

# THE PROFESSION

## perverted research and the political imagination – the trial of the Good Scholar Švejk

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### Abstract

The Research Assessment Exercise and its successor – the Research Excellence Framework – are examined as contemporary examples of a perversion of academic discourse in British universities that threatens to spread to the rest of Europe. It is claimed that conventional political science is of limited use for understanding the true inanity of such bureaucratic initiatives and instead fiction and psychoanalytical theory are proposed as highly useful intellectual resources with which to understand the truly perverted essence of research bureaucracy. The work of literature-inspired writers such as Žižek, Kafka, Sloterdijk, and Hašek is used to illustrate this claim.

**Keywords** research; perversion; Kafka; RAE

### RAE GROUPINGS AS BEARERS OF IDEAS

*... the group that has gained power certainly does not abandon the idea, even though it has in fact deserted the idea and is now just floating along in reality (one thinks, for example, of the church during the Renaissance). An infallible instinct teaches it that the idea is an excellent ally on whom it can always rely, if ever its right to exist were put in question. It therefore negotiates a daring tightrope of a dialectic in order to deduce all its undertakings in reality from the idea,*

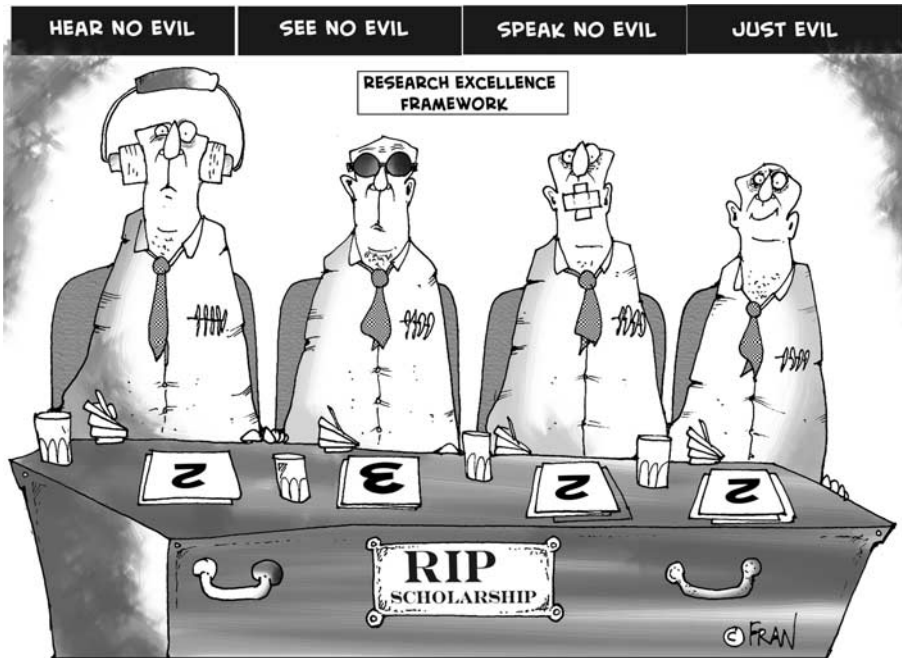
*so that naive sensibilities can believe that the group is acting as its executor. But its relations to the contents of should-being that once constituted it are in truth now only of a superficial sort, the idea having become pure decoration, an ostentatious façade for a partly rotten interior which represents, together with this facade, a unity that is nothing short of a mockery of spirit. (Kracauer, 1995 [1963]: 167)*

*The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude. (Orwell in Davison, 2001 [1946]: 460)*

A spectre is haunting Europe ... the spectre of the *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE). The RAE, as it is commonly abbreviated, is an exhaustive national research auditing procedure that formally takes place within the UK every seven years. In the intervening years, academics and various dedicated university units expend inordinate amounts of time and effort to collate material and devise strategies to maximise the final grade awarded. The RAE is soon to be replaced by a new variation on the same theme, the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF). While, for all its faults, the RAE was based upon scholarly peer review, the REF marks the push towards 100 per cent metrics-driven evaluation of research for science-based subjects and part-metrics, part 'light-touch' peer review for the social sciences and humanities. In the above excerpt from his essay 'The Group as Bearer of Ideas', Kracauer cogently summarises the underlying ethos of such Procrustian procedures as the RAE/REF. Rather than bearing ideas, they function by policing and pigeon-holing intellectuals and their research into discrete groupings. Disinterested intellectual enquiry increasingly survives only as an empirically abstracted alibi for its substitute – managerialised research based upon strategic game-playing. The RAE/REF mentality typifies an apparently insatiable desire to use instrumental, operational categories to define in bureaucratic terms what used to be a natural outcome of traditional scholarship. *The Count* was a Dracula-like puppet character from the US children's programme *Sesame Street* who insisted on counting every object he came across – a similar cartoon-like obtuseness now infects the UK university sector and this bureaucratic plague of the undead threatens to reverse Dracula's journey, taking its concept-sucking ethos into the heart of Europe.

*'the experience of the RAE within the UK sector offers a salutary warning to colleagues in the rest of Europe.'*

After briefly describing specific aspects processes involved in the RAE/REF, the various ways in which literature provides a useful critical corrective are explored. Literary fiction is put forward as an invaluable resource with which scholars can inoculate themselves from the worst aspects of an audit-infestation whose various procedures and structures embody the worst excesses of bureaucratic power in the UK university sector. Of all the academics affected by this power, one would be forgiven for assuming that scholars from such politically aware disciplines as political science and sociology would be both most sensitive to the bureaucracy as a mode of power and best equipped to document and reflect upon such power. However, the experience of the RAE within the UK sector offers a salutary warning to colleagues in the rest of Europe – political scientists and sociologists have proved to be some of the most enthusiastic advocates of the RAE/REF mentality. This paper therefore argues that political science alone is apparently not enough as an intellectual resource with which to best appreciate the frequently innate perversion of research bureaucracy. Suitably armed with the added perspective literature brings, it is argued that political scientists (above all) should become more sensitive to various current ironies. For example, when faced by the RAE/REF, academics who on a day-to-day basis skilfully teach Althusser's (1971) notions of *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs), the *ideological interpellation* of subjects and Weber's notion of the iron cage of rationality somehow obtusely manage to fail to use



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such concepts to reflect upon their own direct professional experience. Perhaps most dispiriting of all is the tendency of otherwise proudly left-wing academics to proceed as if Herbert Marcuse never wrote *One Dimensional Man* (1968). To counter this disturbing intellectual and professional blind spot, European literary and literature-inspired psychoanalytical traditions are shown to produce a *Heineken effect* – they reach the parts of our professional situation that the methodologies and mindsets of what C. Wright Mills (1959) termed *abstracted empiricism* (of which the RAE/REF are prime examples) cannot.

### THE MECHANICAL MENTALITY OF THE RAE/REF

The mechanics of the RAE are relatively simple. As in the end-of-days scenario anticipated so fervently by American neo-

conservatives, academics are divided into the sheep and goat categories of research-active and research-inactive. The research-active are then required to submit four pieces of work (whether they be monographs, peer-reviewed articles, or book chapters) that have been published within the prescribed timescale between exercises. While such concrete research outcomes form the core of the exercise, additional attention is also paid to the 'narrative' departments write about their research culture defined in terms of levels of successful research funding obtained, Ph.D. students recruited, etc. Once hard copies of publications to be submitted to the RAE have been collected from all participating departments, pre-appointed individual subject-specific review panels then assess the work with a view to awarding, as in infant school, a sliding scale of stars for each researcher and an aggregate total for each department as a whole. At the time of writing, the exact nature of the REF is still to be

determined, but its metrics-driven nature will inevitably increase the crude instrumentality of its procedures at the expense of the hard-to-quantify (but all the more important for that) traditional values of scholarship.

This is a bare bones description that fails to do full justice to the jockeying for position that takes place within this structure. Although an ideal always likely to be repeatedly betrayed by reality, the Humboldtian notion of a university as an enlightened community of scholars (see Taylor, 2003) nevertheless has an important practical political consequence – even such an ideal body requires scholars to pay at least lip-service to notions of shared responsibilities and values. The RAE/REF (and its teaching-related cousins such as Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA)) replaces these important, but inevitably ineffable, community qualities with a much more easily articulable set of requirements (e.g. the ability to be reduced to a three letter abbreviation) that will meet the diktats of research bureaucracy. The underlying values of these requirements may seem more transparent than nebulous notions such as ‘scholarship’, but it is this apparent transparency that does most to undermine traditional scholarly values. The ease with which outputs can be measured creates a profoundly tautological process increasingly immune from principled objection – because principles are merely another example of a realm of values and vocabulary that cannot be measured and therefore have no status within this brave new world. Perhaps most unnerving of all is the seductive nature of the bureaucratic charade and the subsequent enthusiasm with which, despite knowing what is really going on, academics still invest in the ostentatious façade. Beyond the organisationally inspired pressures to conform, scholars waste an inordinate amount of time discussing RAE/REF arcana. The average British academic does not need a

gilded cage to distract from their condition – a league table effectively substitutes for a piece of cuttlefish.

The very choice of the banner *REF* is illustrative of the creeping, politically inspired bureaucratisation of scholarly values. *World class* and *excellence* are currently perhaps the most over-used terms in British universities. On the surface they represent non-controversial concepts to which everyone can aspire. In reality, however, what counts as ‘excellence’ is pre-defined as what can be measured by the new RAE/REF gatekeepers. Inspired by C. Wright Mills’ seminal work *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), this article suggests that a severe lack of *political imagination* among academics has exacerbated the problem of excessive managerialism in both research and teaching. For Mills, the sociological imagination is a particularly fruitful form of self-consciousness that allows us to flit adeptly between a micro and macro focus in order to reflect upon our position as individuals caught up in larger historical forces: ‘Everywhere in the overdeveloped world, the means of authority and violence become total in scope and bureaucratic in form ... Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis’ (Mills, 2000 [1959]: 4). Colleagues in continental Europe, most especially those in political science who are theoretically (in both senses of the word) best equipped to reflect upon the RAE’s implicit political values, need to be forewarned and forearmed to avoid suffering a similar fate to that now endured by Britain’s increasingly desperate dons. Literature is an under-utilised resource in the face of this failure of political imagination. It has the potential to be what Heidegger (1974 [1959]) (quoting from Hölderlin’s poem ‘Patmos’) terms a *saving power*.

## THE AXE FOR THE FROZEN SEA WITHIN US – THE POLITICAL POWER OF LITERATURE

*it's good when your conscience receives big wounds, because that makes it more sensitive to every twinge. I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us ... we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. (Kafka cited in Begley, 1997: 261)*

In the above excerpt from a letter to Kafka's friend, Oskar Pollok, Kafka describes the power of great literature to break through the 'frozen sea within us' – an image that so resonantly describes the bureaucratic environment he experienced during his lifetime and wrote about to produce the literary success he unfortunately did not live to see. Despite the argument that scholars need to rekindle their professional imagination, it is still likely that some *EPS* readers will have a negative reaction to the suggestion that such speculative forms as literature and psychoanalysis may have a practical use for them. One response to this article, for example, might be a desire to learn more about the precise mechanics of the RAE/REF regimes briefly described above. Those readers are asked to be wary of such a response and to reflect upon the extent to which it actually illustrates the point under discussion – our professional imagination is indeed enervated when a whole European literary tradition becomes culturally marginalised. Readers desiring more of a focus upon the empirical nature of the RAE/REF are invited to consider how this very desire illustrates Kafka's notion of 'the frozen sea within us'.

Furthermore, drawing upon Heidegger's philosophical distinction between what is *true* and merely *correct*, such readers are asked to ponder whether a true understanding of the lived experience of bureaucracy's enervating effects is better served by a full account of its precise workings or an intellectually open re-encounter with such evocative writers as Kafka whose critical insights into the *essence* of bureaucracy continue to endure beyond the latest manifestation of RAE/REF managerial paper trails. But even on the most pragmatic of grounds, it is also interesting to note that one of the key aspects of the RAE's process that currently causes much angst among scholars in its thrall is what is termed *the narrative* in which departments describe their own self-perceptions of their achievements. Thus, whether properly acknowledged or not, fiction does indeed play a central role in the bureaucratic process, and is worthy of our professional attention.

The unique nature of literary insights provides a valuable necessary critical distance from RAE/REF-induced statistical myopia. It allows one to take what Žižek, borrowing from Shakespeare,<sup>1</sup> characterises as *Looking Awry* (1992) and (after Karatani, 2005) terms a *parallax view* (Žižek, 2006). Notwithstanding Gradgrindian<sup>2</sup> utilitarian suspicions of any useful political role for literature, some of Europe's greatest political and philosophical minds have seamlessly blended literary references into their conceptual projects. There is a strong historical relationship between aesthetics and the basic foundations of European analytical thought (see Eagleton, 1990: 1) and a strong contingent of late twentieth/early twenty-first century European thinkers for whom literature is an essential element with which to make sense of contemporary culture's discombobulating fluxes and flows. The works of Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Kittler, and

most recently Žižek, all make regular recourse to the power of literature to unveil what might otherwise remain obscured by petty-minded fixations about methodological purity.

There is a particularly notable European fictional heritage that deals with the unremitting anomie at the centre of 'civilised' organisations and the banality of the evil that bureaucracy produces. Russian literature, from Gogol to Zamyatin via Dostoyevsky, contributes a treasure trove of both its dehumanising and irrational aspects. For example, Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842) portrays the *poshlost*<sup>3</sup> quality of academic life under an RAE; pre-empting Hannah Arendt, Dostoyevsky portrays the banality of evil with the Devil in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1866) appearing as a rather nondescript gentleman 'with every appearance of gentility on straitened means' (chapter 78); while Zamyatin's *We* (1921) further pre-empted the sterile control societies of Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *1984* (1948). This article, however, concentrates upon the works of the Czech novelists Hašek and Kafka as illuminating illustrations of the lived phenomenological experience of bureaucracy. Franz Kafka's novels *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), and such evocative short stories as 'In the Penal Colony' (1914), provide inimitable depictions of the rationalised madness of bureaucracy and law that has lost touch with any humane guiding principles. Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švjek* (1921–1923), meanwhile scathingly satirises the machinic inhumanity of the military and offers a more positive defence of the human spirit's ability to resist the bureaucratic apparatus. Hašek and Kafka portray with inimitable diagnostic accuracy the lived experience of this apparatus that European academics, faced with the threat of eventually suffering similar regimes as the RAE/REF, would do well to acknowledge.

Illustrating literature's unique ability to portray a general cultural atmosphere inaccessible to the empirical methodologies of political science, Friederich Kittler's 'Dracula's Legacy' (1997) provides a fascinating interpretation of an under-acknowledged aspect of Bram Stoker's novel. Kittler points out that the key to Dracula's eventual demise after centuries of longevity resides in his entanglement within an unprecedented *discourse network* – a network that consisted of the new communicational technology of the portable typewriter and the qualitative and quantitative transformations of information processing that it heralded. It is the implacably unobtrusive collection of data during the novel that, amidst its Gothic horror, leads to Dracula being tracked down and eradicated despite his trademark evanescent elusiveness. Kittler's interpretation is leavened with a mix of reflections upon the relationship between mediated discourse networks and psychoanalytical insights. Taking a lead from the imaginative nature of both Kittler's subject matter and reflective methodology, the RAE/REF can be interpreted as: (1) a *return of the repressed*; and (2) a form of *perversion*.

### **A RETURN OF THE REPRESSED**

Bram Stoker describes the eradication of an anachronistic bloodline of aristocratic vampires. Drawing from Kittler, it is argued here that bureaucracy and its life-sapping models represent the rise of a new bloodless form of the managerial undead and traditional scholarship has emerged as the new anachronism to be eliminated. In psychoanalytical terms, the dark vampiric death-drive of the fictional mittel-European *id* reappears as the underlying unconscious motivation of the super-egoic injunction to publish or perish! In the castle of the RAE/REF – the Count is alive and well.

## A FORM OF PERVERSION

The pathological nature of the privileging of process over rationale that bureaucratic regimes typically produce has long been interrogated in both explicitly sociological and political accounts. Thus, Max Weber (1904–1905) gave us the evocative image of *the iron cage of rationality*, Georg Lukács ([1922]) the conceptions of *reification* and (particularly apposite in light of the above discussion) *phantom objectivity* (see Taylor and Harris, 2005), while Herbert Marcuse (1968) portrayed in detail the soul-destroying nature of the resulting *one dimensional society* so produced.

To these conventional political and sociological accounts of bureaucracy, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literature offer interesting additional insights. In Sartre's existential notion of *bad faith*, for example, an individual is guilty of living in a state of *Being-for-others* if their actions and choices are over-determined by the desire to appease external agencies. By contrast, a truly empowered individual is someone who experiences their own existence as *Being-for-itself* (I'pour-soi). For Lacan, the concept of *perversion* similarly describes a psychological condition common in those for whom the RAE has replaced scholarship as the centre of their affections. In Lacan's usage, the pervert refers, not to the usual notion of a sexual deviant, but to the more general sense of someone who is excessively over-reliant upon structures and rules for their own sake. In the Lacanian framework, the pervert has a dysfunctional relationship to the Phallic symbolic order, or punningly – *père-version*. *Perversion* is defined in terms of the relative dysfunctionality of an individual's relationship to an external meaning-guaranteeing power (the *big Other*) as an individual's over-reliance upon the structures and rules of their desire rather than direct engagement

*'In the context of the RAE/REF structures, UK academics are increasingly perverted.'*

with desire itself. In the context of the RAE/REF structures, UK academics are increasingly perverted.

## KAFKA'S DER PROZESS AND THE POWER OF SHAME

*To be prosecuted in a case like this means that one has already lost it. (Kafka, 1980 [1925]: 116)*

*The verdict does not come all at once, the proceedings gradually merge into the verdict. (ibid.: 236)*

*[he] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault cited in Heinemann, 1996: 264)*

Known in English as *The Trial*, the original German title of *Der Prozess* more aptly conveys the oppressive instrumentality of systems such as the RAE/REF and in particular the way, as Foucault puts it, the subject 'becomes the principle of his own subjection'. As the above quotations indicate, victimisation occurs in the guise of due process and objectivity. The consistent mistake of the protagonist Josef K. (a fact European political scientists should note carefully) is to assume that there is an underlying rationale to the nightmarish scenario that envelops him. Louis Begley summarises the key themes of Kafka's anti-bureaucratic legacy as: (1) loss of

decent community with one's fellow men; (2) the insertion of man into a claustrophobic and totally cruel world, in which indifference and cruelty are the rule; and (3) arousing a sense of revulsion mixed with shame (Begley, 1997: 256).

### **LOSS OF COMMUNITY**

Unlike *The Trial* where the law seeks out the victim, Kafka's *Castle* offers an additional, interesting angle to this internalisation of the bureaucratic experience. It recounts the masochistic degree to which subservience to an overarching and often inchoate system is actually sought after rather than just suffered. At one point the alienating bureaucratic correspondence K receives – the dead letter of the law from 'Chief of Department X' – expresses the de-professionalising nature of bureaucratic correspondence that British academics should have no trouble recognising: 'It was not a consistent letter, in part it dealt with him as with a free man whose independence was recognized, the mode of address, for example, and the reference to his wishes. But there were other places in which he was directly or indirectly treated as a minor employee, hardly visible to the Heads of Department' (Kafka, 2005 [1926]: 29). The RAE/REF undermines traditional notions of collegiality and scholarship. Managerial evaluation techniques stop being just the tools of managers and instead become deeply internalised within scholars who increasingly police and inhibit themselves.

### **THE INSERTION OF MAN INTO A CLAUSTROPHOBIC AND TOTALLY CRUEL WORLD, IN WHICH INDIFFERENCE AND CRUELTY ARE THE RULE**

Claustrophobia is a signature quality of Kafka's work. The legal offices of *The Trial* occupy cramped attic rooms with

labyrinthine dusty corridors; in *The Castle*, K. moves in ever-decreasing circles within the village beneath his target destination; while in 'In the Penal Colony' the protagonist is described as 'the explorer' of a remote self-contained colony. The implacability to reasoned intervention in the various processes described is a defining feature of Kafka's tales. The cruellest aspect of all is the way in which human dignity is undermined by the Law's affective dimension. Rather than acting as independent subjects, people's autonomy is subordinated to their internalisation of oppressive regulations as illustrated by this brief exchange from *The Trial*: "I don't know this Law", K. said. "So much the worse for you", said the warder ... "You'll come to feel it" (Kafka, 1980 [1925]: 22). Most dramatically, 'In the Penal Colony' describes 'a remarkable piece of apparatus' (Kafka, 2005 [1949]: 140) part of which is 'the Harrow' whose attached needles inscribe the Law's sentence upon the flesh of the prisoner.

An important aspect of this 'harrowing' experience of the Kafkaesque Law is the ignorant state the 'offender' is forced to endure. At the metaphorical level, there is the 'harrowing' experience of not knowing exactly what the accusation against you is, while more literally: "He doesn't know the sentence that has been passed on him?" "No", said the officer again ... "There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body" (Kafka, 2005 [1949]: 145). As Gailus succinctly sums up: 'This is the core of the institutional fantasy: a machine that short-circuits semantic mediation and directly inscribes the Symbolic into the Real of bare life' (Gailus, 2001: 300). Kafka's genius and literature's inimitable strength resides in this ability to portray the institutional fantasy in a fantastical form that encapsulates through its very novelistic license the true essence of the institution's cruel indifference. Once again, European

political scientists should ask themselves whether this bureaucratic aspect of the RAE/REF is one they wish to experience.

### **AROUSING A SENSE OF REVULSION MIXED WITH SHAME**

Literature is vividly able to express the costs in terms of human dignity when the Law functions with indifference. Beyond the inchoate guilt and powerless revulsion felt by the individual, however, Kafka repeatedly uses the evocative image of canine submissiveness to highlight a wider group notion of shame. For example, from 'In the Penal Colony': '... the condemned man looked so like a submissive dog that one might have thought he could be left to run free on the surrounding hills and would only need to be whistled for when the execution was due to begin' (Kafka, 2005 [1949]: 140); and yet more memorably in the final lines of *Der Prozess*, as Josef K. mourns the nature of his servile death: "'Like a dog!'" he said. It was as if the shame of it would outlive him' (Kafka, 1980 [1925]: 254). Sternstein argues that most Kafka critics concentrate upon his work's depiction of individual guilt and fail to take into account adequately the performative, public aspect of shame that he presents: 'A truly radical reading of Kafka, then, must underscore the equally important (if not more important) interest in the performance of a collective shame. "In the Penal Colony", ... is a document of shame written upon the body politic' (Sternstein, 2001: 318). Similarly, the RAE/REF creates a harrowing apparatus that every seven years produces a document of shame written upon the British academic body.

Building further upon the notion of the Law's cruel indifference, an important aspect of large bureaucratic machines is the successful way in which they manage to reconstitute whole environments into realms of operational thinking in which

objections based upon principles and ethics are made to seem anachronistic: 'the unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces of which prevent their realization' (Marcuse, 2002 [1964]: 6). An important aspect of this ethical decaffeination is what Kafka terms *Steigerungen* – the rhetorical manoeuvres and evasions used by bureaucrats to avoid confronting directly matters of basic decency. Heinemann (1996) points out that Alfred Weber (Max's brother) used Kafka's notion of metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*) to explain the 'spiritual paralysis' that turned the traditional upper classes into bureaucrats for whom the German Enlightenment tradition of *bildung* (the development of a well-rounded, educated character) is replaced by a perverted obsession with the bureaucratic apparatus and its smooth functioning as an end in itself.

Ultimately, shame's power lies in the way it encourages one to steer a moral path between individual autonomy and solidarity with others. In Sartre's philosophical terms, an aesthetically informed sense of shame would help us to maintain a professional life *for-itself* rather than the merely *for-others* sensibility generated by such structures as the RAE/REF. The combined relevance to Kafka's work of a well-developed sense of shame and psychoanalytical categories is indicated by a letter about the bureaucratic mindset he wrote to his friend Baum in which he excoriates himself for exhibiting the worst aspects of the bureaucratic mindset (*Beamtengeist*) – an 'art of calculation' (*Berechnungskunst*) that he likens to a form of a neurotic childish subservience to an over-weening paternal will. He berates himself to: 'Improve yourself, escape this bureaucrat's nature, start looking at who you are instead of calculating who you should become. The immediate task is clear: become a soldier' (Kafka cited in Heinemann, 1996: 259).

So, it is to the example of two fictional soldiers and their spirited opposition to the apparatus of war that we now turn in our continued search for inspiration with which to resist the RAE/REF.

## THE GOOD SOLDIERS ŠVJEK AND YOSSARIAN

*Their major concern appears to be to protect and personally benefit from their positions, and to do that they will play by the rules of the game whose larger purpose (if it has one at all) they can only articulate with various versions of the official line. To this enterprise they bring no special talents and no wider vision whatsoever. In many cases, they cope with any challenge or obstacle to their authority with mere aggression ... and repetitive formulations of rhetorical slogans or official procedures (there's a strong sense here that the officials simply cannot think beyond such aggressively asserted formulaic defences of their own positions). (Johnston, 2004: 4)*

Johnston's summary of the tautological mentality Švjek confronts should be familiar to most British scholars aghast at the poor intellectual quality and the disingenuous and aggressively self-serving nature of those who have shamelessly hitched themselves to the RAE/REF bandwagon. Its central critical thrust is supplemented well by *Catch-22's* (1978 [1955]) depiction of the protagonist Yossarian's similar encounters with bureaucracy's essential mindlessness. So well in fact that the book's title has become, along with the adjective *Kafkaesque*, the standard English phrases for the innately mindless *cul de sacs* at which bureaucracy excels. Josef K.'s compliance to the surreal vagaries of the labyrinthine system he confronted produced neither happiness nor his eventual freedom. A strong message of *The Trial* is the

disastrous role played by his own supine acquiescence. In contrast to Kafka's depiction of this failure, Hašek's Švjek and Heller's Yossarian demonstrate more positive examples of the soldier Kafka wanted to be and how they spiritedly spend more time battling against their own military bureaucracy than any external enemy. Arguably the most appropriate character from the tragi-comic novel *Catch-22* for political scientists to bear in mind (especially as universities become increasingly and shamelessly commercial) is Milo Minderbender, the human incarnation of the naked profit motive: 'Milo had been caught red-handed in the act of plundering his countrymen, and, as a result, his stock had never been higher' (Heller, 1978: 391). In the most entertainingly surreal example of Milo's systemic capitalist logic, he oversees the bombing of his own troops on the basis that if the troops have to be bombed it is better that it is done by his commercial syndicate – because what benefits the syndicate benefits everyone. This resonates strongly with the tendency of academics under RAE/REF regimes to justify their mutual surveillance and control on the basis of 'let's do it to ourselves before it is done to us'. Like Milo, the average RAE/REF 'expert' is more entrepreneurial and innovative in finding ways to exploit his own community than outsiders could hope to be – scholars and soldiers alike are often at more risk from the dangers of 'friendly fire' than any external agencies out to get them.

Faced with this situation of institutionalised bad faith in the university sector, reason-based critique has innate limitations. Pointing out the essential vacuity of various processes and mind-sets fails to effect change when the perpetrators are ultimately fully aware of the disingenuous nature of their actions. Both Kafka and Hašek show us that the operations of machine-like organisations 'induce a semantic collapse in which the meaning

of the elements proper to the conceptions of justice are obliterated ... From this ... emerges a Law devoid of any specific meaning. The machine embodies the fantasy of a symbolism without semantic mediation, of a supreme and transcendent language so pure as to be untranslatable into ordinary words' (Gailus, 2001: 297). In the RAE/REF this phenomenon is readily apparent in the rise of a whole new terminology with which to discuss the management of research rather than the traditional scholarly discussion of actual concepts. *The Good Soldier Svjek* is replete with examples of the hollowed-out symbolism that results from this lack of substantive semantic mediation so that the:

*... narrative is constantly mocking symbols for such control – everything from crucifixes and prayers to official images and law books (the novel begins with a discussion of a fly shitting on a portrait of the emperor). These signs of authority are all officially sanctioned, but no one believes in them; people simply use them as instruments of their own authority in a system which reinforces itself by reflex appeals to such traditions. (Johnston, 2004: 4)*

The desperate search of Otto Katz, the drunken chaplain, for objects with which to conduct the Mass encapsulates this evisceration of symbolic content in a manner directly applicable to the various procedures of the RAE: 'fake materials will do just as well as the real thing because what matters is the bureaucratic public ritual and people's faith in it – any genuine spiritual or ideal meaning has long since disappeared' (*ibid.* 4).

Švjek's response to the situation in which he finds himself offers a more positive model for political scientists than that provided by Kafka: 'Seeking desperately to cooperate with the enigmatic system and through unshakable logic to defend himself against the unfounded

## *'Opportunities for flannelling also exist within RAE/REF structures.'*

charges, Josef K. ends up dead. By matching the illogic of the system with his own idiosyncrasies, Josef S. stays alive' (Steiner, 2000: 47). After the anthropologist F.G. Bailey, Fleming and Sewell (2002) use the term *Švjekism* to describe a type of organisational disengagement, that despite the apparent oxymoron is an *active* disengagement – 'the ability to comply without conforming'. In this mode of resistance, 'the self is detached from the normative prescriptions of managerialism through irony and cynicism ... disengagement of this kind is not capitulation; rather it is a re-engagement with another register of organizational life' (Fleming and Sewell, 2002: 860). Yossarian is a good example of a purveyor of the sort of 'gallows humour' that creates a breathing space within oppressive bureaucratic environments. Žižek (1989) points out, ideology in today's world is less a question of traditional Marxist false consciousness, but rather, a situation in which people know what they are doing is alienating, but continue to do it anyway. Similarly, Yossarian: '... knew there was no such thing. Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up' (Heller, 1978: 432).

The innate irrationality of the *Catch-22* Yossarian caught within is also faced by those currently suffering the worst excesses of the RAE. He is only able to avoid flying more combat missions if he can prove he is mentally unstable yet the

desire not to fly any more missions is treated as proof of his sanity. Likewise, to avoid accusations of sour grapes and intellectual inadequacy, academics critical of the RAE need to have published material that meets its requirements. One potentially enabling difference, however, resides in the extent to which the more explicitly documented terminology of the RAE/REF allows for playful reformulations designed to create resistance in a manner adopted by Švjek: 'The reinscription of formulaic expressions charged with a definite set of values into a nonstandard context is the most obvious example of a ludic challenge to authority' (Steiner, 2000: 48). In practical terms, academics are able to use such strategies of Švjekism as *flannelling*:

*Flannelling can be said to occur when the authorities are part of the audience but cannot acknowledge the fact without confounding their own beliefs or principles. Unlike the 'arse-kisser', 'creep', or 'company suck' who displays a conspicuously devotional adherence to the organization's norms in the hope of gaining preferment, the flanneller does not wish to climb the greasy pole. On the contrary, through an elaborate, even exaggerated display of deference, enthusiasm, or conformity, the flanneller signals the exact opposite, displaying contempt for those very norms (Fleming and Sewell, 2002: 866).*

Hašek's novel abounds with examples, often humorous, of how Švjek over-identifies with the military. For example, upon seeing a General passing, he causes chaos by calling all soldiers on the latrines to stand to attention.

Opportunities for flannelling also exist within RAE/REF structures. An important aspect of British university bureaucracy is the use of various league tables that rank universities in terms of performance in teaching and research. These tables are

*'in recent years,  
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used to create a routinised enchantment that acts as a poor substitute for the bureaucratically sponsored disenchantment of previous scholarly values – but in the context of university managerial drives for otherwise vaguely defined notions of 'excellence', the need to improve one's university's league standing can be used to defend high quality scholarship against bureaucratic incursions. Managers themselves may become vulnerable to the charge that unlike the internationally recognised scholars they oversee, they do not provide direct evidence of their own contribution to 'excellence'. Referring to the Robert De Niro, guerilla plumber, character in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*, Žižek playfully points out that: '... in a bureaucracy ... the ultimate crime is simply and directly to do the job one is supposed to do' (Žižek, 2006: 116). Other examples of flannelling could also involve the deliberate pushing to the limit of the logic of student satisfaction surveys to include complaints about lack of genuine intellectual stimulation, opportunities to benefit from research-informed teaching, while the inevitable corporate-inspired rise of staff satisfaction surveys nevertheless create good opportunities to embarrass and overload managers.

The stubborn refusal of the individual truly subjectively identify with the bureaucratic apparatus is both the grounds for Švjekism but also the perverted careerism of the apparatchik. Žižek (1989) points out that an important aspect of Kafka's work is the way it, *avant la lettre*, adds an important missing dimension to Althusser's notion of interpellation: 'The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to

offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel' (Žižek, 1989: 45). This traumatic, real kernel that academics seek to escape is arguably a genuine atmosphere of intellectual openness and enquiry where one's speculations and writings risk meaningful critique rather than institutionalised endorsement. A further contention would be that systems such as the RAE/REF thus act as convenient alibi for the academic profession's inability to stem the flow of education's commercialisation and banality – a bureaucratic parallel to the Left's excessive investment in the linguistic policing of political correctness just as its practical ability to effect substantive political change was at an historical low.

## **BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER AND DIOGENES THE KYNIC**

*Kafka's genius was to eroticize bureaucracy, the nonerotic entity if ever there was one ... What can be more 'divine' than the traumatic encounter with the bureaucracy at its craziest ... It is in such encounters that we get a glimpse of another order beyond mere earthly everyday reality. Like God, bureaucracy is simultaneously all-powerful and impenetrable, capricious, omnipresent and invisible. (Žižek, 2006: 115–16)*

Despite political science and other social sciences being conceptually well placed to reflect upon the processes involved in contemporary iron cages of rationality, in recent years, British social scientists have been supinely acquiescent. A rare example of professional nous was the award to some twenty British philosophy departments of a maximum RAE rating as a result of their peer-review process. This neat demonstration of a philosophical slicing through the Gordian knot effectively undermined the whole RAE process within that one discipline – but unfortunately, such acts of resistance have

proved to be the exception, rather than the rule. For Žižek, such bureaucratic perversion represents sublimated forms of sex and religion for our jaded, disenchanted times. He attempts to use Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener' as a model for resisting bureaucracy's seductive charms. In this story, after an initial period of productive employment, the eponymous clerk invariably responds to requests to carry out his duties with the response 'I would prefer not to'. Žižek analyses Bartleby's refusal in similar terms to the active disengagement of Švjekism :

*His 'I would prefer not to' is to be taken literally: it says 'I would prefer not to,' not 'I don't prefer (or care) to' ... in his refusal of his Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it. This is how we pass from a politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation,' which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation. (Žižek, 2006: 381)*

A rather large problem for political scientists seeking inspiration from Bartleby's new mode of politics, however, is that his affirmation of a non-predicate also includes starving himself to death – since he also prefers not to eat!

Revisiting the notion of the canine, however, offers a potentially more productive model. In contrast to Kafka's emphasis upon canine submissiveness, the kynic tradition of the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Kynic (from the Greek for dog – *kyon*) offers a dog-like spontaneity and shamelessness as an antidote to the truly shameful fate of Joseph K. Perhaps history's greatest flanneller, Diogenes achieved notoriety in ancient Athenian society for his shockingly active disengagement with conventional

behaviour including public acts of masturbation and defecation. Less extreme kynic episodes relevant to dealing with bureaucracy included his famous interaction with Alexander The Great, who upon asking Diogenes (sitting in his barrel) what he could do for him, met with the reply 'stand out of my light'. Additional instances such as publicly begging from statue (in order to practice disappointment) demonstrate a healthy recalcitrant desire to problematise the previously discussed tendency of bureaucracy to evacuate substantive meaning. Thus, we are told that the reason he left his homeland of Sinope for Athens in the first place was due to the accusation that he had adulterated the coinage (*paracharaxai* to *nomisma*), an accusation of wider significance in that:

*... if monetary forgery undermines the government by stripping it of its economic power, play devalues the concept of truth, the currency of intellectual rulers ... the phrase paracharaxai to nomisma ... is a pun based on the homonymity of nomisma, which originally signified anything sanctioned by law or convention and only through a subsequent extension was applied to money as legal tender. (Steiner, 2000: 41)*

The semantic importance of this adulteration is the way in which Diogenes is able to undermine all pre-conceived standards and institutionally driven notions of truth.

It is this kynic tradition depicted in characters such as Švjek that political scientists opposing the RAE/REF need to draw upon. In the very first sentence of Hašek's novel it is alluded to when we are told that after leaving the army certified as an imbecile, Švjek made a living dealing in 'ugly, mongrel monstrosities whose pedigrees he forged' (Hašek, 1974 [1921–1923]: 3). An important strand of Peter Sloterdijk's magisterial *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988) is his tracing

*'left wing academics seem to have no problem in adopting a series of neo-liberal policies.'*

of how the resistance of the *kynic* is subordinated in the modern world to the manipulative acts of the *cynic* of which the bureaucratic mindset is a typical example. Even if only as models existing in the pages of fiction, characters such as Švjek and Yossarian keep the kynic flame alive at a time when: '... managerial technologies now target the very selves of employees through various strategies of "cultural cleansing" ... the perennial employer/employee divide has finally been sutured. Workers can no longer resist management because ideological enculturation is now so pervasive and widespread ... that even the desire to oppose capital has been subtly erased' (Fleming and Sewell, 2002: 858). Žižek (1989) cites Pascal's observation that one may not believe in religion but the moment one kneels down and partakes in its ceremonies, one begins to believe nevertheless. Likewise, new academic rituals such as RAE league tables create their own accommodationist modes of behaviour. In a disenchanted academe, kynic sensibilities have been replaced by a deeply internalised cynicism. For example, otherwise proud left-wing academics seem to have no problem in adopting a series of neo-liberal policies such as:

- the marketing of postgraduate courses to overseas students that are priced inversely to the average per capita income of those countries;
- the expansion and design of these courses to maximise budgetary rather than pedagogic benefits;
- the co-opting of the students themselves into the further marketing of the courses they are taking so that they

become the smiling faces of their own additional commercial exploitation.

As George Orwell expressed so poignantly, 'the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all' (Orwell cited in Davison, 2001 [1946]: 385).

## CONCLUSION

*... night has fallen and the barbarians  
have not come.  
And some who have just returned from  
the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.  
And now, what's going to happen to us  
without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of  
solution.  
(C. P. Cavafy's *Waiting for the Barbarians*,  
1898)<sup>4</sup>*

The relevance of this article's literary and psychoanalytical concepts to the RAE/REF is the manner in which they provide an explicit and sustained reflection on how individual spirit attempts to survive the harrowing arm of the bureaucratic apparatus. It is this ability to reflect on such dynamics that British academics have lost in their perverted identification with the RAE's multifarious structures, rules, league tables, strategies, etc. The particular object of a sexual fetishist's desire is relatively arbitrary – it could be a high-heeled shoe or a rubber outfit – the important thing is that the various self-generated rules of engagement with that object become the defining feature of how desire is encountered. The sexual pervert replaces the natural ambiguity and open-endedness of desire with his/her clear cut rules and procedures – the RAE/REF replaces the open-ended possibilities of intellectual enquiry within a community of scholars with bureaucratic notions of disciplinary purity and, paraphrasing our

earlier use of Kracauer, the cynical phenomenon of rigidly policed research groupings as bearers of ideas. Orwell argued that 'A society becomes totalitarian when its structure becomes flagrantly artificial: that is, when its ruling class has lost its function but succeeds in clinging to power by force or fraud' (Orwell cited in Davison, 2001 [1946]: 387). The RAE/REF is a bureaucratically forceful fraud – within its regime, a new ruling class (that has lost its original function: scholarship) clings to power by a perverted investment of energy in the flagrantly artificial structure it has created for its own ends. The omens may not be good for the likely success of resistance from those attempting to act as the soldier Kafka dreamed of being. Bartleby passively starved to death, while Yossarian, despite his much more active disengagement, was forced to flee from the US military machine to Sweden. But Švjek remains a stubborn model for the good scholar. Unlike the compliant Josef K., whose shame would outlive him, the kynic dealer in mongrel monstrosities successfully managed to lead a shameless life and, despite great odds, did so without succumbing to a normally overpowering organisational apparatus.

Above are the concluding lines of Cavafy's poem, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The full poem describes the senators of Rome dressing up in their finery to receive the barbarians they have been told are arriving that day. These lines provide an ironic commentary on the disorientation felt by the Romans upon the eventual non-appearance of the barbarians and the subsequent realisation that the loss of their alien values creates a profound, hitherto unforeseen problem. The Romans have an identity crisis since there is no one against whom they can oppose their civilised values, but more than this, there is the ultimately much more disturbing implication that, without realising it, they have become barbarians themselves. The resonance of this situation

with today's higher education is evident from the most cursory observation of preparations for either an external research or teaching audit. Like Cavafy's barbarians, no one is quite sure in what form these 'initiatives' will appear, if at all, yet this does not stop academics preparing for them with statistical

finery that has more than a passing resemblance to the pomp of the Roman senators. The practical political implications to be faced by European political scientists are that rather than any threat from external barbarians – the enemy may now already be within our gates.

## Notes

- 1 Looking Awry – a phrase used in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Act 2 Scene 1).
- 2 Thomas Gradgrind is a philistine schoolteacher obsessed by facts from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*.
- 3 *Poshlost* is a hard-to-translate Russian word indicating a certain complacent crassness and philistinism of moral character.
- 4 Cited in Lapham (1997: 1).

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