs. Samsa demands that she be able to see her son, a demand which is notably never made by the father, but which nonetheless recalls an invocation of the visitation rights for the family members of the incarcerated. Mrs. Samsa demands, "Let me go to Gregor, he is my unfortunate boy!....Gregor thought that it might be a good idea after all if his mother did come in, not every day of course, but perhaps once a week..."¹⁷ This, in turn, leads Grete to propose that her mother help move the furniture out of Gregor's room, ostensibly in order to provide her brother with more space to roam (though in chapter three the reason becomes to free up space for three lodgers who move into a spare room). Besides sending Gregor into near-panic, the moving of the furniture further transforms the bedroom into a prison cell. In the midst of this process, however, Mrs. Samsa is startled by the surprise appearance of Gregor, who has crawled onto the wall to place his body over a framed picture he is desperate to keep in his bedroom. As a result, his mother faints, and while Grete attempts to revive her, Mr. Samsa returns home from his new job at a bank, ultimately driving Gregor back into his room. Kafka's description of his bank uniform further amplifies his resemblance to an officer or government official, and it is worth quoting at length:

Now, however, he was holding himself very erect, dressed in a tight-fitting blue uniform with gold buttons, the kind worn by messengers at banking concerns; above the high stiff collar of the jacket his heavy chin protruded....He threw his cap – which was adorned with a gold monogram, probably that of a bank – in an arc across the entire room onto the couch, and with the tails of his long uniform jacket slapped back, his hands in his pants pockets, went for Gregor with a sullen look on his face.¹⁸

The overlapping of the economic and the legal realms is here symbolized by Mr. Samsa's dress. His uniform calls to mind the blue uniforms of police officers, yet all of the buttons on his coat are gold, as if to signify opulence and wealth. In any case, the patriarch has himself been transformed from overweight parasite to sovereign enforcer, and in order to scare Gregor back into his bedroom, he starts lobbing apples at his son, one of which lodges itself into Gregor's shell, causing him to lose consciousness. It is here that one can notice clear overlap with the management, discipline and punishment of poor vagrants and wanderers in England beginning in the 16th century and continuing apace into the 19th century as industrialization intensified. As Paul Ocobock writes in the introduction to the collection *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspectives*, beginning in the 16th century British vagrancy laws were adapted "not simply to manipulate the labor market but to control the movement and behavior of the poor" and

¹⁷ Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

to “manage the behavior of unworthy paupers.”¹⁹ Indeed, A.L. Beier writes in the first essay in the collection, “A New Serfdom: Labor Laws, Vagrancy Statutes and Labor Discipline in England, 1350-1800” that beginning in the 16th century and continuing into the 1800s a shift in the purpose occurs in the character of vagrancy statutes, a shift from a concern with forcibly supplementing labor markets that had been decimated in the wake of the plague to a focus on simply disciplining the poor. Beier cites a handbook distributed in 1618 meant for justices, which read in part that justices were empowered to “command vagrant persons to prison if they will not serve,” and he notes that such manuals were continuously updated and used into the early 1800s.²⁰ Most of these laws were born out of a “rising concern about social disorder.” There is in the above-cited passage from *The Metamorphosis* a clear sense of disorder and fear as Grete and Mrs. Samsa attempt to move the furniture out of Gregor’s room, an attempt which is born out of a concern for Gregor’s mobility, which itself is underpinned by an overarching desire in both Grete and her father to discipline Gregor. The chaos which ensues when the father returns home from work finds resolution in the injury and re-incarceration of Gregor in his room, as if the father enters the scene only to restore a necessary order that will facilitate the smooth functioning of the household outside of his son’s room, an order which is predicated on imprisonment and the curtailing of the freedom of the mostly idle protagonist. It is clear to the family that Gregor will no longer work, and in this sense too his re-confinement in his bedroom at the conclusion of this dramatic scene resonates with the guidelines laid out in the 17th-century handbook for justices whose task it was to “command” the vagrant and idle to prison if they do not work. Indeed, Beier notes the irony evident in the enforcement of vagrancy law in the early development of free market capitalism:

If in this period England took the first steps toward a condition of economic “modernity,” which political and neoclassical economists often associate with free markets, it is paradoxical....that it did so drawing on a disciplined labor force that had been compelled to labor.²¹

Applying this paradox to Gregor’s life of coerced labor – a labor he is forced into as a result of his father’s debt – as well as his internment as an idle insect, one can notice another dimension to the illusory feeling of freedom in the previously cited passage in which Gregor stares out the window of his room, a freedom which escapes Gregor no matter what form his body takes and regardless of which activities those forms allow. Although Beier discusses historical statutes in a country and time period somewhat distant from Kafka’s, such historical constraints placed on labor are nonetheless reflected in *The*

¹⁹ Ocobeck, Paul and Beir, A.L., *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspectives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

Metamorphosis, and this reflection is likely not coincidental. Peter Thompson, in his article “The Psychology of Alienation,” from a longer series of articles on Karl Marx *The Guardian*, states that certain passages in the *Metamorphosis* reference *The Communist Manifesto* directly, a reference which, if Thompson is correct, would indicate undeniably Kafka’s intention to place class struggle as one of the key concerns at the heart of the story.²²

Before concluding it will be necessary to return once again to Agamben, this time to quote a passage that I believe will show how the inclusion/exclusion paradox of the law is reflected in vagrancy statutes and, more importantly, in Kafka’s story. Agamben writes:

The law has a regulative character and is a “rule” not because it commands and proscribes, but because it must first of all create the sphere of its own reference in real life and *make that reference regular*. Since the rule both stabilizes and presupposes the conditions of this reference, the ordinary structure of the rule is always of this kind: “If (a real case in point, e.g. *si membrum rupsit*), then (juridical consequence, e.g. *talio esto*),” in which a fact is included in the juridical order through its exclusion and transgression seems to precede and determine the lawful case (26).²³

The conditional sentence above asserts the law by including the circumstances for its own suspension in itself. Law thus does not exist unless it includes the cases in which it can suspend its guarantee of order and validity, and by suspending these it excludes lives from itself, subjecting these lives to the force and violence that law, in the Hobbesian sense, is meant to protect against. We have already seen how, although Agamben’s theories of sovereignty do not directly reference the coercion exerted by capitalist economies, the same inclusion/exclusion dynamic at their center is at work in economic as well as juridical law. Furthermore, if we apply the above structure of the law to vagrancy, the transgression which invites juridical consequence would be unemployment, wandering and generally existing without a master. Extending this reading of sovereign power’s force to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, then, Gregor’s violation of the law, a violation that begins when his body does not allow him to get up from his bed – “I’d better get up, since my train leaves at five” – is the idleness that his transformation initiates. As stated above, in terms of the capitalist law’s enforcement, it is because he does not work on that first day that his rights are suspended; his transformation *out of* human form is thus a symbolic representation of his exclusion from both economic accumulation and law’s guarantee of the order and stability that he seems to think his job will restore for him and his family.

²² Thompson, Peter, “The Psychology of Alienation.” *The Guardian*. May 16, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/may/16/karl-marx-psychology-alienation>

²³ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 26.

In the third and final chapter of the story, we notice the return of the sense of antagonism, frustration and anger that briefly shows itself in the first chapter. Gregor at this point is starving and his condition is growing worse as a result of the apple lodged in his back, an injury which calls to mind the V with which vagrants were sometimes branded in the sixteenth century.²⁴ Gregor's room becomes filthier by the day, as Grete has taken to tossing food haphazardly in through the door and carelessly sweeping up the remains at the end of the day. It is notable that all of this inspires an anger that initially was directed at his employer but is now focused more directly on his family:

At other times he was in no mood to worry about his family, he was completely filled with rage at his miserable treatment, and although he could not imagine anything that would pique his appetite, he still made plans for getting into the pantry to take what was coming to him, even if he wasn't hungry.²⁵

The fact that his rage now enters a different phase, becoming focused instead on his family, indicates the extent to which his sister and Mr. Samsa have supplanted the role of the sovereign decision-maker whose decisions catch Gregor's life in their paradox. He has been abused to such a degree that he has developed a total disregard for the laws that govern his new existence, and this is evidenced in his plot – which never comes to fruition – to steal from his family, who have now become his enemies in the same way that those who seek to assert sovereign power make themselves the enemies of the people's lives that are caught in its bind. Over the course of this chapter, Gregor grows thinner and eventually dies, but not before attempting to escape and being forced one last time into his bedroom by his father, who brandishes a broomstick to punish Gregor for scaring away the family's latest source of income: three tenants, or, "lodgers."²⁶ It is immediately after the exit of these lodgers that Grete realizes what her father has known all along: this creature is "not Gregor."²⁷ His incapacitation in a world defined by economic law and punishment ends with his death from starvation and infection from the apple embedded in his back, and afterwards the three remaining family members feel free to take the day off and enjoy the emerging spring, which prompts the parents to think of the daughter that it would "soon be time, too, to find her a good husband," words which are as ominous as they are alarming considering the fate of the last breadwinner of the family.²⁸

24 Ocobock, Paul and Beir, A.L., *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspectives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 8.

25 Kafka, Franz, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Edward Muir (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 43.

26 *Ibid.*, 49.

27 *Ibid.*, 52.

28 *Ibid.*, 58.

Discussing the coercion that capitalism exerts on all workers in so-called democratic nations, Wayne Price writes that the only freedom that workers have in reality is “to choose which boss will exploit them – and sometimes not even that.”²⁹ Indeed, this statement describes quite well Gregor’s dilemma, caught between a job he feels he must keep in order to support his family and pay off their debt, and the isolated and lonesome existence to which that work’s demands relegate him. The language Kafka uses to describe his working life makes it clear that Gregor has little choice but to work, with no ability to save any of the money he earns for himself and with no guarantee that there will be an exit from the sovereign bind – embodied by his deceptive and abusive father and the deputy director – that capital exerts on his life. With the exit of the deputy director, Gregor’s father slowly comes to occupy the position of sovereign enforcer, brutally expressing the sovereign law that capital must employ to give itself meaning in the protagonist’s life. As Marx and others have shown, Gregor’s plight is one that in history was also faced by many thousands of peasants in early modern England, forced off their land through enclosure and punished and imprisoned as vagrants in retribution, victims of a juridical code inscribed with the values and interests of an emerging capitalist order founded on the discipline and abuse of the dispossessed.

²⁹ Price, Wayne, *The Value of Radical Theory: An Anarchist Introduction to Marx’s Critique of Political Economy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2013), 31.

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