

Interview

Horst Pöttker

»A call to arms«

An interview with Karl Kraus (1874 – 1936)

Karl Kraus was born on April 28, 1874 in Jičín, then in Bohemia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now in Czechia, and died on June 12, 1936 in Vienna. He came from an upper middle class family, who moved to the capital, Vienna, in 1877. Having begun studies in Law and Philosophy, and following initial forays as a journalist for various magazines and daily newspapers, he published the cultural policy magazine *Die Fackel* from 1899 until his death – for most of this time as its sole author. The book edition of his pacifist drama *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* [The last days of humanity], whose enormous length meant that it was only ever performed in abridged versions, sometimes edited by the author himself, came out in 1922. As a journalist, satirist, poet and playwright, Karl Kraus was sharply critical of what he called the »yellow press« and its language. He also gave opinions on other problems, such as the questionable benefits of intellectual involvement, the accusation of antisemitism, and the rejection of the war.

Keywords: anti-Semitism, *Die Fackel*, Dreyfus affair, Karl Kraus, Maximilian Harden, satire, critique of language

Like the papers on Hilde Spiel and Ingeborg Bachmann as journalists in editions 1/22 and 2/22, this is an advance publication of a paper intended for a planned volume on German-language and Russian journalists of the 20th century. However, the war on Ukraine has made this publication difficult.

Translation: Sophie Costella

Mr. Kraus, you set up your own magazine, *Die Fackel*, in 1899, choosing not to publish it weekly, as is common, but just three times per month. Was this due to your contrariness, which is targeted against conventions on principle, even ancient cultural rhythms like weekly publication?

No, no, not at all! The original plan was to publish *Die Fackel* every week. But then I would have had to pay stamp tax, more than a thousand guilders per year. Because *Die Fackel* only came out three times a month, there was no need for the ›newspaper stamp‹ – and Finance Minister Kaizl was saved the red face he would have got from making it even more difficult that it already is for a respectable, independent, reader-funded magazine to gain the interest of the Austrian public by subjecting it to the shackles of the stamp tax. (I/1/8)¹¹

Was that really necessary? *Die Fackel* was very successful to start with. According to Maximilian Harden, you sold around 30,000 copies of the first issue. That began to ebb later. Would regular weekly publication not have helped you to stabilize this success better by adapting to the rhythms of the audience's lives?

The deepest confirmation of what my writing thinks and does was bestowed upon it: It did not find any readers. The audience cannot be deceived; they have the finest nose for art. They avoid value even more reliably than they sniff out kitsch. Those who stay with the reader in words have a much harder time than those who deceive him with words. (VI/329-330/1)

The relationship between the press and the government, whose work the public needs to scrutinize, must be a tense one – otherwise journalists would need to ask themselves whether they are doing their job. How did you deal with this professional obligation, which was not such a matter of course as it is in democracies today? After all, you were a monarchist loyal to the House of Habsburg.

At a time in which Austria was in danger of dying of acute boredom, in days that brought my country all kinds of political and social complications, I dared to call the public to arms. For a change, I was not someone adulterated by party

11 Karl Kraus' responses are exact quotes or paraphrases from his extensive life's work as an author and journalist. The relevant passages in *Die Fackel* can be found in the twelve-volume reproduction: KRAUS, KARL (ed.) (1976-1986): *Die Fackel*. Munich: Kösel (2001); they are quoted here with the volume number, the edition number of *Die Fackel* and the page number. For example, (I/1/8) means volume I of the reproduction, edition 1 of *Die Fackel*, page 8. Reference passages from the volume of essays first published by Heinrich Fischer in 1929: KRAUS, KARL (1958): *Literatur und Lüge*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, are quoted as (L&L/page number).

affiliation, but a journalist who sees the »wild ones« as better people even in questions of politics and who would not be drawn away from his position as an observer by any of the opinions represented in the Reichsrat. I was happy to wear the odium of political »lack of conviction« on my forehead, with the defiance usually unique to club fanatics and party idealists. (1/1/1)

Can you give us an example to explain what you meant by party-neutral social critique and how you practiced it?

I would love to. In edition 4 from early May 1899, I examined the situation at Vienna's medical school in an article entitled »A stroll through the university.« What I found: Instead of being a republic of the learned, ruled by the most capable, the medical school was an unparalleled feudal system – an oligarchy based on random lineages. Given that these were learned men, it made sense to prove what I had found using a table – a common approach in scientific work. In this table, I listed no fewer than 15 pairs of doctors in the faculty, most of them professors, who were related to one another as uncle and nephew or even as father and son. The table shows that, at Vienna's medical faculty, specialist talent was not always hereditary, but academic positions certainly were. What was happening was the miracle of heredity, which is yet to be explained by the greatest philosophers: We see the son becoming a master of the same specialist subject in which his father did it before. In this university degenerated by academic incest, the only faculty in which I was unable to prove protectionism between fathers and sons was the Faculty of Catholic Theology. I therefore recommended that medical scholars be required to remain celibate. (1/4/7-10)

That is biting social critique, delivered with an irony that makes it plausible for intelligent readers. Could you not have also practiced this in the *Wiener Neue Presse*, where you were successful as a journalist before? Why set up your own newspaper?

By setting up *Die Fackel*, I distanced myself more clearly not only from politics, but also from the dominant culture and media activities. Until I founded the magazine, I had not managed to escape my reputation for having become unpopular in smaller circles. In various periodicals over many years, I had fought against the periodical idiocy and ridiculousness of political, societal and literary life in Austria. Not always with the passion needed for an attack, because – well, because certain forms of consideration that even the publishers of reputable, or, to use a milder word, »independent« magazines believed they owed certain cliques, are not an inspiring motive. It was not censorship by the state prosecutor that I was afraid of – it was the more intimate censorship of an editor in chief

that, when I, full of social disgust, wanted to drive into the foul hawker goings-on of our journalism, made every effort to distract all the trouble into farther-off regions with soft insouciance. There, where there were no detectable relationships to any office, any financial group, at times not even to any opinion, there was suddenly concern for a thousand power factors in society. (I/1/4-6)

Could you provide a specific example of this independence?

Die Fackel printed an explicit rejection of any cooperation with other publishing houses and press organs in the form of the following message: »The sending of letters, printed items, excerpts, invitations, tickets to plays, lectures and concerts, etc. is futile and unwanted. No manuscripts will be examined. Review copies will be sold, with any profit – and postage costs submitted – donated to a good cause. In particular, the publishers of newspapers are asked to refrain from sending these. No exchange, sample or review copies of *Die Fackel* or books from the *Die Fackel* publishing house will be provided. Letters regarding subscription or delivery are to be sent to the publishing house and not the publisher.« (e.g. X/800-805/134)

In the very first edition of *Die Fackel*, you criticized the lack of independence of the theater reviews in the Vienna press. In the second, you name deskmen (Wittmann, Herzl and Heuberger) who constantly praise one another and applaud their own plays in the feuilleton. You were then accused of advertising your own publications, such as the book *Die demolirte Litteratur*^[2], in *Die Fackel* with laudatory quotes from other newspapers and magazines. What do you say to that?

The accusations were unjustified. This was a purely administrative matter for the publisher of *Die demolirte Litteratur*. Not one of the Vienna papers was quoted; instead, all those that had previously been complimentary – and I can't help that – were listed in order. Because a reader complained about this, however, I asked the publisher of *Die demolirte Litteratur* to remove the list of press reviews from the advertisement. (I/2/32)

The advertisement (cf. I/1/30) may not have contained any complimentary quotes from Vienna newspapers, but it did have some from a German literary magazine and the *Berliner Fremdenblatt*. Does this episode not demonstrate exactly what your request to the publisher is an admission of: That, however noble the endeavor, attempting to avoid the media business and its mechanisms of dependency as a publisher, editor and author, as you did with *Die*

2 KRAUS, KARL (1897): *Die demolirte Litteratur*. Vienna: S. Bauer.

***Fackel*, is ultimately doomed to failure? Today we call this the *self-observation trap* of media critique.^[3] Did you not have to adapt to the laws of the media market, the fight for attention, whether you wanted to or not?**

Perhaps, but I banked on consistent endeavors towards independence paying off in the long run, and I still hope they will. The written word, the work of an author and journalist, can be a communication aid to deeds and misdeeds. But brought around, returned to its natural habitat, given back to the element from which the trope of deed and misdeed is formed, the word falls short of the early counter-effect that is not its part; proves itself as a moral legacy, but is stunted by the anachronistic demands. (XI/890-905/7)

You did not tire of fighting against bad journalism, as well as against war and the act of profiteering from it. Your weapon of choice was language critique through better language, which you used to debunk the phrases of both journalism and war. Do you believe that a bad situation can be improved by improving the language that describes such situations incorrectly?

I have to answer with the words of the grumbling character in my play *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*^[4]. In 1914, the recruits drafted for war and death through general conscription were called »enlisters.« More accurately, they should have been called »enlisted.« The use of the present tense immediately suggests a willingness – that is why we need to use a past participle. They are enlisted. Soon they will have been enlisted. I saw enlisted men and felt that it was a move against the language. War is about the life and death of language. (XII, 227-232)

Are you not overstating the meaning of the language?

Language critique is my *raison d'être*. Could there be a stronger moral safeguard than linguistic doubt? The epitome of frivolous decision-making, all the talking and writing has made the language the garbage of a time that takes its happenings and experiences, its existence and worth, from the newspaper. Doubt – the great moral gift that man has language to thank for and despises to this day – would be the redemptive obstacle to progress that is absolutely certain to lead to the end of a civilization it believes it is serving. Teaching people to see abysses where there are actually truisms – that would be the educational task

3 BEUTHNER, MICHAEL; WEICHERT, STEPHAN (eds.) (2005): *Die Selbstbeobachtungsfälle. Grenzen und Grenzgänge des Medienjournalismus*. Wiesbaden: Springer vs.

4 KRAUS, KARL (1919): *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit. Tragödie in fünf Akten mit Vorspiel und Epilog*. Vienna: Verlag »Die Fackel«.

of a nation that has grown up in sin; a way to release the goods of life from the bonds of journalism and the clutches of politics. (XI/885-887/2f.)

Can you provide some examples for the political dimension of language critique, too?

A people is finished when it carries its phrases along with it even in a state in which it experiences their content once again. This is proof that it is not experiencing this content. A submarine commander flies the flag, a pilot throws caution to the wind. It gets even more empty when the metaphor is responsible in terms of subject matter. When, rather than another army operation, a maritime campaign is shipwrecked. When success in our current positions was bomb-proof and the bombing of a square a smash hit. (XII/231f.)

If idioms like this come from a background of war, is this not because people lived through war in the years that followed 1914 and 1939?

No, they didn't. Otherwise, the scab of language would have fallen off by itself. I once read in the newspaper that news of a fire in a suburb of Vienna spread like wildfire. Just like the news of the global conflagration. (XII/232)

Does that mean that it wasn't burning?

No. Paper burns and set the world alight. But all that was experienced was that the final hour had arrived. Because the church bells were transformed into cannons. (XII/232)

You allowed the optimist in you to respond: »The churches themselves do not seem to see this so tragically. After all, many of them provide the bells voluntarily.« (XII/232)

The Church presumably could not be required to invoke God's blessings on the enemy's weapons, but they might at least have been able to bring themselves to curse their own. The churches of the warring states would have got along better then. This way, it was possible for the Pope to decry the war yet still speak of »justified national aspirations« and, on the same day, for the Prince-Archbishop of Vienna to bless the war, which he said was being waged to defend against »heinous national aspirations.« If inspiration were stronger than aspiration, there would be no war, then or now. (XII/232f.)

There were two periods – in 1914 after the European nations began the First World War and in 1933 when the Germans voted Hitler into power – in which *Die Fackel* was not published for several months. Was this silence perhaps based on your self-critical realization that language, including language critique using language, is ultimately helpless in the face of this kind of event after all?

Following accusations by exile newspapers that I had »no time for a fight against fascist barbarism« because I was using all my strength to carry »press law suits about punctuation« (cf. XI/889/12), I decided to start publishing *Die Fackel* again after all in July 1934. Many people at the time saw my poem in the only, slim edition of 1933, including the lines »It will pass; afterwards it was all the same« (XI/888/4), as a form of resignation. But, immediately after Hitler came to power, I worked intensively on a long, caustic text against the Nazi rule that I only decided not to publish in order to protect all those mentioned in it from danger. After the end of Nazi rule, it was published under the title *Die dritte Walpurgisnacht*.⁵ In it, I lamented the fact that I had been left out of the book burning: »This black list that makes one green with envy just to look at it. Where is the justice, when one has spent a lifetime being subversive, weakened the will to fight, resisted the Anschluss and only recommended it to the fatherland as protection against the other option, knowing that it is the home of electrically lit barbarians and that it is the people of judges and executioners.« It was from this text that I quoted the phrase »I cannot think of anything to say about Hitler,« which would later become famous, in July 1934 edition of *Die Fackel*. (XI/890-905/2)

But in the end you managed to think of 315 pages, filling this edition of *Die Fackel*. Was this a revision of your skepticism – which perhaps grew during the period of silence – regarding the effectiveness of language and language critique through language?

Readers and writers have a certain image of the work of a writer in general and of this author in particular. But the author of *Die Fackel* does not recognize this image. They have not yet reached his desk, and that is a good thing, because they would not know their way around at all. He was not lazy, and perhaps he attempted a great deal more than has ever been achieved in a place like this. There is an observation point from which nothing appears left or right any more, but everything simply appears stupid. The airhead who cannot imagine anything imagines an »effect« that »overturns« something – something to which

5 Kraus, Karl (1952): *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht*. Munich: Kösel.

he coincidentally, in terms of opinion, superficially feels that he is averse, and to which he is deeply spiritually akin. (XI/890-905/6f.)

But does that mean it is wrong to expect, or at least to hope, that political participation, which can also be expressed in some journalistic forms, such as satire, can have a visible impact?

This has always been the problem with satire drawn from current events, which only becomes effective, indeed comprehensible, at a certain distance from the event. Is there a need for clarification that the word in the fullness of its relationships connects poetically to everything – not just to that which the speakers mean? If the language now eludes this claim to false function, if it lends itself to content that is removed from its time or purpose – such as losing itself in the language play of Shakesperean sonnets – then those who are hungry for purpose, who cannot be fobbed off, become unruly, and those who imagine that a sentence is the product of nothing more than its drive to express what they feel, become rebellious! (XI/890-905/7-9)

Mr. Kraus, a final question on the topic of language critique. You mentioned satire and thus your technique, indeed your art of satirical commentary, on which Joachim Pötschke wrote his dissertation in the early 1960s under Hermann Budzislawski and Hans Mayer at Leipzig University.⁶ In it, he showed that your commentaries were mainly, sometimes even entirely, limited to quotes from the very daily press that you were fighting – quotes that reveal contradictions. Does this frugality, bordering on renunciation, not also demonstrate skepticism towards the power of explanatory words?

I don't think so. I can explain this technique to you using an example that then also backs up my argument. The appalling cultural journalism of the *Neue Freie Presse*, and its theater reviews in particular, was so obtrusively superficial that merely quoting it was sufficient to destroy it. I did this very thoroughly over the decades, for example in a commentary in early August 1929. I headlined the text »Die Räuber in Salzburg« [The Robbers in Salzburg] and gave the self-exposing quote only the briefest introduction: »The problem of staging *The Robbers* has concerned the German cultural world since Piscator. One was fascinated to see Reinhardt's solution. I did not experience it myself, but gained a lively picture from the report in the *Neue Freie Presse*, which brought together many impressions.

6 PÖTSCHKE, JOACHIM (1962): *Die satirischen Glossen von Karl Kraus (1914 – 1918)*. Diss. Phil. Fak. Leipzig; ders. (2010): Die Geburt der Glosse aus dem Zeitungszitat. Der Wiener Publizist Karl Kraus und seine Zeitschrift »Die Fackel«. In: EBERWEIN, TOBIAS; MÜLLER, DANIEL (eds.) (2010): *Journalismus und Öffentlichkeit. Eine Profession und ihr gesellschaftlicher Auftrag*. Wiesbaden: vs, p. 411-425.

The report reads: »The Reinhardt staging of Schiller's *The Robbers*. Telegram from our correspondent. The high point of this year's festival season was yesterday's premiere of the Reinhardt staging of Schiller's *The Robbers*. The event at the Festspielhaus was attended by a glittering audience that filled every room. The magnificent dresses of the women added a colorful touch to the appearance in the sold-out building. There were numerous representatives of the world of theater from Germany and abroad, plus the heads of the authorities of the city and state of Salzburg, including Governor Rehr, Mayor Ott and many significant personalities from public life. The premiere was also attended by former Trade Minister Dr. Heidl. Following the performance, a reception was hosted at Schloss Leopoldskron by Max Reinhardt, attended in the palace's magnificent rooms by a large number of people.« – This spoke so clearly against itself that no critical comments on it were necessary. It was my way of combatting the sordid feuilleton of the daily press without having to subject myself to its laws. (x/811-819/136f.)

Was this subtle irony understood by all the readers? You are likely to have reached predominantly those who turned their noses up at the »yellow press« anyway. Did you not essentially hope for snobbish intellectual circles? Did this not contradict the political views that you had formed during and after the First World War, when you shifted closer to social democracy following your monarchist beginnings? – But let's move on to a different complex. In your famous, or infamous, essay »Heine und die Folgen« [Heine and the consequences] (vi/329-330/1-33), you accused poet and journalist Heinrich Heine of an estheticizing, un-German love of language, style and rhyme.

Yes, that's right. His handling of words was all that mattered to Heine. As long as it sounded good. He allowed language to become an ornament, arts-and-crafts progress in the daily press. The Heine model cannot be denied – not in the style of the state-of-the-art impression journalism of my era, nor today. Without Heine there would be no feuilleton. That is the French disease that he has passed on to us. How easy it is to get sick in Paris! How the morals of the German sense of language are loosened! The French morals will succumb to any rogue. But it takes a real man to turn the German language, and even then it will give him hell. Heine loosened the bodice of the German language so much that today anyone can finger its breast. (vi/329-330/7,11) I, on the other hand, want to decipher its strict rules, understand its depths and dangerous plans, in order to master it and not to abuse it as an instrument of appealing temptation. (xi/885-887/3)

But do you not share Heine's belief that the language, the style plays an enormous role – even if only from an aesthetic point of view? After all, you do believe that language critique can have a long-term impact deep into the

culture through language, even if you do not attribute current political changes to it.

In contrast to Heine, I tried nothing apart from draining the broad swamp of phrases that others still want to place behind national borders to this day. With tongues of fire – even if it were a dozen different languages – the circumstances preach that social necessities need to be recognized. But governments and parties still always want to see issues of symbol politics dealt with for the time being. (1/1/2)

You also accused Heine of a lack of conviction, of levity in his political attitudes and intentions. But what about you? To start with you were loyal to the Habsburg dynasty, especially Archduke Franz Ferdinand, then you sympathized with still-Marxist social democracy, then again with the Austro-fascist dictator Engelbert Dollfuß, who you seemed to hope would prevent German-style national socialism from spreading into Austria. Your death in 1936 spared you from experiencing how wrong this view was. But what do you say to the accusation of fluctuating political conviction? Given the large number of times your own political affinities have switched, surely it must be levelled against you?

The appearance of the most painful of contrasts, which continued and continues throughout our public life, was held in *Die Fackel* as a standpoint from which to assess all political events. At times, we may have succeeded in reducing the credit paid to the stifling seriousness of phrase-mongering, wherever it carried out its destructive work, through a cheerfulness that it found uncomfortable. (1/1/2)

Heine was Jewish, but was christened so that he could work as an attorney in Prussia. Yet his Judaism remained formative for his life and work.¹⁷ Did your aversion to Heine not also include moments of the antisemitism that was rife throughout Europe at the time, and of which you, too, despite your Jewish background – or perhaps in the spirit of contradiction against it – were guilty? Even sympathetic interpreters have found your work laden with stereotypes not just of journalism and its superficiality, but also of Jews and their

7 Cf. PÖTTKER, HORST (2012): Jude und Deutscher. Heinrich Heine als Pionier des modernen Journalismus. In: MARTEN-FINNIS, SUSANNE; NAGEL, MICHAEL (eds.): *Die PRESSA. Internationale Presseausstellung Köln 1928 und der jüdische Beitrag zum modernen Journalismus. The PRESSA. International Press Exhibition Cologne 1928 and the Jewish Contribution to Modern Journalism*. Vol. 2. Bremen: edition lumière, p. 347-373.

»rootlessness,«^[8] and your essay on Heine, among other works, to express antisemitic clichés both playfully and sometimes in a raw, blunt form.^[9]

In a comment piece on the New York premiere of Max Reinhardt's film on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the last edition of *Die Fackel* in February 1936, I criticized the homage paid in America to the breeders of antisemitism, which was more a matter of domestic politics than the mistreatment inflicted on the innocent victims in Germany. (XI/917-922/6) And in a further comment piece on the loud criticism in the press of the breach of contract by the Metro film company, which meant that the agreed film version of Franz Werfel's novel *Die Vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* [The forty days of Musa Dagh] was not made after all, I took aim at the fact that this criticism, which also concerned the Nazi term »racial defilement,« increased in volume at a time in which 35,000 housekeepers had to leave Jewish households »for the protection of German honor and German blood« and were deported to »reception camps« to protect them against starvation. The comment piece went on to point out that the heads of these households were then forced to starve as race comrades of freedom fighters and that the Jewish author of the novel received just 1000 dollars for each of the forty days of Musa Dagh. (XI/917-922/48-50)

But, by using this kind of irony, were you not also feeding into the stereotype of the rich, greedy, lazy Jew? Incidentally, your comment piece is still topical. The subject of Werfel's novel^[10] is the Armenian minority's resistance against the Ottoman campaign of extermination in 1915, which France and now Germany, too, have officially termed genocide – a situation that Turkey continues to deny. In your comment piece, you dismissed the possible Hollywood filming of the novel as »kitsch.« Was this not also based on antisemitic prejudice?

The question is whether the dogmatic interest of the Jewish clerics – there was a party like this that wanted to govern – could ultimately cause greater harm than any antisemitism. In their efforts »to maintain [the Jews as] a chosen people who do not mix with other peoples,« indeed are not permitted to become too similar to them in any way, they saw the Dreyfus affair as a sign from God against assimilation. Despite any rationalism, orthodox Jews appear not to want to move away from the dogma of »the chosen people.« (1/7/4)

8 Cf. FRANZEN, JONATHAN (2016): *Das Kraus-Projekt. Aufsätze von Karl Kraus*. Collaboration with Paul Reitter and Daniel Kehlmann. Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, p. 94, p. 115.

9 Cf. FRANZEN 2016: 97.

10 WERFEL, FRANZ (1933): *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh*. Novel. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay.

So do you believe that antisemitism in Europe, which has been growing constantly since the early Middle Ages, is simply due to the lack of willingness to assimilate by part of the Jewish population, their stubborn adherence to Jewish faith and cultural traditions?

No, I don't believe that. The antisemitism that flared up in France so quickly and almost unexpectedly with the Dreyfus affair proved that the psychological and societal assimilation pursued with great fervor by some Jews is not enough, even in a socially advanced nation, when the percentage of Jews in the population exceeds a certain point. Perhaps socialism would have thoroughly asserted this adaptation, which was only seen in the upper classes up to the end of the 19th century, throughout all of society. Or perhaps even the most elementary societal authority cannot achieve this fully without some assistance from nature. Either way, the assimilation of the Jews without physiological gene mixing proved insufficient in that period in history and society. (1/7/5)

You put the case for the assimilation of the Jews, which you of course accomplished on yourself as far as possible. On the other hand, I hear in your words some doubt that even the greatest possible assimilation can ever rid the world of antisemitism. That seems like a realistic view to me, not least following the Shoah, whose victims included numerous German and Austrian patriots of Jewish heritage. Yet it seems to me that this critical attitude towards anti-semitism does not sit well with the fact that you, together with the German socialists and especially Wilhelm Liebknecht, whom you allowed to make this known in *Die Fackel* numerous times, saw the Dreyfus affair as a commercially driven, media-staged spectacle, even when the Jewish officer's wrongful conviction had already been publicly brought to light. Was that not a capital misjudgment?

At no point in my life did I shift from my belief that the Dreyfus affair was an ideological farce. As late as 1930, in a polemical dispute with Alfred Kerr, I stated clearly and correctly that the never sufficiently avertible fate of a frontline soldier remains a significantly greater ordeal than the content of the Dreyfus affair, which the most dishonest of all bourgeoisies, that of Central Europe, used as a distraction from their acts of violence in their own country and, even 30 years later, still tried to carry the gloriole of their righteousness before them on a dramatic poster. (x/827-833/83)

Unlike Liebknecht and the German socialists, the French socialists led by Jean Jaurès sided with Dreyfus and advocated his rehabilitation. Leon Blum later noted that Jaurès' incisive series of articles »Les Preuves« in the *La Petite*

Republique newspaper in summer 1898¹¹) was the crucial journalistic achievement in uncovering the antisemitic conspiracy of the French establishment, alongside Émile Zola's accusatory article »J'accuse« in *L'Aurore* on January 13 of that year.¹² In 1899, you and Liebknecht were still disputing in *Die Fackel* that there had been a conspiracy against Dreyfus in France's military and government. Would a public correction of your mistake have been due at some point? Politicians and judges in the Third Republic admitted that the conviction was wrongful and withdrew it.

Even then, I could not forget that that the old Liebknecht had shown true revolutionary courage in confronting in the young *Die Fackel* the attempt by lying liberals and journalists to distract from the victims of justice in their own country through a maneuver of humanity. I did not want to allow the Dreyfus affair to go down in history as the symbol of all martyrdom, the mere invocation of which provides any alibi one might need. (x/827-833/83)

You made fun of Jaurès and the French socialists from quite a high horse, while at the same time praising Liebknecht and the German social democracy, which, for tactical, party-political reasons, came down stubbornly and ultimately against better knowledge on the side of the Dreyfus opponents and their antisemitic misjudgments and even falsifications. You yourself have a Jewish background. Was there perhaps a little of the oft-quoted Jewish self-hatred in your misjudgment of the Dreyfus affair and your stereotypes of Jews?

My critique of Judaism does not have even a hint of »self-hatred,« the pretense of which the rejected hawkers of literature have always used to indemnify themselves. The need for segregation is exposed as proof of a shameful sense of belonging, aided particularly by the kind of psychoanalysis that nourishes its man even during times of unemployment. Apparently it is namely unabatedly attractive to Americans, who are interested in everything they don't have, like antiquities and the processes of an emotional life. The thing with Jewish self-hatred is a small matter that is a thing of the past, but was revived time and again by the editor of *Die Fackel*, even when he was believed to be languishing. The idea that he sits at his desk at night and, before picking up his quill – he really did use a quill, not even a fountain pen, let alone a typewriter – he beat his chest and quarreled or otherwise somehow »wrestled« with himself, is the kind of tomfoolery thought up by the willingness to be disparaging that underestimates the orderliness and composure with which he attempted to make a verse out of it. Of

11 JAURÈS, JEAN (1898): *Les preuves: Affaire Dreyfus*. Paris: La Petite République.

12 Cf. BLUM, LÉON (1935): *Souvenirs de l'affaire*. Paris: Gallimard.

course, it also has no idea that any attempt to feel the pulse of the language does not arise in the »ecstasy« imagined by dilettantes, but in the rapture of logic. As for my criticism of the lesser Jewish types who take terrible reprisals on spirit and nature in both literature and psychology, they do not appear to me to be any less serious and significant in the history of thought than the excesses through which compassion for human suffering is addressed more directly. On the other hand, I feel obliged to confess that, in the reverence for the defiled life and the besmirched language, gratefully recognize the natural power of uncompromising Judaism and love it above all else: as something that rests in itself, undisturbed by race and money, by classes, gases and masses, in short by any hatred between fiends and villains. (XI/890-905/36-38)

Would it not have been possible to confront antisemitism more strongly and clearly, at least by publishing reader letters to that effect?

The imposition: »to take a stand« on this horror and scum of trades and brawls, on this pancake of cant and gibberish, illogicality and lies, on all the thoughts one might have when half-asleep; to stand before the raving petite bourgeoisie shoulder to shoulder with those who hold the power on paper as a fighting comrade of the stupidity that has no idea of how it misses its target right down to the last Hitler anecdote – this kind of imposition is to be unceremoniously countered with the information: »Correspondence unwanted.« (XI/890-905/38)

But today you are taking a stand!?

Why do we make an exception, with you of all people, honored gentleman? It is simple: because you consider yourself an exception and cannot imagine that everyone else also considers themselves an exception who is not affected by the dismissal. In this way, we hope to also satisfy the others and yet not give anyone the oppressive feeling of preferential treatment. In addition, we let you in on the secret that you do not actually exist, but that instead we have manufactured you as an extract of those who do not exist either – from the humble questioners, the bolder scroungers, but mainly from the disappointed who, through many years of incorrect use of reading *Die Fackel*, believe they are entitled to stand up to someone who does not want to take a stand. (XI/ 890-905/39)

In the year of your death, and also the year in which the last edition of *Die Fackel* was published, 1936, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*¹³¹, in which he spoke of the

13 HITLER, ADOLF (1925/1927): *Mein Kampf. Erster Band: Eine Abrechnung. Zweiter Band: Die nationalsozialistische Bewegung*. München: Eher. Cf. on this Pöttker, Horst (2013): *Mein Kampf* (Adolf Hitler, 1925/26). In: BENZ,

necessity of eradicating the Jewish race, had been on the market for ten years. Yet you still did not revise your stereotypical statements on Jews or your misjudgment of the Dreyfus affair – perhaps you could no longer revise it after 1933. But you did revise something else, for which you had more time: your initial friendship with the influential German journalist and author Maximilian Harden (1861-1927), who also published an intellectually and politically ambitious magazine, *Die Zukunft* [The Future], in Berlin from 1892 to 1922. You allowed Harden to contribute to early editions of *Die Fackel*, but later fell out with him. Later, you were the only author in *Die Fackel* anyway. When and why did you and Harden fall out?

My attack on him because of his article on the actor Jenny Groß, who at the time had recently died, my public speaking out against sexual snooping, which I had become disgusted by both here and in the scandal surrounding Philipp, Prince of Eulenburg¹⁴ and in other cases, ultimately led to our falling out in fall 1904. (L&L/74f.) One of Maximilian Harden's most striking pronouncements is: It's better to be a rotter than an idiot. (L&L/55) In fall 1907, I publicly declared my distancing myself from Harden as necessary and justified, without denying my previous admiration for him, which I attributed to the naïve enthusiasm of a then 25-year-old for a 35-year-old. (L&L/52f.)

You have never shied away from hefty disputes with colleagues. The list of your adversaries is long, including for example Alfred Kerr, Eduard Hanslick, Hermann Bahr, and Victor Adler. Should Harden be included in this list, or were there particular reasons in his case? Having read the first edition of *Die Fackel*, he warned against a rigorism of morals and language aesthetics that would eventually alienate readers. Given what you know now, should you have listened to Harden?

Harden would have been a poor source of advice, had I followed him. He deceived me shamefully. At the time, when I was only able to get my temperament up to temperature within the narrow limits of social ethics and advocated the approach of ideal citizenship in the fight against corruption, I had to see the man who had recognized a malady in the press many years earlier as an exceptional

WOLFGANG (ed.): *Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Vol. 6, Publikationen. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Saur, pp. 449-453.

- 14 The Eulenburg affair was a public dispute regarding a series of court cases for homosexual conduct and the libel actions taken against these applications in the period 1907 to 1909. The people concerned were well-known figures from the political circle of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The affair became one of the greatest scandals of the German Empire and attracted global attention. Although it related only to the legal dispute between Philipp, Prince of Eulenburg and Hertefeld, and Maximilian Harden, the latter deliberately orchestrated it in order to put the Kaiser under pressure on foreign policy.

phenomenon. Those who came before also had to impress him who had the intensity of the fight behind them even then, who had the advantage over intellectual corruption of the insight that sees journalism as the mortal enemy of culture. The lucky position, into which Mr. Harden fell by chance against public opinion in Germany, had to bring the image of a fighter to my young imagination. Yes, he wrote an article for me for the second edition of *Die Fackel* for nothing. But, in this open letter, he pandered to Viennese journalism in a way that hoped to mediate between me and them. It did not get him anywhere. After all, the connection with me initially led to the alienation of the *Neue Freie Presse* about which he complained so bitterly. (L&L/62f.)

When you and Harden were still connected as colleagues, he observed in the second edition of *Die Fackel* that he did not know whether the circumstances and people you attacked in the first were really as bad as your pointed pen described. He went on to say that Vienna's *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, despite its political viewpoint, was the best-edited newspaper in the German language. (1/2/3) Does one not at least need to concede that Maximilian Harden made a contribution to the development of German journalism and thus a cultural achievement?

The guy might have been a patriot, but he was certainly not cultured. I put together a collection of around seventy grandiose howlers from the *Zukunft*, with translations into clear, simple German. One of his editorials began with this sentence: »One hundred and twenty years ago, when the fat, pompously enthroned son of August Wilhelm, who enjoyed meandering from the unwarlike noise of parties to the shallow mysticism of the parlor, had just fed his vanity with a success in the Dutch Wilhelmine trade that provided no nourishing power, a publication that had been written fifty years earlier – »*Considérations sur l'état présent du corps politique de l'Europe*« – became famous.« (L&L/57) Anyone who writes like that is stylistically no match for me.

Much as I understand your reasons for parting ways with Harden, they are in line with modern professional ethics in journalism: respect for privacy, verifiable accuracy of facts, truthful disclosure of one's own positions, an unemotional style. But your work displays a lot of moral rigor, and sometimes intellectual arrogance, does it not? In your polemic against Harden's response to the public explanation of your distancing, you accused him of alleging that you were both vengeful due to good deeds denied and ungrateful of good deeds bestowed, which you claim is a logical impossibility that speculates on the easy-to-impress superficiality of the readership. But ingratitude and vengefulness can go together in life, can they not? Especially when, as in the

case of you and Harden, there is first the bestowal and later the denial of good deeds?

My development, which commanded respect even from my mortal enemies – even if no-one heard or saw it – was always officially attributed to the denial of good deeds. These were allegedly denied to me first by the *Neue Freie Presse* and then by Mr. Harden. Since then I have been complaining. Unfortunately, I had to address it. I had to destroy the myth of vengefulness, time and again I had to boast of the booking requests sent to me by the *Neue Freie Presse* and the favors bestowed upon me by Mr. Harden so that people would finally stop using the stupidest explanation for my hatred. (L&L/61) Harden, of all people, that cunning switcher of opinions, who pardons or fights homosexuality, justifies or prosecutes perjury as necessary – it is he who dared to interpret my development, which made its way painfully from feelings to thoughts and that led to an inner life of the likes of which his card index wisdom can only dream, as revenge for the denial of affection. (L&L/63)

How did the literary and journalistic world judge your behavior?

Even at the time, I knew that the judges of literary history would not research and assess my work pedantically based on »personal« motives, but only on whether the »personality« was broad enough to allow such far-reaching fluctuations in the judgment. I do not regret anything I did; I merely demand that my deeds are assessed in context with me. (L&L/62) When the actions of Mr. Harden began to displease me more and more, I said so. (L&L/72) What I ultimately wanted was insight, truth, values and their place in me. (L&L/73, 53) I could not do it differently. Incidentally, my journalistic opinions also won over my opponents. »A reader, who cannot often be a follower of yours, congratulates you on the insight, the courage and the ability to see the big picture in the small details, as shown in your article on Hervay.« Professor Freud, whom I did not yet know at the time, once wrote to me.^[15] (L&L/73f.)

Is there not also some intellectual arrogance behind the severity that you display in both linguistic and moral matters? And is your indifference to the aim of being popular with the audience not also a typical sign of the failure

15 Sigmund Freud was referring to a scandal of global renown, in which district commissioner Franz Hervay von Kirchberg fell victim to marriage imposter and fraudster Tamara von Lützow, the attractive »Black Baroness,« when she came to Mürrzschlag in 1903 to escape the summer heat. Freud will have enjoyed sentences like this in Kraus' polemic on the scandal: »Begone, sexual hypocrisy! Only when we stop shying away from the most human thing about us as a secretive world, will we be able to protect ourselves against its dangers.« (KRAUS, KARL (1966): Der Fall Hervay. In: KRAUS, KARL: *Sittlichkeit und Kriminalität*. Frankfurt/M., Hamburg: Fischer Bücherei, pp. 75-83, p. 81).

of the 20th century intellectual in the face of the disasters of fascism, national socialism and Soviet Bolshevism? Was the fact that *Die Fackel* was extinguished twice for catastrophic nose-dives in humanity not also a self-critical confession of this failure?

The answer to your question of why *Die Fackel* was not published could simply be: Because the question is asked! Because it was expected to appear before readers who can't think an inch to answer it themselves and never ask it again. This answer is to be understood as the concise rejection of the readers' needs, as the firm standard of the primary right of the author to intellectual resolution, to command over the existence, duration and scope of their artistic achievement. What should an author of this nature do? Let the readers decide whether a work satisfies them more than him? (x1/890-905/34f.)

***Die Fackel* did then end up being published for another year from spring 1935, with its usual content, satirical language critique of the theater reviews in the daily press, etc.**

I can assure you that – in the mental barrier that the event means not just functionally, but fundamentally – even the understandable desire for clarification of this lack of publication would not have had a productive effect in any way if the possibility of hiding behind us had not enticed the author to let himself go a little. (x1/890-905/35f.)

Not just Maximilian Harden, some readers of *Die Fackel* would also sometimes like to have seen you show more appreciation of the objects of your criticism, especially the feuilleton of the *Wiener Presse*.

Unfortunately, I must note that I did not always read the feuilleton; without good reason, one does not need to enter the area in which stupidity begins to become uninteresting. (1/17/30)

Self-criticism does not appear to be one of your strengths; the fact that you and *Die Fackel* were admired by your »followers,« to use the modern word, as an unwavering and unrelenting moral authority in questions of both language aesthetics and ethics and politics, certainly contributed to your seeing yourself this way, too. Am I wrong?

Even before my death, I, unlike Thomas Mann, was certain not to win the Nobel Prize. But that was a shame. Because this deprived me, unlike Thomas Mann, of the opportunity to develop a benevolent sense of irony that sees human limits!

Does the awareness of having to obey the basest needs of the time not fill the conductors of time with horror, both then and now? Having to participate in the prostitution to which the press forces all of humanity? Does nothing fill them with horror? (x/827-833/94)

Mr. Kraus, our interview has become more of an argument at times. Let's finish by discussing two of your achievements, which I believe set a journalistic and political example to this day.

That sounds good – although I have nothing against argument in principle.

The journalistic achievement is something that we refer to today as »interactivity.« Nowadays, we sometimes pretend that »interaction« between a medium and its audience only became possible through digitalization, with the comment function on blogs etc. Of course, there have always been letters to the editor in print media, including yours: The editor's note »Correspondence of all kinds is unwanted.« in bold print was added later. But you also reacted to letters publicly in *Die Fackel's* regular »Answers from the publisher« section, as long as they were not sent anonymously. Did you do that deliberately in order to get closer to the readers?

Yes, definitely. I'll give you an example. Reader Marianne W. sent me a complaint that was actually a matter for *Die Fackel's* sales staff, but in which I also had an interest from an editorial point of view. »In case you are not already aware,« she wrote, »I would like to inform you that *Die Fackel* – unlike previously – is no longer displayed openly on the counter of the newspaper seller at Südbahnhof station like all the other newspapers, but is retrieved from under the counter by special request. This course of action certainly is not in the interest of the seller and yet, as I have observed, she also hides new issues from the eyes of the newspaper buyers. Has the management of the railway perhaps laid down the law?« I answered the reader that I did not begrudge the railway management the harmless joke of railway station censorship that extended merely to hiding a magazine, when in Germany unpopular papers were not allowed to be sold at railway stations at all. The railway management presumably did not want to ruin the poor seller's business completely, I wrote; but equally I could not blame them for not wanting to display a paper in their shop that brought them into contempt so often. I had criticized the railway company, which had seen fatal accidents as a result of the lack of expensive staff and sufficient safety precautions, harshly in *Die Fackel's* first year. From that point of view, if you will allow me the irony, it was a sensible decision to gradually wean their passengers off reading newspapers and to concentrate their thoughts solely on the hazards of the journey they

were about to undertake. Anyone travelling on that railway really did have more serious things to consider than reading a magazine – even one that had often made them insistently aware of the seriousness of the situation. (I/45/32)

Not only did you print and comment on numerous letters from readers in the first few years – your satirical comment pieces skewering external material later also put you in dialog with the public almost structurally. Incidentally, your dialog-like style of working works very well with the character of this posthumous interview. It can be interpreted as a form of interactivity, implemented early in print media, that some believe only became possible with the advent of digitalization. Communication in digital networks, however, is steered and instrumentalized by powerful interests with the help of hidden algorithms.

What you describe there was one of my motives for ultimately voicing very few of my own thoughts and opinions in my comment pieces, as I said, but instead letting the shoddy journalism I quoted speak against itself.

Mr. Kraus, your other commendable achievement is your pacifism, to which you remained true your entire life. You had already been dead for eight years when I was born at the end of the Second World War. Perhaps you are pleased not to have lived through the horror. But it is certainly a risk to be interviewed by someone who, having been born later, knows so much more than you do yourself.

You do not know so much more than me. I experienced the terrible start of these atrocities, the World War from 1914 to 1918, and processed them in the summers of 1915 to 1917 in my tragic play *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* as a total admission of guilt for belonging to humanity, which tolerated the things described in it. It is merely the self-reproach of someone who did not go crazy at the thought of having survived witnessing these events with his brain intact. (VIII/508-513/34f.)

The play is theater, fictional literature. You later abridged and edited it so that it could be performed. Yet, as the publisher and main author of *Die Fackel*, you spent most of your career as a kind of journalist yourself, or certainly an author looking at real, non-fictional circumstances.

The most improbable conversations that took place in *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* were really spoken; the most lurid inventions are quotes. The larvae and lemures that appear here carry living names, because it has to be this way and

because, in this timeliness defined by coincidence, nothing is coincidental.
(VIII/508-513/35)

Why, despite your educational play and numerous pacifist bestsellers like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, did humanity learn so little from the First World War that the Second was possible?

It could not be expected that a present in which this could occur would see this terror put in words as anything other than a bit of fun, not least when it was spoken by the quaint lowlands of the most horrible dialects. It was also to be feared that a future born of the loins of such a desolate present would, despite the great distance, elude the greater power of understanding. Yet I still strongly believe that this kind of literature is welcome somewhere and will be of use sometime.
(VIII/508-513/35)

Dear Mr. Kraus, thank you for this detailed discussion after so many years.

About the author

Horst Pöttker, born in 1944, is a retired Professor of the Theory and Practice of Journalism at TU Dortmund and a lecturer at both the University of Hamburg and TU Hamburg. From 2000 to 2019 without interruption, he was a guest lecturer at Russian universities and published multiple collected works in both German and Russian together with Russian colleagues. Contact: horst.poettker@tu-dortmund.de