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Kracauer, S. (2015). *Os empregados*. Lisboa: Antígona.

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Siegfried Kracauer was a German scholar who lived from 1889 to 1966. When he wrote *The Salaried Masses* the world was on the verge of a fateful decade of recession that would lead to the emergence of fascist regimes in Europe and the Second World War of 1939-1945. Kracauer was a Jew and a Marxist and could not have imagined that just a few years later he would be fleeing Nazi Germany to seek refuge in the U.S.A., where he lived until the end of his life. This work, published in 1930, was destroyed by the Hitler regime and was only rescued decades later.

As is the case of other European intellectuals of the period, Kracauer's work can never be limited to any one field of knowledge or any single area of interest. Although an architect and engineer by training, his scholarly work was devoted to the arts, philosophy and the social sciences. Kracauer left behind important contributions to the sociology of art and culture, namely, cinema and photography. His reading of artistic and cultural events came from a highly political perspective with a marked Marxist slant.

In *The Salaried Masses, Kracauer* presents an almost ethnographic view of labour relations in Europe following the First World War. These relationships highlight the complex interrelationship between the bourgeoisie and salaried workers. The build up of the welfare-state, the explosion of consumption and the expansion of services in general greatly increased the number of workers and brought their working conditions closer and closer to those of the proletariat that had arisen with industrialization. Kracauer said, in fact, that these workers constituted an "industrial reserve army of salaried employees" and he distanced himself from those that regarded this group as a new middle class.

The fieldwork that gave rise to this work took place in the human anthill of Berlin, a vibrant city where the rebuilding of industrial and commercial activity following the First World War had created a particular social subgroup. Kracauer describes workers in banks, offices and, most of all in commerce, as men and women who are being exploited by capitalism, despite being enamoured of bourgeois ideas. There is a contradiction here. On the one hand, there were the objective relations of domination and the subordinate position that the workers not only faced at work but also in relation to their salaries. On the other hand, they subjectively developed their place in the social hierarchy, through the fantasy of climbing the social ladder and participating in lifestyles that would differentiate themselves from the working classes and make them indistinguishable from the classes they emulated.

Their attempts to distinguish themselves became more vigorous in order to emphasize the distinctions between "workers and salaried employees. This is felt to be a class distinction, although essentially it had ceased to be so long before." If it is true that

"a clerk is more different from a chief clerk than he is from a skilled worker, it is just as sure that he considers himself the chief clerk's colleague" (pp. 111-112).

Although Kracauer's analysis of the world of Berlin workers was anchored in a Marxist vision, he admirably applied a keen and ironic eye to portray a reality that unfolded in multiple layers which were not always coherent. In place of vulgar Marxism, what we find is attention given to the superstructure and the processes that in the day-to-day described a workers' culture that was riddled with the ideological tools of subjugation. It is in the interstices between the relationships of production that Kracauer explored the meanders of capitalist culture, by resorting to the discourse of its agents, employers and employees at many different levels. These discourses had been gathered by way of documents or interviews but their systematic dismantling revealed the "false consciousness" mentioned by Walter Benjamin in a critical review of this work which is included as a postscript to this edition.

"...(I)ntellectual work that is light and clean" (p. 24) and which was legitimized by overrated school diplomas cannot avoid the rationalization that had already been imposed upon intellectual work in modern business. Whether one was speaking of a typist, a shop assistant or a bookkeeper adding up instalments in an accounting department, the service worker was subject to labour that was increasingly mechanized, fragmented and controlled. "Thanks to the intellectual labour invested in the equipment, its handmaidens are spared the possession of knowledge (...). Just one thing is required of them: attention. This cannot wander free but is under the control of the apparatus it controls and(...) the less enticing the object at which it is to be directed, the more it must demand of the nerves." (p. 39). The proletarianization of the workers is therefore a consequence less of salary level than the loss of autonomy at work. Just as had happened to the craftsmen when they entered the factory, the office worker has now become just a cog in the service industry wheel which is more and more well-oiled and impersonal.

The control of workers is not confined, however, to the exercise of professional duties. Kracauer exposed the eminently political control that companies exerted over the workers. He paid particular attention to the role which sport and entertainment played and which, we would argue, they continue to do today, in managing human resources. In other, less ingenuous, words, sports and leisure were turned into a biopolitics tool, according to Michel Foucault's analysis (2004). Kracauer also pointed out that workers' physical condition had become, more and more, a pre-requisite for the hiring and (at least implicitly) evaluating of employees, whilst it was this evaluation that determined workers' promotions or even their ability to keep their jobs. Furthermore, sport done at work together with colleagues and bosses was portrayed as a mechanism for capturing employees' energy for that which Kracauer called the "will to community" (p. 102). In other words, whether at sport or at leisure it was appropriate to create the links of loyalty to the company that capitalist work had destroyed by reducing it to a piece of merchandise and a cost. He would go so far as to say that "sports associations are like outposts intended to conquer the still vacant territory of employees' souls. Indeed they often carry out a thorough process of colonization there" (p. 103). At the same time, the frequency

of leisure activities within the business was the strongest way to ward off workers' participation in labour union conflicts, which was of utmost importance since the unions were the only effective counterweight in the capitalist job market. Once aware of the attraction that leisure activities held over workers, the unions were hesitant to unmask the false charity of businesses. Instead they offered members similar levels of recreation, escapism and the search for belonging. Sport and entertainment were, in the words of Kracauer, "a major means of depoliticization" (p. 130).

A reflection of the same sculptured politics amongst the workforce is the way that age functioned, not as a repository of experience, but as the frontier of undesirability that penalized the workers because they got older every day. For businesses, the young worker brought benefits of greater relevance in the world of services: attractive appearance, mental and physical resistance to work, lower salaries, and the docility that was typical of those who had not yet realized that their diligence was their exploitation. Age represented, therefore, a tool of power to the extent that it constituted such a threat to older workers that they struggled to conceal it: "For fear of being withdrawn from use as obsolete, ladies and gentlemen dye their hair, while forty-year-olds take up sports to keep slim" (p. 33). Do not be misled into thinking, however, that the requirement applied only to those who were no longer able to hide their wrinkles. Kracauer described a situation that is familiar to us today: it is certain that "the age limit in business life today really has moved sharply downwards, and at forty many who still think themselves hale and hearty are, alas, economically already dead" (p. 60).

In *The Salaried Masses*, Kracauer went beyond the culture of a sub-class, the rationalization of services or the urban life of Berlin. It was a social order in transformation that the scholar captured in each detail of the social life that he observed. It was a society that, we know, was preparing the way to give in to totalitarianism. "Salaried employees who live today in Berlin and the other big cities increasingly assume a standard character, a lifestyle, which is also subject to the standardizing influence of powerful ideological forces" (p. 85). The signs that Kracauer picked up almost intuitively, Hannah Arendt (2006) would go on to name as the pre-condition for the formation of Nazi Germany. Massification was not about the regimentation of armies, but the *colonization of common souls*, those who were familiar with the depersonalization of being an obedient cog in the wheel.

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