

MAIN SECTION

City and Community in Siegfried Kracauer's Weimar essays

Olivier Agard — Sorbonne University, Paris, France
Contact: olivier.agard@sorbonne-universite.fr

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of Siegfried Kracauer's reflection on *Gemeinschaft* during the Weimar Republic, situating it within broader debates on community, modernity, and urban life in 1920s Germany. It argues that Kracauer's engagement with community cannot be reduced to authoritarian or *völkisch* interpretations, but unfolds through a complex analysis of loss, alienation, and collective experience in the modern metropolis. In his early writings, Kracauer depicts the big city as a space of existential alienation and spiritual homelessness, drawing critically on Georg Simmel's figure of the stranger while reworking it through a religious existentialist lens. Although he rejects any restorative return to organic community, Kracauer insists on the enduring significance of what has been lost. This tension leads to the concept of a negative community, composed of isolated individuals bound by a shared experience of metaphysical waiting and later social disenchantment. During the second half of the 1920s, this framework becomes increasingly secularized and politicized as Kracauer turns toward mass society, public space, and the emergence of an urban *Publikum*. The article shows how he seeks to move beyond the opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* by reactivating Enlightenment ideals while critically addressing mass culture and democratic fragility in Weimar Germany.

KEYWORDS

Siegfried Kracauer; *Gemeinschaft*; Weimar Republic; Urban Modernity; Mass Culture

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As we know, the category of *Gemeinschaft* was central to political and social philosophy in Germany in the 1920s. The question of the possibility of a community in the modern age cuts across all political and ideological currents and takes a variety of forms. The issue of community cannot be reduced to its authoritarian versions: *Gemeinschaft* is not necessarily *Volksgemeinschaft*, and there are also democratic uses of this notion. This question of community never ceased to preoccupy Siegfried Kracauer in his Weimar years, and I want to analyze the development of his thinking on this point, showing how it is also linked to his analysis of urban modernity. The city is both the place where the original, traditional community is lost and the place where new collective experiences emerge.

The loss of community

In his early writings, Kracauer saw the city as a place of alienation and atomization. In the city, individuals are uprooted. Modern individualism is thought of in a purely negative mode and appears as the consequence of the absence of a relationship to an all-embracing meaning in a utilitarian civilization that represses the metaphysical aspirations of the soul:

I have already shown that the capitalist economic system uproots and isolates people [...]. The soul in its fullness is sidelined, it is worthless, indeed, it becomes ballast that many people dominated by the capitalist spirit ultimately throw overboard.¹

This vision of the hostile impersonality of the modern world is partly inspired by Georg Simmel, but Kracauer criticizes Simmel for not providing a solution. Simmel, a thinker of the big city and an eminently urban thinker, is the embodiment of modern man who no longer has a *Heimat* anywhere. Kracauer's youth essay on Simmel ends strikingly with a portrait of Simmel as a 'transcendental homeless man' and a stranger. It is because he is a stranger, a nomad, that Simmel is a good sociologist, because he sees what sedentary people do not see (this is the epistemological privilege of the stranger), but because he is a stranger, he has no access to the essential dimension of human experience, the living in a meaningful *Gemeinschaft*:

Therefore: however much he knows about the life of those banished to the place, he has not experienced their innermost happiness. He is a thousand times richer than they are, because he passes them by, close and familiar to each of them once, and he is a thousand times

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Georg Simmel*, in *Werke*, vol. 9/II: *Frühe Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, hrsg. Ingrid Belke unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biehl (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), 259: "Ich habe bereits gezeigt, dass die kapitalistische Wirtschaftsordnung den Menschen entwurzelt und vereinzelt [...]. Die Seele in ihrer Fülle wird außer Kurs gesetzt, sie gilt nichts, ja, sie wird zum Ballast, den viele von kapitalistischem Geist beherrschte Menschen am Ende über Bord werfen."

poorer than they are, because he has no home like theirs. This person is Simmel: a guest, a wanderer.²

When Kracauer speaks of *Heimat*, he is not referring to the idealized rural world in *Heimatliteratur*, but to participation in a community that is itself linked to a transcendent meaning. By taking up the Simmelian figure of the stranger and making it a figure of modern man in general, Kracauer draws Simmel towards a form of religious existentialism, even if the lost community is not linked to any positive religion. This nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft* and transcendent meaning does not exist in this form in Simmel. As we know, Simmel saw the city as a threat to subjective culture, but also as the site of the emergence of new forms of individualism. So, for Simmel, it is not a question of returning to the village community, which he describes in a very negative way, but it is a fact that he also uses very violent terms to describe the urban environment, speaking for example of *Vergewaltigungen der Großstadt*.³ Kracauer's perspective in his first texts is marked by a form of personalism with a religious dimension and by the philosophy of existence. Kracauer's proximity to a philosophy of existence that characterizes the experience of the modern subject as inauthentic is obvious in his criticism of the film *Die Strasse* in 1923.⁴ Kracauer considers the film as a language to be an adequate description of modern urban reality. The big city is the embodiment of this modern world, in which there is no longer any relationship with a transcendent meaning, and therefore no longer any relationship between individuals, or between individuals and things. The modern condition is described as alienation, but it is an existential alienation:

The film *Die Strasse*, which is now being shown in some German cities, shows a world in which the work of connection remains undone. These people in the big city street have no relation to the upper, they are only such an outside as the street itself is, on which much is going on without anything happening. The movement of the figures resembles the whirl of atoms, they do not meet but collide, they drift apart and do not separate.⁵

2 *ibid.*, 270: "Darum: So viel er auch weiß von dem Leben der an den Ort Gebannten, ihr eigenstes Glück hat er nicht erfahren. Er ist tausendfach reicher als sie, denn er geht an ihnen vorüber, jedem einmal nah und vertraut, und er ist tausendfach ärmer als sie, denn er hat keine Heimat wie sie. Dieser Mensch ist Simmel: ein Gast, ein Wanderer."

3 Georg Simmel, "Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben," in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7/I: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 118.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, "Der Künstler in dieser Zeit," in *Werke*, vol. 5/II: *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1924-1927*, hrsg. Inka Mülder-Bach; unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biehl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 232-242.

5 *ibid.*, 236: "Das jetzt in manchen deutschen Städten vorgeführte Filmwerk *Die Straße* zeigt eine Welt, in der das Werk der Verknüpfung ungetan bleibt. Diese Menschen in der Großstadtstraße haben keinen Bezug auf das Oberer, sie sind nur noch ein solches Außen, wie die Straße selbst es ist, auf der sich vieles begibt, ohne das etwas geschieht. Das Getriebe der Figuren gleicht dem Wirbel der Atome, sie begegnen sich nicht, sondern prallen zusammen, sie treiben auseinander und trennen sich nicht."

The social order or rather disorder referred to here is that of *Gesellschaft* as opposed to *Gemeinschaft*. Kracauer recalls Ferdinand Tönnies' definitions in his review of Helmuth Plessner *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* in 1924. This definition includes the word 'Getriebe,' which Kracauer also used in his commentary on *Die Strasse*:

If society is understood as the inorganic hustle and bustle [*Getriebe*] of the soulless, purpose-driven people who move in a world mechanized by capitalism and technology, then Community is thought of as the organic togetherness of all people who know how to put themselves in the right order.⁶

But while insisting on this absence of a community bond, Kracauer considers that community has become impossible. He always makes it very clear that his thinking is not about restoring community and going back to the roots. He clearly criticizes conservative political uses of the category of *Gemeinschaft*. For him, Plessner has the merit of warning against the community fanatics (*Gemeinschaftsfanatiker*⁷) who want to abolish civilization. However, there is in this same review a criticism of Plessner, insofar as for Kracauer individualistic society is not self-sufficient, and can only make sense if it is the expression of a community that precedes society.⁸ There is no *Gesellschaft* without community, and here Kracauer returns to another thinker who had also an influence on him, albeit less visibly than in the case of Simmel: Max Scheler, who thought that society was incapable of producing solidarity on its own: solidarity can only emerge in a *Gemeinschaft*.⁹ At the same time, Kracauer considers that proposals for rebuilding the community are arbitrary and artificial: there is no longer a collective meaning, and we have to take note of this impossibility of community, but we have to remain aware that something has been lost. In the text "Those who wait," Kracauer characterizes this attitude as *warten*.¹⁰ But it is important to see that the city remains the horizon of Kracauer's thinking: those who wait are city dwellers and have no intention of leaving the city. Like Kracauer, they go to the cinema and read crime novels.

6 Siegfried Kracauer, "Philosophie der Gemeinschaft," in *Werke*, vol. 5/II, 148: "Versteht man unter dieser etwa das anorganische Getriebe, der entseelten, nur noch zweckbestimmten Menschen, die sich in der durch Kapitalismus und Technik mechanisierten Welt bewegen, so wird jene als das organische Miteinander der ganzen Menschen gedacht, die sich in die richtige Ordnung zu schicken wissen."

7 *ibid.*, 150.

8 *ibid.*, 151.

9 Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: NUP, 1973), 527.

10 Siegfried Kracauer, "Those who wait," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans., ed., and introd. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: HUP, 1995), 129-140.

The negative community

The critique of the individualistic and impersonal *Gesellschaft* was widely shared in Weimar Germany, even if the presuppositions of this critique and the solutions proposed could be very different. With Plessner,¹¹ we can consider that there were two main responses to this situation: that of the *völkisch* movement with its idea of an organic community based on a common cultural identity, or even on race, and that of communism: in this case, the community had to have a rational and universal basis. But if we look a little more closely, there were also other solutions, such as Christian democracy based on religious personalism. Rarer were the positions taken in favor of liberal individualism. There was also the idea that the first step was to develop elite micro-communities. This conception had a long tradition in Germany and could be traced back at least to Friedrich Schiller's idea of the aesthetic state (*"ästhetischer Staat"*). In general, it was a more cultural than directly political vision of community. In the context of the early 1920s, this position could be compatible with a republicanism of reason and a mistrust, even hostility, towards *völkisch* thought, as in the case of Ernst Troeltsch, who in his *Spectator*-Briefe polemicized very clearly against the idea of a homogeneous community of the people. At the same time, Troeltsch spoke of "germ cells [*Keimzellen*]" to qualify small groups sharing a common spiritual aspiration.¹² In a way, Kracauer is part of this tradition, but in a deliberately paradoxical way. If you read the text "Those who wait" carefully, you will see that Kracauer is suggesting that city dwellers are indeed isolated atoms, but that those of them who are aware that something has been lost, those who are waiting, form a kind of community. However, it is an invisible community that can be described as negative community. But the experience of the loss of meaning does have a collective dimension and creates a bond that unites city dwellers, even if they are not aware of it. Those who wait are a collective; they form a kind of community of destiny (Kracauer uses the word *Schicksalsgefährten*). He speaks of them in the plural, and tells us that there are many of them:

There are a lot of people these days who, although unaware of each other, are nevertheless linked by a common fate. Having eluded the profession of any particular faith, they have acquired their share of the cultural and educational wealth generally available today and tend to live with an alert sense of their time. These scholars, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, students, and intellectuals of all sorts spend most of their days in the loneliness of the large cities. And since they are sitting in offices, receiving clients, directing negotiations, and attending lectures, they quite often forget their actual inner being in the din of

11 Helmuth Plessner, *The Limits of Community. A Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. and introd. Andrew Wallace (New York: Prometheus, 1999).

12 Ernst Troeltsch, "Der Historismus und seine Überwindung," in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 17, hrgs. Gangolf Hübinger in Zusammenarbeit mit Andreas Terwey (Berlin: de Gruyter 2006), 102.

the hustle and bustle and fancy themselves free of the burden that secretly weighs upon them. But when they do pull back from the surface into the center of their being, they are overcome by a profound sadness which arises from the recognition of their confinement in a particular spiritual situation, a sadness that ultimately overruns all layers of their being. It is this metaphysical suffering from the lack of higher meaning in the world, a suffering due to an existence in an empty space, which makes these people companions in misfortune¹³.

Those who wait are isolated, but they aspire to a self that would be common to all humanity. Perhaps when he spoke of those who wait, Kracauer was thinking of the Judeo-German intellectuals who frequented the *Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, of which he was a member at the time. The article "Der Künstler in dieser Zeit," mentioned above, appeared in the first issue of the newspaper *Der Morgen*, founded by Julius Goldstein and intended to be the newspaper of enlightened Judaism. In a way, this idea of a negative community of the companions in misfortune can also be found in Kracauer's essay on *Detektivroman*. Kracauer explains there that the hotel lobby is an inverted image of the assembly of the faithful in the Church. In the hotel lobby, individuals are in a space that interrupts the social "Getriebe," revealing its emptiness. But unlike those who wait, the people in the hotel lobby are not aware of this emptiness. The individuals who form a paradoxical community in the hotel lobby that is unaware of itself.¹⁴ This absence of a community link has consequences for architecture. This is the underlying reason for Kracauer's fight against ornament, because in a German romantic tradition ornament was seen as the expression of community, as a *gemeinschaftlicher Mittelpunkt*, as Friedrich Schlegel puts it.¹⁵ For Kracauer, if ornament is no longer possible, it is because we live in an age of spiritual anarchy, devoid of any relationship to a higher meaning, and therefore incapable of producing a style unlike previous eras. This is why the only possible point of agreement is negative: it is the renunciation of ornament, the nakedness, the simplicity of form. Kracauer uses the word *Kargheit*, and on this point he joins the Werkbund. In an article on the Werkbund's exhibition *Die Wohnung* in Stuttgart in 1927, he describes the attitude of the Werkbund as an attitude of expectation: "Perhaps, say the Werkbund people, a new abundance will come later, but for the time being, austerity is called for..."¹⁶ This idea of a negative community united in loss and mourning will never completely disappear from Kracauer's thought—at least in the Weimarian phase of his work—but in the second half of the 1920s it becomes secularized. In the book about the employees,

13 Kracauer, "Those who wait," 129.

14 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby," in *The Mass Ornament*, 176.

15 Michel Collomb et Gérard Raulet (dir.), *Critique de l'ornement de Vienne à la postmodernité* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck 1992), 15.

16 Siegfried Kracauer, "Das neue Bauen: Zur Stuttgarter Werkbund-Ausstellung: *Die Wohnung*," in *Werke*, vol. 5/II, 636: "Vielleicht, sagen die Werkbundeute, kommt später wieder eine neue Fülle, einstweilen aber ist Kargheit geboten [...]."

Die Angestellten, the employees are also orphans of disenchantment, but it is a political and social disenchantment. In both cases, we are dealing with alienation, and in both cases the reign of instrumental rationality is a symptom of this alienation, but Kracauer is moving towards a more political and social reading of modernity. If employees are *obdachlos*, it is not because they have lost the link to a higher meaning, but because social and political change has undermined the bourgeois worldview to which they subscribed. The "mass of salaried employees" is "spiritually homeless."¹⁷ Here, Kracauer introduces the concept of mass. The negative community of employees forms a mass, and the term 'mass' is used again and again in *Die Angestellten* to refer to this new social group, which is also associated with the big city. Kracauer emphasizes at the beginning of the book that the expedition into the *terra incognita* of the world of the employees takes us to the heart of the big city.

The mass, the public, the human community

For Kracauer, the notion of mass never has a completely positive connotation. The masses are generally characterized as living in false consciousness, and as a product of rationalized capitalism. In his essay "Das Ornament der Masse," Kracauer distinguishes the mass from the *Volk*. The *Volk* corresponds to an organic community and belongs to the past. If the mass ornament, unlike the traditional ornament, is purely geometric, this is because it is no longer the expression of a living community, but of a rationalized organization that has become an end in itself. However, the fact that this organization produces ornaments shows that it threatens to fall back into myth. Against this threat of a return to myth, Kracauer reactivates the *Aufklärung* project. The goal of history appears to be the establishment of a reasonable human community, what he calls "the advent of the man of reason."¹⁸ The community is no longer a lost religious community, but a community to be built, on reasonable foundations, and this is why Kracauer explains in "Das Ornament der Masse" that capitalism has not rationalized too much, but too little. At the end of the process, we can hope for the advent of a universal ornament.¹⁹ In this text dating from 1927, and therefore from a period of stabilization in the Weimar Republic, Kracauer considers modernity and Germany to be at a tipping point. Either we move towards a kind of alliance between technical rationality and myth, which risks throwing society back into nature, but into a nature that is more brutal than it has ever been, or we continue the process of rationalization, which presupposes that we master and humanize the unleashed instrumental and capitalistic rationality, which nevertheless constitutes a

17 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (London: Verso 1998), 88.

18 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament", in *The Mass Ornament*, 83.

19 *ibid.*, 86.

necessary moment. In this project, Kracauer refers above all to the French *Lumières*, no doubt because he attributes to it—particularly in the criticism of religion—a more radical and ‘materialist’ orientation than to the German *Aufklärung*. At the same time, Max Horkheimer also drew on this tradition of the French *Lumières*.²⁰ For Kracauer, this radicalism was necessary in a country where public space was occupied by myths and worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*). Public space became a central issue in Kracauer’s thinking at the time. The question was how to move from the mass to the rational human community. This is where the notion of the public/*Publikum* comes in, because the mass is also a *Publikum*, an audience. In this respect, it seems to me that one of Kracauer’s original features, which sets him apart in the intellectual landscape of the Weimar Republic, is that in the mid-1920s he tried to go beyond the opposition between society and community by reactivating the Kantian notion of public space. If the city is the place of the masses, it is also the place where an audience is born. This audience is the people who rush to the cinema and consume the new forms of entertainment. In Kracauer, the *Publikum* is no longer, as it was for Kant, the cultivated bourgeoisie taking part in an academic debate, but a massified public in an enlarged public space as a result of the functional democratization of society and the industrialization of the media. We could say the public space has an aesthetic dimension. It is only in the metropolis that this new public can emerge, as Kracauer notes. It is only in the big city that the mass becomes a public:

Masses also gather in the provinces; but there they are subjected to a pressure which does not allow them the spiritual and cultural fulfillment appropriate to their number and real social significance.²¹

What makes the mass a public is that it expresses cultural needs that need to be satisfied and despite its initial reluctance, the bourgeois public is in the process of amalgamating with these middle classes to form the public of the big city, which constitutes a new social entity, a sort of new collective subject:

There is little room left for the so-called educated classes, who must either join in the dining or maintain their snobbish aloofness. Their provincial isolation is, in any case, at an end. They are being absorbed by the masses, and this gives rise to the homogeneous cosmopolitan audience in which everyone has the same responses, from the bank directors to the salesclerk, from the diva to the stenographer.²²

20 Max Horkheimer, “Aufklärung,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9/1: *Nachgelassene Schriften 1914-1931: Vorlesung über die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1987), 346-480.

21 Siegfried Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s picture palaces,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 324.

22 *ibid.*, 325.

Of course, in some respects this mass public is a negative community, because it is a partly alienated public. Kracauer is a critic of what Theodor L.W. Adorno and Horkheimer would call *Kulturindustrie*, and as a film critic he leads a campaign against the films of the UFA film company, which he analyses from the angle of a critique of ideology. But at the same time Kracauer considers that there is a positive democratic potential in this new public. He invites his bourgeois readership, that of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, not to despise distraction. The distraction that this audience is so fond of has the merit of corresponding to the current stage of culture, which it is necessary to confront. The reality to which distraction corresponds is that of disorder, of a *Durcheinander*, of what Kracauer calls "*Unordnung [disorder] der Gesellschaft*," but there is something subversive in this *Durcheinander*, which is its dimension of improvisation: for Kracauer, Berlin's cinemas, those palaces of entertainment, must stop imitating theatres: distraction, then, has the merit of *Aufrichtigkeit*, but it also holds out the promise of recomposition. Kracauer tells us that the masses easily allow themselves to be stupefied only because they are so close to the truth. They are closer to the truth than the nostalgic bourgeois.

The pathologies of the public sphere

As his critique of *Kulturindustrie* and the reactionary ideologies propagated by a cinema that obscures social reality shows, Kracauer is aware of the pathologies of the public space. Kracauer considers that in Germany, public debate is polluted by visions of the world that, because of their totalizing ambition, prevent the perception of a common world. Political conflict, which should be about choices concerning real living conditions, is being displaced by cultural wars between *Weltanschauungen*. Architecture is again a symptom of this fragmentation, as can be seen from the way Kracauer comments on plans to build certain monuments, in particular the conversion of the *Neue Wache* into a memorial to the dead of the First World War. He believes that the minimalist solution adopted by Heinrich Tessenow is the only one possible in a country that cannot agree on a common language: "The fact is that we are currently almost completely denied a positive statement [...]. A memorial to the fallen in the Great War: if we want to be honest, it must not be much more than an empty space."²³ For Kracauer, there can be no public space without some kind of pre-political and shared common world, and that is what is lacking in Germany. This is why political confrontation in the Weimar Republic takes the form of a clash of worldviews in which the reality of material conditions is entirely secondary. This is expressed in the text "*Flaggen [Flags]*," written on the occasion of an election day in the Prussian Landtag

23 Siegfried Kracauer, "Tessenow baut das Berliner Ehrenmal," in *Werke*, vol. 5/III: *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1928-1931*, hrsg. Inka Müllder-Bach; unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biebl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 287.

in July 1932, which appears as a pure clash of symbols:

It started with the swastika flags. They have been silently appearing for a few days, hanging out of windows here and there [...]. In the meantime, shortly before election Sunday, the symbols of the other parties have followed in time [...]. They do not spread cheerfulness, these flags. They wave gloomily against each other, heralding programs that are killing each other and revealing the bitterness that fills the people who seem to walk peacefully among them.²⁴

The big city, which is Berlin, now appears as a place of violence and segregation. Referring to a debate between a representative of the nationalist 'German Youth Order' and a Social Democrat student, Kracauer shows the impossibility of a democratic confrontation of discourses in Germany: "As usually happens in Germany, the dialogue rose to ideological heights, and in the end the idea of a people's state based on self-administration was contrasted with that of a socialist planned economy."²⁵ This diagnosis of the unreality of the debate, of the absence of a common world, explains the nostalgia for a natural community that we sometimes perceive in Kracauer, particularly when he speaks of France. In a 1930 letter to Adorno, in which he expressed concern about the political situation in Germany, he wrote of France, where he was at the time:

It is just that I observe over and over again in France—where, however, there is also plenty to criticize—everything that has been destroyed back home: fundamental decency, good nature as a whole and, along with this, every kind of trust that people have in one another.²⁶

Kracauer finds an image of this pre-political natural community, which does not exist in Germany, in René Clair's film *Sous les toits de Paris*, as shown in the text "Schlager im Exil." In the heart of Berlin, the narrator hears a song being sung in chorus by passers-by on the street: Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris*. This reminds him of a scene of communion he experienced in Paris after the aviators Costes and Bellonte crossed the Atlantic Ocean: this crossing had inspired a song that spread throughout the city. Kracauer had observed in Paris how this song sparked moments of communion that brought together all social classes:

24 Siegfried Kracauer, "Flaggen," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV: *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1932-1965*, hrsg. Inka Mülder-Bach; unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biebl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 90: "Angefangen hat es mit den Hakenkreuzfahnen. Seit einigen Tagen sind sie stillschweigend aufgetaucht und hängen hier und dort aus den Fenstern heraus [...]. Inzwischen sind, kurz von Wahlsonntag, die Symbole der übrigen Parteien noch rechtzeitig nachgerückt [...]. Sie verbreiten keine Heiterkeit, diese Fahnen. Duster wehen sie gegeneinander, kündigen Programme, die sich den Garaus machen, und geben die Erbitterung preis, von der die Menschen erfüllt sind, die scheinbar friedlich unter ihnen hinwandeln."

25 Siegfried Kracauer, "Ausserhalb der Universität-Studenten diskutieren," in *Werke*, vol. 5/III, 656: "Der Dialog schraubte sich, wie es in Deutschland meistens geschieht, zu weltanschaulichen Höhen empor, und am Ende stand der Idee eines auf Selbstverwaltung gegründeten Volksstaates die der sozialistischen Planwirtschaft gegenüber."

26 See Kracauer's letter to Adorno dated August 24, 1930, in Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Correspondence: 1923 - 1966*, trans. Susan Reynolds and Michael Winkler (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 167.

And when the woman began to sing [...] for the second time, the circle of people gradually joined together to form a congregation that sang along more vigorously from verse to verse. Craftsmen, petty bourgeois women and young lads with caps on their heads: they formed one big family [...].²⁷

It is only later that he recognizes this song: it is the song from the opening scene of *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), a film that had been a great success in Germany. We are witnessing in Paris the spontaneous birth of a collective subject intimately linked to the city. In Berlin, however, as Kracauer points out, the song is not understood. This song is like an exile in the streets it doesn't know. This song is therefore in exile. Paris is also a place where there is a harmony between the present and the past, while in Berlin there is no relation to history. This feeling of the absence of a shared common world in Germany is also the reason for Kracauer's interest, which may seem strange in retrospect, in the experience of the 'labor camps,' inspired by Eugen Rostenstock and Hans Dehmel on the one hand, and by certain currents of the *Jugendbewegung* on the other. Officially, the idea behind these camps was to bring together young people from all social backgrounds. Kracauer, recounting a visit to one of these camps, certainly refused to consider them as cells of a 'people's community,' which in his view was a romantic illusion and a political naivety. However, he does explain that the *Arbeitslager* could help to create the conditions for a productive discussion:

That is to say, their possible mission does not extend to the political sphere but is limited purely and exclusively to the pre-political sphere. No royal road leads from them to what, in the strict sense of the word, may be called a national community; but they can help create the conditions for real political action [...].²⁸

They do it by encouraging the confrontation of points of view. For Kracauer, then, this encounter not between ideologies but between people is about laying the foundations for a shared perception that is a pre-political condition for the existence of a positive conflict. In the second half of the 1920s, Kracauer still had hope in the dynamics of the public sphere and the emergence of a sort of collective will, but in the 1930s this hope gave way to growing pessimism. In one of his last texts written in Germany, describing the crowd that came to see the Reichstag in Berlin after it was burnt down, Kracauer noted that the individuals who made up this crowd

27 Siegfried Kracauer, "Schlager im Exil," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV, 451: "Und als dann die Frau zum zweiten Male [...] zu singen begann, schloss sich der Menschenkreis allmählich zu einer Gemeinde zusammen, die von Strophe zu Strophe kräftiger mitsang. Handwerker, Kleinbürgerfrauen und junge Burschen mit der Mütze auf dem Kopf: sie bildeten eine einzige große Familie [...]."

28 Siegfried Kracauer, "Über Arbeitslager," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV, 201-213: "Das heißt, ihre etwaige Mission erstreckt sich nicht auf das politische Gebiet, sondern beschränkt sich nicht auf das politische Gebiet, sondern beschränkt sich rein und ausschließlich aufs vorpolitische. Kein Königsweg führt von ihnen zu dem, was in des Wortes strenger Bedeutung Volksgemeinschaft heißen darf; wohl aber können sie die Voraussetzungen für ein wirkliches politisches Handeln mitschaffen [...]."

and who belonged to all social classes were silent and did not discuss among themselves, whereas this attack on democracy was supposed to provoke a collective reaction and a collective discussion.²⁹ The clash of worldviews has now been replaced by democratic apathy, paving the way for the reign of propaganda. In his later analyses, Kracauer shows that propaganda aims to establish a pseudo-community that is in fact nothing more than an image and a gigantic ornament of the mass, designed to mask a social conflict that cannot be expressed.

After the Second World War, we still find in Kracauer the idea of human community, particularly at the end of *Theory of Film*, where Kracauer deals with the famous exhibition *The Family of Man*, but I think it does not have the same political dimension as in the Weimarian essays. As I said at the beginning, this discussion of *Gemeinschaft* is linked to the Weimarian context. Significantly, the ideal of the *Gemeinschaft* community disappears in the way Kracauer characterizes the film *Die Strasse* and the way he presents the city: the world depicted in the film is no longer opposed to the impossible community. Kracauer now emphasizes that if the street is cinematic, it is because it is an example of the flow of life.³⁰ Another sign of this depolitization is that Kracauer no longer envisages the cinema audience as a collective, as he did in *Kult der Zerstreuung*: he speaks of the spectator in the singular. Cinema appears to be the medium for the aesthetic education of the individual, and the city, although it remains a privileged object for cinema, is no longer the locus of social and political dynamics, as it was in the Weimar texts.

29 Siegfried Kracauer, "Rund um den Reichstag," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV, 395

30 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, PUP, 1997), 72.

Olivier Agard is Professor of Germanic Studies at Sorbonne University's Faculty of Letters. He works on the history of German ideas in the 20th century, with a particular interest in philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen). Among his publications, mention should be made of *Siegfried Kracauer, le chiffonnier mélancolique* (CNRS, 2010) and *Elias Canetti* (Belin, 2003).

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