Research Article

Correspondences 13, no. 1 (2025): 51–88

(De)Mythologizing the German Middle Classes: Siegfried Kracauer, the Eugen Diederichs Publishing House and the Journal *Die Tat* in the Weimar Era

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Abstract

This article traces Siegfried Kracauer's encounters with the neo-religious journal *Die Tat* and its publisher Eugen Diederichs in interwar Germany. Both Kracauer and *Die Tat* began the 1920s as participants in the post-war quest for spiritual renewal but ended the decade on opposing paths: Kracauer as a left-wing cultural critic and *Die Tat* as a vehicle of right-wing radicalization. Focusing on their shared preoccupation with the emerging urban middle classes, the study explores how a discourse once framed in religious terms was gradually displaced by social and political concerns. Kracauer interpreted the "transcendental homelessness" of modernity as the intellectual condition of the salaried masses, while *Die Tat* transformed similar anxieties into a völkisch-socialist mythology of the "middle." Their divergent responses to the same crisis illuminate the ideological polarization of Weimar culture and the shifting boundaries between religion, politics, and social theory in Germany's interwar public sphere.

Keywords: Siegfried Kracauer; Salaried Masses; Eugen Diederichs; Weimar Germany; Middle Classes

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Introduction

In this article, I chart the encounters of one German Jewish intellectual, Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), with one particular neo-religious journal and movement in the interwar period: *Die Tat: Monatsschrift für die Zukunft deutscher Kultur* [The Deed: Monthly Journal for the Future of German Culture], its publisher, Eugen Diederichs (1867–1930), and the *Tat* Circle.[1] The Diederichs publishing house produced a broad range of philosophical, religious, political, and esoteric literature. Both *Die Tat* and Kracauer underwent a transformation between 1918 and 1933. They started out as committed commentators on the German neo-religious scene after the First World War, eagerly searching for higher truths and denouncing false prophets (as I will illustrate in regard to Rudolf Steiner and Martin Buber). The nature of their subsequent parting of the ways illustrates important political trends in 1920s Germany. Kracauer evolved into a leftist intellectual and cultural critic whom the Weimar Republic's foremost liberal daily, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, offered a prominent forum for his frequently rapier-like commentary. *Die Tat*, by contrast, having initially accommodated a broad range of mutually contradictory political positions, subsequently underwent a process of right-wing radicalization and extended its readership by firmly positioning itself within the spectrum of völkisch socialism.

In both instances, the religious discourse was increasingly displaced by politics. Kracauer and the contributors to *Die Tat* shared a particular interest in the new middle classes emerging after the First World War, notably in the urban centres.[2]

1. Text and quotations translated by Lars Fischer (The History Practice, Berlin).

2. What may be less obvious to Anglophone readers is the extent to which in Germany, since the early twentieth century, the concept of the middle class(es) has been understood not merely to denote a particular level of income, wealth, and status relative to other classes, but has also been associated with the conceit that the middle class(es) form the middle, the centre of society—roughly in the sense in which Lipset, *Political Man*, used the term when referring to the "extremism of the centre." Notably the middle class saw itself as the social group that truly embodied society's essence and values and formed its actual backbone. While this may seem unremarkable today, at a time when more than 70 percent of economically active Germans were either industrial or agricultural workers, this was a stark claim indeed.

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While Kracauer was preoccupied with their economic precarity and ideological disorientation, the *Tat* Circle conceived of them as the locus of ultimate social integration, placing them at the core of its vision of a totalitarian revolution that would be social in character yet unconcerned with issues of class.

Siegfried Kracauer's "Transcendental Homelessness"

Growing up in an acculturated Jewish environment in Frankfurt, Kracauer studied architecture, his life-long yearning for philosophy notwithstanding.[3] Yet, in keeping with the zeitgeist, he had no interest in the abstract and idealistic (in this context, neo-Kantian) approach to theory and sought a more phenomenological approach to objects and people. As one of its features editors (until the paper dropped him in 1933), he was able to use the widely read *Frankfurter Zeitung*, to present his gradually evolving social theory. It treated substantial issues on the basis of often very slight changes such as the displacement of items such as inkpots, monocles and suspenders, and elucidated the secret messages encoded in urban panoramas, umbrellas, leisure parks and neon signs. An avid reviewer of new movies and novels, and an acute observer of everyday mass culture, Kracauer also functioned as "a highly sensitive seismograph of the Weimar Republic's intellectual and religious currents."[4] Alas, historians of religion have rarely taken notice of him in this capacity. His reports from anthroposophical congresses, gatherings of Catholic academics or Hermann Keyserling's School of

3. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer* offers an excellent introduction to the man and his work. See also Agard, *Siegfried Kracauer*, and Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*. As a survey of relevant edited collections indicates, the principal focus of research on Kracauer has increasingly shifted in recent decades from his framing of the salaried employees and the middle classes towards aesthetic themes. See Kessler and Levin, eds., *Siegfried Kracauer*; Volk, ed., *Siegfried Kracauer*; Grunert and Kimmich, eds., *Denken durch die Dinge*; Gemünden and Moltke, eds., *Culture in the Anteroom*; Ahrens, Fleming, Martin, and Vedder. eds., *"Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen, so ist es darum noch nicht getilgt"*; Biebl, Lethen, and von Moltke, eds., *Siegfried Kracauers Grenzgänge*; Hunter and Trautmann, eds., *In the Sense of Material Reality*.

4. Bauschulte, *Religionsbahnhöfe in der Weimarer Republik*, 53. The German term *geistig* can mean simply "intellectual," but frequently has the connotation "spiritual" as well, making it virtually untranslatable.

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Wisdom, are important sources for scholars interested in relevant trends in the 1920s.[5] In what follows, I illustrate this by focussing on Kracauer's encounters with *Die Tat* and its publisher and sometime editor Eugen Diederichs. Over time, their focus on esotericist concerns was increasingly displaced by sociological and class considerations. Theo-political concerns continued to attract a great deal of their attention, but the ratio between the numbers of primarily political texts and specific treatments of religious issues published both by Kracauer and in *Die Tat* shifted markedly towards the former.

The point of departure for the interaction between them was a feeling of "transcendental homelessness" in whose grip Kracauer found himself following the First World War.[6] He promptly proceeded to project his own lack of a sense of spiritual and intellectual belonging and his personal disillusionment with existing traditions onto modernity per se. The concept of "transcendental homelessness" was adopted from Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, a book that enjoyed a broad reception at the time.[7] In it, Lukács presented a historico-metaphysical theory of literature, charting a course from the meaningful deeds of the Homeric epics to the epistemic and eschatological randomness in which the isolated subject of the modern Dostoyevskyan novel was trapped.

Lukács's account was predicated on a Romanticist historical fairy tale: one upon a time, in "blissful times," a bright light illuminated the heavens and the earth. Back then, because "the fire that burns in the soul is of the same character as the stars," the "starry sky mapped out all the paths one could and ought to tread."[8] Yet humankind had since entered the "era of complete sinfulness,» and the paradigmatic literary form of this age was the novel.[9] This myth of an

5. See Martins, *"Um Himmels willen nicht vom Materiellen ablenken"* (forthcoming).
6. See Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 19–48; Martins, "Katholizismus als esoterischer Sehnsuchtsort."
7. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 41.
8. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29 (translation amended).
9. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 152 (translation amended).

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original golden age in Antiquity, when the world was "vast and yet like home,"[10] reverberated across all of Kracauer's early works.

In his first monograph, *Sociology as Science* (1922), Kracauer proceeded from the same point of departure, the notion of a "meaningful age," of a world replete with meaning in which "the divine pervades life, and even the stones bear testimony to the divine being."[11] Yet all this meaning had since seeped away, hence the need for human interpretive endeavours such as literary theory, sociology and science. Quoting Novalis, Lukács argued that "[p]hilosophy is really homesickness," an expression of the yearning and quest for an orderly and universally meaningful world that no longer existed.[12] On Kracauer's account, the world had disintegrated "into the multifariousness of that which exists and the subject confronted with this multifariousness. Once integrated into the chain of characters populating the world, the subject now emerges from the chaos all alone. . . . Catapulted into the frigid infinity of empty space and empty time," the subject faces "infinite realms of reality."[13]

Observers poked fun at Kracauer's neo-Romanticist crisis theory and cultural pessimism even then. Perhaps the harshest mockery was formulated by Franz Rosenzweig in a letter to Martin Buber. "And then," he wrote, "we are told for the umpteenth time that 'we' live in shattered, fractured, fragmented and chaotic 'times', from within which a 'religious yearning' desperately pines for the big, beautiful torte of unity that a kindhearted pastry chef, 'in the Middle Ages', used to home deliver to a humankind 'close to God' as ideological dessert."[14]

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10. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29 (translation amended).
11. Kracauer, "Soziologie als Wissenschaft," 12.
12. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29.
13. Kracauer, "Soziologie als Wissenschaft," 12.
14. Rosenzweig, letter to Martin Buber, 11 October 1922, in Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 1, 835. On the tense relations between Rosenzweig and Kracauer, see Baumann, "Drei Briefe"; Handelman, "The Forgotten Conversation"; Martins, *"Um Himmels willen."*

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Critique of Ideology Meets the Intellectual and Spiritual Homelessness of the Middle Classes

Towards the end of the 1920s, Kracauer developed an alternative explanation for the lamented sense of disorientation, which he articulated in his book *The Salaried Masses* (1929/30).[15] He now identified transcendental homelessness as a phenomenon specific to the middle classes (his own included). To be sure, his parental home was, by conventional standards, indeed a middle-class or urban lower-middle-class household. Yet, Kracauer wanted to make a more specific point. He conceived of the middle classes not as a timeless fixed category within a stable social constellation, but as a specific social formation emerging under the specific economic and historical conditions prevalent after the First World War. He occasionally referred to them as "intermediate strata" and often as the "mass." His term of choice, however, was "salaried employees." He observed that, "[o]ver a period in which the number of workers has not yet doubled, salary-earners have multiplied almost five times."[16] While this had cost some their assets, others owed their upward social mobility to the war. Yet others were mere fortune seekers fleeing the countryside for the cities. Kracauer's portrayal of Berlin's salaried employees offers a unique blend of interviews, ethnographical observation and textual exegesis crafted in a highly innovative manner from reportage, personal accounts and empirical social research.[17]

Kracauer was certainly not alone in his preoccupation with salaried employees. Because they cut across established class divisions and engendered the mass societies of the twentieth century, they fascinated sociologists and have done so ever since.[18] As salaried employees, they stood neither on the side

15. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*.

16. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 29.

17. See Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 37–47; Hoffmann, "Kritische Öffentlichkeit als Erkenntnisprozess"; Mülder-Bach, "Cinematic Ethnography"; Band, "Siegfried Kracauers Expedition in die Alltagswelt der Berliner Angestellten"; Band, *Mittelschichten und Massenkultur*; Reitz, "Die Klasse ohne Eigenschaften."

18. Reitz, "Die Klasse ohne Eigenschaften," also brings Kracauer's findings up-to-date with reference to international sociological debates.

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of the capitalists who owned the means of production nor on the side of the proletariat who owned only their labour.[19] Klaus Fritzsche's study on the *Tat* Circle, though now a little dated, is still a helpful point of reference for those interested in Kracauer's class-theoretical reflections. His own Marxist approach notwithstanding, Fritzsche challenged some of Kracauer's positions, notably by pointing out that, in conventional sociological terms, Kracauer's salaried employees did not in fact form a unitary social group but represented a range of mutually attenuating or even contradictory social positions and perspectives. What united the jumble of "the bourgeois lower and established middle class, salaried employees, civil servants, notably the cultured and well educated and the bourgeois intelligentsia," were primarily ideological features: "bourgeois lower middle-class traditions, pronounced self-esteem, [and] desperate resistance against the exterior social world and its destruction of basic values and dispossession" of people like themselves. What Kracauer had portrayed was the "entire spectrum of those who considered themselves the 'middle class'" and who felt threatened by both capitalism and Communism.[20]

Kracauer himself had in fact arrived at a similar conclusion. The middle classes did not constitute a solid bloc located at the middle of a scale of social groups defined by their income, wealth and social status but comprised a range of diverse groups. What they had in common above all else was their resentful attitude towards other social groups and their fear of loss of status.[21] Instead

19. This analysis tapped into a well-established Marxist trope regarding the petit bourgeoisie. As Marx noted in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Because he belongs to the petty bourgeoisie, i.e., an *intermediate* class in which the interests of two classes mutually blunt each other, the democrat imagines that he stands above the class antagonism." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" [1852], 133.

20. Fritzsche, *Politische Romantik und Gegenrevolution*, 66.

21. Notably after the Second World War, Kracauer occasionally went as far as to claim that middle-class ideology had in fact penetrated society in its entirety: "In pre-Nazi Germany, middle-class penchants penetrated all strata; they competed with the political aspirations of the Left and also filled the voids of the upper-class mind." Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 8. His erstwhile student Theodor W. Adorno, in turn, extended this generalization to encompass all of post-war West German society: "What Kracauer diagnosed in 1930 as the culture of

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of an elaborate theory of the middle class, he presented a range of observations from the vantage of the critique of ideology focussing on the nexus between the justified fear of immiseration and various kinds of crises, on the one hand, and the ideological construct of the imperilled middle class, on the other, a well-known construct to this day: the middle classes have nothing but contempt for those higher up yet like to bully those of lower social rank, and they dislike both Marxism and liberalism, both class solidarity and capitalist competition. This left them wide open to all manner of ideologies that claim to offer a remedy for their sense of disorientation and marginalization and affirmed their delusions of grandeur. Ideologies predicated on notions of religious and/or racial superiority were only too happy to step into the breach.

In *The Salaried Masses*, Kracauer characterized this non-class above all in terms of the vacuousness of its concepts:

> The mass of salaried employees differs from the labour proletariat in that they are intellectually homeless. It cannot, for now, find its way to join the proletarian comrades, and the edifice of bourgeois ideas and sentiments it has hitherto inhabited has collapsed because the economic development has deprived it of its foundations. It currently lives with no doctrine to look and aspire to, with no goal it might descry. Hence, it lives in fear of lifting up its eyes and asking its way in earnest. Nothing is more characteristic of this life, to the extent that it can be called life, than its way of perceiving of the sublime: not as substance but as glamour, not by means of concentration but of distraction.[22]

salaried employees—the institutional and psychological superstructure that fooled the white-collar proletarians teetering on the precipice into thinking they were something special and thus secured their allegiance to the bourgeoisie—has since, given long-standing economic growth, turned into the universal ideology of a society that mistakes itself for a unitary middle-class people." Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 19–20 (translation amended). Others have cited Kracauer's insights to stress that the constant reference to the middle classes detracts attention from the continued existence of a precarious lower class. See Kadritze, *Mythos "Mitte,"* 36–40. This certainly tallies with the fact that Kracauer was concerned with the distinction between workers and salaried employees only in terms of the illusory way in which the ideology he identified as that of the salaried employees drew this distinction.

22. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 88 (translation amended).

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What started out as the glamour and distraction offered by the capitalist leisure industry eventually fed into the glamour of the seemingly unifying cult of the Führer. In a short piece written at roughly the same time as Kracauer was studying the salaried masses, Ernst Bloch noted, in a similar vein, that white-collar workers "allow themselves to be diverted, by cinema or race, so that they do not collect themselves";[23] collect themselves both in the plain sense of the term and in the sense of coming together to assert their political and economic interests (Bloch's word play in this instance does not work in English). Constant diversion filled the void created by political ignorance, lack of social awareness, economic precarity and historical hopelessness. There was obviously no ignoring the enormous challenges post-war German society faced, yet this awareness translated only into a desperate sense of isolation and meaninglessness. The neo-religious movements too, Kracauer stressed, were able to conceive of the sublime merely as glamour, not as substance. They peddled invented traditions with a pretence of archaic religious authenticity that turned out, on closer inspection, to lack all substance.

If so many lamented an insufficient sense of orientation, the causes were neither existential nor ontological in nature but historical, social and economic, Kracauer explained. Yet he consistently rejected the "vulgar-Marxist doctrine" that "cultural contents merely form a superstructure above the relevant socio-economic base, so that it is not their claim to truth that is investigated but merely the conditions in which they arise."[24] Such content existed in its own right.[25] "Theology exists," Kracauer insisted, "and for me, . . . the word eternal has real meaning." However, "for heaven's sake," its contemplation "must not be allowed to divert attention from the material" realm.[26] Ideas needed to be interpreted in conjunction with their social context since one could not understand the former without considering the latter.

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23. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 22.

24. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 103 (translation amended).

25. On Kracauer's concept of content (Gehalt), see Biebl, "Verbaute Passagen," 75.

26. Kracauer, "Zwei Arten der Mitteilung," 181. See also Martins, "Märchenhafter Materialismus"; Martins, "Religious Encounters in Profane Spaces."

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The Neo-Religious Discourse in the Early 1920s: Kracauer, Anthroposophy and Eugen Diederichs

As we saw, a decade earlier, Kracauer had himself been in the grip of the very yearning he criticized in 1929/30. In what follows, I will chart the development leading from this point of departure to his subsequent critique. Kracauer's own quest for a spiritual refuge led him to survey the esoteric marketplace of the early 1920s and dive head-first into what has been called the "modern German occult revival."[27]

While research on esotericism in the narrower sense of the word would certainly benefit from engaging with Kracauer and Diederichs, my focus in this article is not specifically on esotericism or the occult but on a slightly broader frame of reference. The developments I discuss were not limited to the spiritistic, astrological or theosophical scenes, but also made themselves felt in humanities departments and specific Jewish and Christian denominational trends. They were underpinned by a shared sense of spiritual renewal combined, paradoxically, with the desire to recover one's roots in a supposedly lost past. Kracauer himself frequently characterized this phenomenon as one of "religious renewal," a concept he adopted from his early philosophical role model Max Scheler (1874–1928).[28] Hence my preference for the term neo-religious. The range of Kracauer's own spiritual explorations gives some indication of just how many iterations there were of this neo-religious yearning. Anthroposophy, to which I will turn in due course, was merely one such iteration, albeit one that was particularly conspicuous.

Kracauer's desperate longing for some kind of compelling, objective meaning to which individuals could not but yield bore unmistakable authoritarian traits from the outset. In the immediate post-war years, he lamented the spread of

27. See, for example, Treitel, *A Science for the Soul,*; Staudenmaier, "Esoteric Alternatives in Imperial Germany"; pertinent transnational studies include Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*; Myers, "Affinity and Estrangement."

28. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, Scheler felt increasingly alienated from established Catholicism in later life. He held the chair in philosophy and sociology at Cologne University until 1928, when he was appointed professor of philosophy at Frankfurt but died before he was able to take up the position. Kracauer, "Catholicism and Relativism" [1921], 203; Scheler, "The Renewal of Religion," 107–356.

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individualism and craved authentic authority and a "master of the path," a leader whose soul was all-encompassing and who therefore "brings the community closer to attaining an ideal state."[29] He assumed that a religious community would form around a master of this kind and thought he had found it in the congregation of the charismatic Frankfurt-based rabbi Nehemias Anton Nobel, who was "all spirit—what others teach, he *was*."[30] Yet, Nobel died in 1921. Kracauer went on to pen extremely interesting contemporaneous eye-witness accounts of other prominent religious charismatics of the interwar years such as Hermann Keyserling and Rudolf Steiner, whom he promptly rejected as false prophets. In addition, he observed various gatherings of Catholic academics, education reform activists and the youth movement.[31]

One cannot help wondering to what extent the concepts Kracauer developed in his treatment of the salaried masses a decade later may usefully be applied to this earlier ideological labyrinth. Since the late 1920s, it has been widely held that the natural habitat of occultism (as opposed to more traditional rural superstition) is found at the lower end of the urban bourgeois spectrum.[32] Yet, the evidence for this contention has tended to be anecdotal. While several

29. Kracauer, "Das Wesen des politischen Führers" [1921], 214.

30. Kracauer, letter to Leo Löwenthal, 24 January 1922, in *In steter Freundschaft,* 35. See also Heuberger, *Rabbi Nehemiah Anton Nobel*; Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 79–85; Sauter, Kasten, and Martins, eds., *Die Bibelübersetzung von Buber-Rosenzweig*, 15–18, 54–56.

31. Kracauer scholars to date have paid little or no attention to his dealings with, and reception of, the *Tat* Circle, Hermann Keyserling or Rudolf Steiner. Yet, as I show in Part II of *"Um Himmels willen,"* they were central to his critique of esotericism. For example, Harry Craver, while discussing Kracauer's dealings with Catholicism and Protestantism and a range of religious authors, has paid only very limited attention to his esoteric affinities. Craver, *Reluctant Skeptic*. Jared Poley has characterized Kracauer's analysis of authoritarian, morbid and dark tendencies in German cinema as an "occult study" in the sense that Kracauer engaged in "the reading of esoteric signs for deeper knowledge and meaning," but he makes no reference to Kracauer's encounters with occultism or occult influences on Weimar cinema. Poley, "Siegfried Kracauer, Spirit, and the Soul of Weimar Germany," 86. Peter S. Fisher looks specifically at the Weimar-era use of psychics in criminalistics: *Weimar Controversies*, 17–66.

32. Will-Erich Peuckert, "Okkultismus," 1227, 1230. On Peuckert, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 315–17.

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studies have confirmed its validity in the case of specific groups active around the turn of the century,[33] the same cannot be said for the period from 1914 onwards. Rudolf Steiner's (1861–1925) Anthroposophical Society would seem an obvious case in point for the state of play in this intermediate period.[34] In 1913, it seceded from the supposedly alien and "Eastern" Theosophical Society Adyar to proclaim a more German and Christian form of esotericism. Steiner's branch of the Theosophical Society had comprised a few hundred members who mostly belonged to the upper-middle class or the aristocracy. After the First World War, he suddenly had a mass following. To be sure, many had only a superficial grasp of what he was about and soon lost interest but even so, the change was dramatic. Most of the new followers were neither aristocrats nor factory workers but indeed middle-class intellectuals, students, salaried employees, and civil servants, many of whom had recently been subject to upward or downward social mobility. As Steiner reached the peak of his fame in 1921/22, the anthroposophical movement certainly piqued Kracauer's curiosity and it remained a significant focal point for him for some time to come.[35]

In 1921, *Die Tat* published a special issue on anthroposophy comprising contributions by both Steiner supporters and detractors.[36] We know that

33. See Bigalke, *Lebensreform und Esoterik um 1900*.

34. See Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 362–80; *Rudolf Steiner*.

35. "The anthroposophical movement, whose principal German base is currently Stuttgart," Kracauer wrote in February 1921, "is making initial forays into Frankfurt" ("Rudolf Steiners Geheimwissenschaft," 3). Kracauer then reported from an anthroposophical conference held in Darmstadt in July of that year. See Steiner, *Die Aufgabe der Anthroposophie Gegenüber Wissenschaft und Leben*; Kracauer, "Anthroposophie und Wissenschaft," 256–65. Subsequent articles on the topic included "Rudolf Steiner und Seine Jünger"; "Dr. Rudolf Steiner in Frankfurt"; "Zum Tode Rudolf Steiners." These were followed mainly by reviews of relevant books and public lectures: "Moderne Theosophie"; "Neuere Literatur zur Anthroposophie"; "Der Abendländische Zeus"; "Anthroposophie und Christentum." After the Second World War, Kracauer seems to have left it, at least in print, at one final sideswipe: "In their dread of being left in the open, scores of people rushed to mushroom prophets, who were to sink into oblivion a few years later. The theosophist Rudolf Steiner was a particular rage of the time; he resembled Hitler in that he zealously advertised inflated visions in execrable, petty-bourgeois German." *From Caligari to Hitler*, 107.

36. There was some measure of direct overlap between the *Tat* Circle and the anthroposophical

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Kracauer was intensely familiar with at least one of the contributions, a critical assessment of Steiner by the far-left Catholic theologian Ernst Michel, because, in 1923, he discussed a lecture by Michel on the same topic which, going by Kracauer's summary, was either identical or very similar to the article in *Die Tat*.[37] In the early 1920s, Kracauer's own religious stance would by no means have been out of place in *Die Tat*, and his assessment of anthroposophy did not differ markedly from that of the critical contributors to the journal's special issue on the topic. One could "hardly ignore anthroposophical doctrine,"[38] he wrote, and this not only because it had become so ubiquitous. To be sure, it did little more than offer some measure of diversion to those searching for meaning. One needed to acknowledge, however, that Steiner had an "extraordinary nose" for the intellectual and spiritual void that troubled so many and that he offered a unified, albeit daemonic, concept of nature and spirit.[39] Hence, "One can understand why many people fall prey to this kind of temptation."[40]

Eugen Diederichs,[41] editor and publisher of *Die Tat*, would not have disagreed. Anthroposophy, he wrote in the special issue, was a transitional phenomenon and not a new beginning. As such, it posed a "threat to the substantiation of

movement. See Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*, 82–83. In addition to the relevant publications named by Staudenmaier, see also Bauer, "Geheimschulung nach Steiner,." On *Die Tat* and the *Tat* Circle, see Fritzsche, *Politische Romantik*; Sontheimer, "Der Tatkreis"; Stark, *Entrepreneurs of Ideology*,; Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic*, 88–100; Hanke and Hübinger, "Von der 'Tat'-Gemeinde zum 'Tat'-Kreis"; Hübinger, "*Die Tat* und der *Tat-Kreis*."

37. See Kracauer, "Anthroposophie und Christentum"; Michel, "Anthroposophie und Christentum." Although Steiner dismissed Michel as a Catholic dogmatic and Dadaist, the two had rather more in common than either would have cared to admit. Steiner, *Die Verantwortung des Menschen für die Weltentwickelung*, 215–19. See, as a case in point, Michel, *Weltanschauung und Naturdeutung*. The Vatican placed several works by Michel on the index. On Michel, see Groß, Hainz, Klehr, and Michel, eds., *Weltverantwortung des Christen*; on his background in Frankfurt, see Lowitsch, *Der Kreis um die Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung*, 36–39; on Kracauer and Michel, see Craver, *Reluctant Skeptic*, 71, 175–81.

38. Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," 132.

39. Kracauer, "Anthroposophie und Christentum," 260.

40. Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," 133.

41. For Diederichs's self-understanding, see Eugen Diederichs, *Aus meinem Leben*.

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the coming Germany," and it was for this very reason that one urgently needed to subject it to critical scrutiny. It was, after all, "such an obvious option just now to seek refuge atop a secure tower from the chaos of what is emerging."[42]

While both Kracauer and Diederichs presented themselves as concerned commentors who scrutinized intellectual and spiritual renewal movements on behalf of "the coming Germany," in stark contrast to Kracauer, Diederichs maintained a "secure tower" of his own: the Eugen Diederichs publishing enterprise in Jena.[43] A Diederichs publishing enterprise producing religious literature still exists, but its early-twentieth-century predecessor was not just some publisher, it was as voguish an enterprise as anthroposophy. It published the complete or collected works of various philosophers, substantial collections of fairy tales, (neo-)religious and secular literature and books by authors from the religious socialist and völkisch spectrums. Notably in the areas of ethnography and folklore studies, its academic impact was considerable,[44] but Diederichs's success rested above all on his ability to present these topics to a broad middle-class readership in an accessible manner. In his capacity as a moderator and mediator of contemporary ideas, Diederichs was able to punch far above his weight, and for the authors and publicists of the neo-religious scene all ways led to Diederichs; so too for Kracauer, a one-time contributor to *Die Tat* and frequent reviewer of Diederichs publications, and for Steiner, who sought to publish one of his books with Diederichs.[45]

42. Diederichs, "Zum anthroposophischen Sonderheft." For Steiner's harnished response, see Steiner, *Die Verantwortung des Menschen*, 200–24. The fact that the anthroposophical journal *Die Drei* still placed an advertisement in *Die Tat* a year later suggests that Steiner was unable to warn all his supporters off *Die Tat*.

43. See Stark, *Entrepreneurs of Ideology*, 58–110, and passim; Viehöfen, *Der Verleger als Organisator*; Hübinger, ed., *Versammlungsort Moderner Geister*; Heidler, *Der Verleger Eugen Diederichs und Seine Welt (1896–1930)*; Ulbricht and Werner, eds., *Romantik, Revolution und Reform*; Triebl, *Der Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1930–1949*; Diederichs, *Eugen Diederichs und Sein Verlag*; Werner, *Germany's Other Modernism*.

44. See Niem, *Eugen Diederichs und die Volkskunde*.

45. See Steiner, letter to Eugen Diederichs, 14 May 1904, in Ulf Diederichs, ed., *Eugen Diederichs*, 145–46. In *Die Verantwortung des Menschen*, 211–13, Steiner claimed he had never shown any interest in Diederichs as a publisher.

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Even so, the Diederichs publishing house did have its own religion of sorts, albeit one whose appeal owed more to its syncretism and universal compatibility than its originality. Meike Werner has argued that Diederichs's eventual decision to settle in Jena was owed not (only) to pragmatic considerations but to programmatic concerns too. While the likes of Kracauer and Walter Benjamin identified metropolitan centres such as Frankfurt or Berlin as the true loci of modernity, Diederichs consciously opted for a provincial city—albeit a city that was home to one of Germany's most prestigious universities—because, to his mind, it embodied an alternative modernity not tied to urbanism.[46] Jena supposedly stood not for acceleration and rationalization but for poetic charm and soulful profundity. This was, of course, a thoroughly lopsided perception that presupposed the deconstruction and reinterpretation of other intellectual and academic traditions that were or had been equally at home in the city.[47] While the penchant for a vision of provincial modernity was shared by some liberals and leftists, it was fundamentally Romanticist in nature, and Diederichs was by no means alone in charging his ideal of provincial modernity with antisemitic tropes.

Indeed, Diederichs coined the term neo-Romanticism and sought to outline a distinctly German and this-worldly pantheism that scanned artistic output for traces of the divine and conceived of God as residing in the individual and in nature. Monotheism and belief in the afterlife, by contrast, he dismissed as Jewish and alien.[48] His antisemitic rejection of the "Jehovah-God" and his call to find God within was rounded off by a metaphysics of history drawing on Joachim of Fiore's doctrine of the three kingdoms:

> The redemptive word will come, for the third empire is nigh. All we can do now is seek solitude and prepare to hear our inner voice, which God uses to call out. For in

46. Werner, *Germany's Other Modernism*, 6–16. Analogously, both the anthroposophists and Keyserling's School of Wisdom liked to congregate in Darmstadt, a quaint former royal residence offering plenty of attractive Art Nouveau architecture.

47. Werner, *Germany's Other Modernism*, 10–11.

48. See Ulbricht, "'Deutsche Religion' und 'Deutsche Kunst'," 35.

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> the third empire, the experience of God will be more profound, it has transcended the Jehovah-God, the God of hosts enthroned on high, because its concept of God is more spiritualized. This experience will require no notion of a Father God because it will observe God's symbols in the occurrences of life and God himself in ideas.[49]

Young Kracauer was no stranger to such ideas about "waiting" and inner "self-preparation" as a sort of golden mean between short-circuited dogmatism and principled skepticism, nor to eclecticism and pantheistic tendencies.[50] He envisaged the possibility of straddling the chasm between spirit and nature, of "eavesdropping on the ancient God Pan." The visible light of this world was the smile of the Gnostic Sophia.[51] Yet Kracauer was able to entertain these ideas without the complementary antisemitism: "Hasidic mysticism (according to [Martin] Buber) too sought and found the Shekhinah in nature," he wrote to Leo Löwenthal in 1922.[52] Diederichs, by contrast, strained all the ideological tenets he assimilated through a filter that ensured they conformed sufficiently to his pronounced völkisch nationalism and anti-intellectualism, as well as his slightly less pronounced antisemitism. In the introduction to *Politik des Geistes* (Politics of the Spirit, 1920), a collection of his contributions to *Die Tat*, he stated his position as follows:

> True politics maintains the health of the national spirit. Everyone can contribute to this task, initially by beginning to stay spiritually healthy themselves. In this vein, what I wrote down quite inadvertently turned into an inner grappling with "my truth." Never have I been a chauvinist, nor bourgeois, nor a critic or radical detractor for the sake of some "ism." Sinc we need "visions," not "opinions," criticism that does not come with a constructive idea is, to my mind, redundant.[53]

This was certainly too affirmative for Kracauer's liking; he did not buy that one constantly needed to be positive and constructive. It was important to be "able

49. Eugen Diederichs, "Das Kommen des dritten Reiches," 99.
50. Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," 139.
51. Kracauer, letter to Leo Löwenthal, 16 October 1921, in *In steter Freundschaft*, 26.
52. Kracauer, letter to Leo Löwenthal, 9 March 1922, in *In steter Freundschaft*, 41.
53. Eugen Diederichs, "Zum Geleit!," 1.

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to stick it out" among the negative, and some things deserved only criticism.[54] Diederichs wanted to be more hands-on. His ideal was "the man rooted in fact who is intent on lending life an increasingly organic structure." His foes, conversely, were the "leaders of intellectualism" and the materialist spirit of the masses which, on his account, were at home in soulless America. To avert Germany's Americanization, the "democratic idea" needed "to bring together and penetrate liberal individualism, the conservative notion of organic configuration and the socialist concept of community so that a state of the Volk may be created."[55] In spiritual terms, the Politics of the Spirit were predicated on the "Christ idea" and the willingness, encapsulated in that idea, to make sacrifices, as well as the determination "to follow through in earnest on the demands of Goethe, Schiller and their contemporaries." This would allow the God lying dormant in nature to be reawakened within us: "Each one of us must ensure they develop in keeping with their intellectual and spiritual core. . . . The religious requirement of our times is to be truthful, for this is the only way of serving the spirit."[56]

"Nationhood! Goethe! Mythos!" Diederichs, Martin Buber and Kracauer's Turn of 1926

Although Kracauer would have been a good fit as a Diederichs author in the early 1920s, in the event, he occasionally published articles in *Deutscher Pfeiler* (German Pylon), a journal published by former editors of *Die Tat* whom Diederichs had pressured into leaving,[57] but only one text in *Die Tat*—a review of Martin Buber's magnum opus, *Ich und Du* (I and Thou, 1923).[58] The

54. Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," 139 (translation amended).

55. Eugen Diederichs, "Deutschlands Aufgabe," 166–67.

56. Eugen Diederichs, "400 Jahre Reformation," 94.

57. The brothers Ernst and August Horneffer established *Die Tat* in 1909. Beginning in 1912 and notably during the war, Diederichs acquired his dominant role and tried to increase the journal's circulation. See Diederichs, *Eugen Diederichs und sein Verlag*, 347. In addition to the two previously identified texts "Rudolf Steiner" and "Moderne Theosophie," Kracauer published a third text in the Horneffer's subsequent journal, *Deutscher Pfeiler: Neue Folge des "Unsichtbaren Tempels"*: "Der Graf Cagliostro."

58. See Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber*.

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religious philosopher Buber had published his *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (Ecstatic Confessions, 1909), an anthology of mystical texts from various world religions, with Diederichs. While Buber and Diederichs were both interested in medieval mysticism,[59] Buber, who was unable to convince the antisemite Diederichs that there was such a thing as "Jewish mysticism" too,[60] subsequently, depending on one's vantage, either turned his back on the neo-religious discourse or developed his own Jewish variant of that discourse. *I and Thou* is now considered a work of Jewish philosophy, yet in his review of the work published in *Die Tat* in 1923, Kracauer stressed that "in this book, Buber does not speak as a Jew." Instead, he offered "generally valid answers to general human questions."[61]

At the time, Kracauer still agreed with Diederichs and Buber on certain issues. Three years later, he broke with them and publicly at that. In his review of *I and Thou*, he initially praised the central plank of Buber's account, his emphasis on the Thou, on dialogue, on the genuinely meaningful encounter, on God as the Eternal Thou.[62] He had misgivings, however, about the way in which Buber dismissed the material, profane, external world and everyday life as a frigid "It world." Did he not, in so doing, "leapfrog precisely the concrete reality that he ... seeks to grasp?"[63] Three years later, this question mark had turned into an exclamation mark. As he explained in his critical review of the first volume of Buber and Rosenzweig's translation of the Tanakh, truth now resided "in the profane realms in which a social critique (no matter how abstract) is more at home than a contemplation of reality that skips over it."[64] By now,

59. See Ulbricht, "Mystik und Deutschtumsmetaphysik"; Groiser, "Einleitung," 13–43.

60. Buber, letter to Eugen Diederichs, 21 February 1907, in *Briefwechsel aus Sieben Jahrzehnten*, vol. 1, 253. See also Groiser, "Einleitung," 22; Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden*, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation," 89. Buber played a crucial role in creating the notion of the Kabbalistic tradition as the Jewish variant of the ostensible anthropological constant "mysticism" that scholars are currently deconstructing. See Huss, *Mystifying Kabbalah*, 1, 45–50.

61. Kracauer, "Martin Buber," 678.

62. Buber, "Ich und Du," 82.

63. Kracauer, "Martin Buber," 683.

64. Kracauer, "The Bible in German," 200 (translation amended). On the ensuing controversy,

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Kracauer had found a new home in social criticism and become an adherent of the Marxist critique of ideology. Their translation was a work of "archaizing neo-Romanticism," he noted, and it exemplified the "loss of substance" that resulted when supposedly sacred or "esoteric" language was deployed in the present.[65] Given that Diederichs had popularized the term neo-Romanticism, this also amounted to an obvious sideswipe at him.

On 26 April 1926, one day before the publication of his damning review of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, Kracauer had savaged an announcement published by the Diederichs publishing enterprise in the German book trade's leading periodical. It bore the heading "Nationhood! Goethe! Mythos!" and announced the second of three Religious Propaganda Weeks.[66] Each was devoted to one of the themes indicated in the heading and associated with a matching book series: the (German) Nationhood series and the Goethe-inspired God–Nature series, as well as a third series that was still being prepared by the "Mythos group."[67] The three series would mark the consummation of his three decades as a publisher and, "once the third group is announced, the purpose of my labours as a publisher will be encapsulated in the motto: The German countenance whose foremost embodiment is the man Goethe."[68] The publications would fortify the German spirit against the threat of American materialism.

> "What do I hope to achieve with another Propaganda Week? Might it be my intention to sermonize about the range of available books or play the preceptor of the book trade?"

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see Sauter, Kasten, and Martins, eds., *Die Bibelübersetzung von Buber-Rosenzweig*; Jay, "Politics of Translation"; Lesch and Lesch, "Verbindungen zu einer anderen Frankfurter Schule"; Askani, *Das Problem der Übersetzung*, 263–81; Britt, "Romantic Roots of the Debate on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible"; Beck and Coomann, "Adorno, Kracauer und die Ursprünge der Jargonkritik"; Kasten, "Mit Luther Gegen Luther"; Kasten, "'Art Must Become Pious or End'; Sauter, "'Ein Modernes Verdeutschungs-Unternehmen'."

65. Kracauer, "The Bible in German," 196, 194 (translation amended).

66. Diederichs, "Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!"

67. In the event, by far the most effort went into the Nationhood series. See Niem, *Eugen Diederichs*, 331–36.

68. Diederichs, "Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!"

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Diederichs asked rhetorically. Surely not. And yet, he insisted that book publishers faced a stark alternative:

> 'Service to the book and, consequently, to the nation, or Americanization'. . . . Anyone who appreciates this as I do also knows that my announcements are meant for those from the same sphere ..., no books are loudly extolled here, at issue are intellectual goals and tasks of concern to every German. . . . The task is to foster the seeds of renewal, this has nothing to do with the pursuit of some hobby horse or desire to play the know-it-all.[69]

Kracauer mocked the fact that the announcement was neither fish nor fowl. On the one hand, Diederichs effectively claimed to be doing God's bidding purely from inspiration and conviction. On the other hand, he could not do without pointing to the books he produced, books which, whatever their inherent value, he also needed to sell. Consequently, the announcement was also part advertisement, but it was so bashful about it that it did a disservice to the very contents that, on Diederichs's account, so urgently needed to see the light of day: "One quivers with fear for the seeds he has found," Kracauer wrote, "given how carelessly he waters them here."[70] Diederichs's self-stylization rested on the relegation of all that was profane—and, by implication, though unconsciously so, of his own dealings in and with the profane—to the bogeyman of Americanization. This offered Kracauer plenty of low-hanging fruit for his mockery, and he just needed to re-arrange Diederichs's own words to render them ridiculous:[71]

> His struggle in the appeal targets the Americanization of the corpus of books available in Germany, on God's behalf. . . . So what is appropriate to such an age? What, one wonders, would be in God's spirit today? The answer: the Religious Propaganda Weeks organized by Eugen Diederichs. Apparently, these un-American weeks have shielded fledgling shoots from Americanization twice before. To console us, the announcement informs us that, "a

69. Diederichs, "Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!"

70. Kracauer, "Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!," 371.

71. Kracauer's immanent critique of texts on their own terms was reminiscent of the method deployed by the Viennese giant of literary criticism and critical journalism Karl Kraus. It prefigured the Frankfurt School's conviction that the critique of ideology was inseparable from the critique of language. See Djassemi, *Der "Produktivgehalt kritischer Zerstörerarbe*it"; Beck and Coomann, "Adorno, Kracauer und die Ursprünge der Jargonkritik."

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> third Religious Propaganda Week is yet to come in the autumn, whose motto is 'Mythos'." One would like to congratulate their discoverer on these splendid terminological clusters, were it not for the fact that he claims not to be responsible for them. For he states modestly: "All such formulations were not willed by me, they have emanated from the work for inner development since the war, from the work of many creative forces in Germany whom I have taken it upon myself to organize as a bookseller."[72]

This he set out to do, Kracauer ridiculed, "with the help of the pious weeks for the prevention of Americanization."[73]

1926 was the year in which Kracauer broke with the remaining big players on the neo-religious scene whom he had not already cut down (Steiner was among the latter). As he intensified his critique of their endeavours, he developed an idiosyncratic Messianic theo-political vantage in a Marxist vein.[74] Not that he had any time for the leftist parties and organized Marxism. Nor was the extraction and exegesis of programmatic proof texts from Marx's works what he had in mind. His attention to significant transformations and innovations embodied, for example, by the middle classes was principally that of a social scientist.

The "New" *Tat* and the "Revolt of the Middle Classes"

Die Tat, meanwhile, moved not to the left but emphatically to the right, largely abandoning religion as a theme and focussing increasingly on the "middle" of society. Under Diederichs, *Die Tat* enjoyed only a modest circulation. When he gave up the draining editorship in 1928/29, he was initially succeeded in this capacity by Adam Kuckhoff, a progressive liberal. Eventually, the Young Conservative Hans Zehrer (1899–1966) took over for good.[75] By 1932, the circulation had increased to 30,000. Its principal authors now formed the

72. Kracauer, "Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!," 371. The quotations were not entirely correct, but Kracauer's minor deviations did not affect the meaning.

73. Kracauer, "Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!," 372.

74. See Martins, "Märchenhafter Materialismus"; Martins, "Religious Encounters."

75. See Demant, *Hans Zehrer als politischer Publizist von Schleicher zu Springer*.

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infamous *Tat* Circle (Diederich tried to create a similar semi-formal *Tat* circle in 1915, but to no avail).[76] The so-called new *Tat* still embraced myth and mysticism, but it propagated a more political form of nationalism and engaged directly with fascism and National Socialism. As he wrote to Zehrer in 1929, Diederichs was not entirely happy with this development:

> There are no genuinely fundamental points of disagreement. I am truly grateful for the way in which you are running the *Tat*. . . . After all, I approve of any kind of one-sidedness in a militant journal. . . . We should talk about religion another time. . . . Under my editorship the *Tat* was really a religious journal, notably where the word religion did not actually feature. . . . Consequently, I would maintain that, alongside its sociological vantage, the *Tat* should primarily tend to the irrational, i.e., religion and the arts.[77]

Yet Diederichs died a year later, and *Die Tat* no longer needed to show him any consideration. It now nailed its flag firmly to the mast of German Socialism and the Total National Community, promoting a long-established synthesis of völkisch state theory, socialist collectivism and capitalist concepts of property which it popularized further until the Nazis were able to reap the benefits.[78]

In 1931, having since developed his own theory of what moved and motivated salaried employees, Kracauer applied his insights to a detailed discussion of the new *Tat*, "Revolt of the Middle Classes." The supporters of the *Tat* Circle were middle-class intellectuals, firstly, because it explicitly promoted middle-class interests and, secondly, because the approach and stance of the journal was fundamentally shaped by petit-bourgeois individualism.[79] There is certainly no

76. Cf. footnote 36.

77. Eugen Diederichs, letter to Hans Zehrer, 2 December 1929, in Diederichs, *Eugen Diederichs: Selbstzeugnisse und Briefe*, 310–11. See Ulbricht, "'Deutsche Religion' und 'Deutsche Kunst'," 51; Fritzsche, *Politische Romantik*, 54.

78. For an accurate survey, see Werth, *Sozialismus und Nation*, 143–69.

79. See Kracauer, "Revolt of the Middle Classes." Später (*Siegfried Kracauer*, 268) has suggested that Kracauer was motivated to write this six-part article for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* by a letter he received from a student who suggested that Kracauer ought really to be a contributor to *Die Tat*. Needless to say, Kracauer hardly needed to be alerted to the periodical's existence; indeed, he had recommended it on two occasions as recently as 1929. See Kracauer, "Zeitschriften-Schau,"

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denying that the journal positively fetishized the middle classes and the ostensible "middle" of society. It also featured a harsh critique of Kracauer's *Salaried Masses*.[80]

The political theology of the "middle" propagated by *Die Tat* and its contributors and supporters is epitomized by the text quoted most frequently in Kracauer's "Revolt of the Middle Classes": Zehrer's "Rechts oder Links?" (Right or Left?) of 1931. Zehrer too conceived of the middle classes as an assemblage of various groups ("civil servants, salaried employees, businesspeople, small leaseholders, intellectual professions etc.") that defied a clear-cut political classification. They were receptive "neither to liberalistic nor to conservativistic or socialist attempts to regiment them," lacked awareness and organization as a group and thought of themselves as being in transition as they aspired to bourgeois existence. "Fascism was first able to assert itself in a practical manner" in Italy "because of its sociological base in the middle classes." In Germany, the latter had the potential to create the space that "ideals, intellectual zest and enthusing myths" might inhabit. No "trades union, association or class" would help them merge "with the community at large, the people and the nation." Only ideals and myths could facilitate this. In order to have "sufficient substance and plasticity," myth needed to create "a theoretical synthesis of the forces of the left and the right." If the "middle" adopted the right-wing ideal of the total state (as expounded by Carl Schmitt) and the left-wing ideal of the planned economy, it would achieve the hoped-for mythologically underpinned nationalist reconstruction of society.[81]

126, 131. It seems more likely, however, that the article was a response to a review of Kracauer's book on salaried employees: Eschmann, "Die Angestellten."

80. Eschmann, "Die Angestellten." Eschmann praised Kracauer's survey but lamented his ironic style and accused him of Marxist historical determinism (see Band, *Mittelschichten*, 209–10). Kracauer actually rejected Marxism's determinism as an extension of the "philosophy of totality" to which he juxtaposed his empirically saturated method of "constituting" a representation of reality with the help of "a machine gun volley of tiny intuitions." See Kracauer, letter to Theodor W. Adorno, 29 May 1930, in *Correspondence, 1923–1966*, 145 (translation amended).

81. Zehrer, "Rechts oder Links?," 532. Zehrer essentially reiterated the position of the journal's aforementioned editor Ernst Wilhelm Eschmann (1904–1987). Eschmann, who completed his

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In "Revolt of the Middle Classes," Kracauer scrutinized three concepts that featured prominently in the ideology of the *Tat* Circle: 1. Its concept of peoplehood and the notion of a holistic and organic "völkisch totality" that it contrasted to the atomizing individualism of mass society;[82] 2. Its concept of the space in which the corporeal existence of the national community transpired; 3. Its concept of the state that allowed the national community to persist over time and control the economy. As in his critique of Buber and Rosenzweig's Tanakh translation, Kracauer reiterated that mythologies were not something one could create or implant at will. Attempts to do so never got beyond propagandistic assertions.

Kracauer primarily wanted to show that the concepts of the *Tat* Circle were counterfactual, remote from reality and self-contradictory. As he had done in his harsh critique of Diederichs in 1926, Kracauer relied on the contradictions inherent in the *Tat* Circle's own texts to demonstrate the "unreality" of its ideas. How were the circle's organicist notions of development and growth compatible with its call for a planned economy? How did the circle intend to reconcile its vision of a total state with the pathos it bestowed upon the ideational abundance of the individual, how would it mediate between collectivism and individualism? For Kracauer, this vacillation between opposites offered a perfect illustration of his diagnosis regarding the development of middle-class ideology:

> Hence, the publications of the *Tat* Circle precisely reflect the very turmoil in which the dispossessed middle class finds itself due to the material and spiritual circumstances, flung

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doctorate under the supervision of the sociologist Alfred Weber, was the *Tat* Circle's expert on social and economic issues. Following the handover of power to the Nazis in 1933, Eschmann took over as publisher of *Die Tat*, alongside Giselher Wirsing. In 1960, his impressive record as a far-right propagandist and supporter of the Nazi regime notwithstanding, Eschmann was appointed to a chair in philosophy at the University of Münster. In his discussion of the *Tat* Circle, Kracauer referred to two of Eschmann's articles: "Moderne Soziologien III" and "Übergang zur Gesamtwirtschaft." See also Eschmann, "Der Faschismus und die Mittelschichten." For a survey of Eschmann's prescriptions at this time, see Käser and Steiner, "Academic Discussion or Political Guidance?," 93–95, 98, 111–12. On Eschmann's biography, see Plöger, *Soziologie in totalitären Zeiten*.

82. Kracauer, "Revolt of the Middle Classes," 109 (translation amended).

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> to and fro between violence and reason as it seeks refuge in Romanticism. This also means, however, that they [the publications of the *Tat* Circle] are incapable of offering the middle class a way out and merely expose the state in which it finds itself.[83]

Profoundly susceptible to the very liberal individualism they rejected for ideological reasons, yet unable to see their material circumstances for what they were, the *Tat* Circle's yearning for myth and mysticism regressed into anti-humanism:

> The intellectual/spiritual battle waged by the *Tat* is therefore at risk, time and again, of degenerating into an unintellectual/unspiritual revolt. It calls the sword an argument, allows blood to triumph over money and is patently inclined to play off the chthonic forces it worships as heroic against any and every consciously fashioned life.[84]

In short: the ideology of the *Tat* Circle mistook the limited rationality of capitalism for reason itself and, unsettled by the former, proceeded to dismiss the latter.

"Consciously fashioned life," the notion that reason might gently elucidate the "chthonic forces" and find an appropriate place for them—these were tenets crucial to the modest utopian vision developed by the Marxist Kracauer. Surely one first needed to understand society, collect oneself, come together, before one took action and manufactured new myths, Kracauer insisted with mounting desperation. Alas, this insistence stood no chance against the sullen invocation of myth that sought not material change but mere ideological integration.

The sociologist Tilman Reitz has criticized Kracauer's immanent critique of the *Tat* Circle's ideology on the grounds that it did not go beyond "merely exposing errors where he ought to have scrutinized what were powerful ideologies."[85] That Kracauer proceeded in this way may be explained not least by the fact that Kracauer assumed he was debating with the contributors to *Die Tat* on an equal footing. Hence, he took recourse not to utopian or socialist but to pragmatic arguments, criticizing some while praising other aspects—including,

83. Kracauer, "Revolt of the Middle Classes," 124.
84. Kracauer, "Revolt of the Middle Classes," 123–24.
85. Reitz, "Die Klasse ohne Eigenschaften," 143.

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in principle, the aspiration to bring together forces and ideas positioned on both sides of the political spectrum. Many of the articles in *Die Tat* proceeded in a similar vein. As Kracauer's biographer, Jörg Später, has pointed out, these were "battles among intellectuals for intellectuals" that were "insignificant when it came to *realpolitik*."[86] They were naïve and made no significant impact on those who were engaged in politics proper. Kracauer even gave the call for a leader, which, after the Nazi party's electoral breakthrough in September 1930 at the latest, had lost a great deal of its innocence (such as it ever was), a Messianic twist: "Invoking a leader does not draw him near, it obviates his advent. It might be eased, if at all, by constantly asking what must to be done." Leaders owed their authority not to what one assumed they would do but to what they had already achieved by "acting based on knowledge."[87]

Kracauer may have assumed that the concepts of the *Tat* Circle bore little or no connection to reality, yet the integration of the middle classes into a national mythology with its very own Führer was already well underway. In the event, far from vacillating between violence and reason, the middle classes opted emphatically for the sword as their preferred argument. Stripped of his post in 1933, Kracauer began to focus on other classes too and developed his theory of the middle classes into a theory of fascism.[88] As it dawned on him what he had previously overlooked, he turned his theory of fascism into a theory of propaganda. The concepts of the *Tat* Circle may have lacked a grip on reality, but totalitarian propaganda simply created its own reality. As Kracauer noted, citing Goebbels, "a world shaped by the art of propaganda becomes as modeling clay—amorphous material lacking any initiative of its own."[89]

86. Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 269.

87. Kracauer, "Revolt of the Middle Classes," 114–15 (translation amended).

88. See Kracauer, "Die deutschen Bevölkerungsschichten und der Nationalsozialismus"; "Exposé. Masse und Propaganda."

89. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 299; *Totalitäre Propaganda*; *Werke*, vol. 2.2; Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 43–78; "Ästhetisierung der Politik. Siegfried Kracauers *Totalitäre Propaganda*"; Agard, "Convergences et Divergences avec l'Institut für Sozialforschung dans *La Propagande Totalitaire*

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Epilogue: The Undead Myth of the "Middle" of Society

Kracauer's initial misjudgement is instructive in a number of important respects, beginning with the importance of not underestimating the impact of hollow ideological claims. His focus on the "middle" of society is also helpful, notably in contrast to conventional theories of extremism. The threat by no means resides (merely) on the fringes of society but at its heart (too); it resides among those who invoke the myth of the ostensible "middle" of society;[90] in the resentment of those who consider themselves "perfectly normal" and those who seek to mobilize them with their demagoguery.

Kracauer's theory barely tallies with the notion that it was the insufficient republican enthusiasm of the middle classes that killed the Weimar Republic. As he began to acknowledge in 1933, workers and members of the haute bourgeoisie embraced the Nazis' Volksgemeinschaft with no less cheer than their middle-class peers. Even so, it continues to be the case that, as opposed to their conventional leftist and right-wing counterparts, fascist movements in Germany and elsewhere are most aptly characterized as articulations of the "extremism of the middle,"[91] in both senses of the word: as the sphere of cozy consensus between the extremes, and the sphere of the economically middling strata of society. Sociologists have certainly documented this beyond any possible doubt for the German case.[92]

Kracauer's intellectual biography also demonstrates that middle-class intellectuals of the interwar period were perfectly capable of *not* turning into fascists. To be sure, the yearning for genuine authority led all too many to subscribe to ideologies like those propagated by the *Tat* Circle. Yet Kracauer, despite having set out from

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de Siegfried Kracauer"; Lind, "A Cacophony of Critical Voices?," Baumann, "Des Nouvelles Masses à l'Ornement Totalitaire," and Abromeit, "Siegfried Kracauer and the Early Frankfurt School's Analysis of Fascism as Right-Wing Populism," all in Noppen and Raulet, eds., *Théorie Critique de la ropagande*.

90. Decker and Türcke, "Die Mitte—ein mythischer Ort."

91. Lipset, *Political Man*.

92. See, *inter alia*, Decker, Kiess, and Brähler, eds., *Rechtsextremismus der Mitte*; *Flucht ins Autoritäre*.

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the same point of departure, took a totally different turn, developing a gentle Messianism of reason that he sought to anchor in a Jewish theology of sorts.

To what extent Kracauer's middle-class theory can usefully be applied to neo-religious movements more generally is less clear. To be sure, in the early 1920s, anthroposophy seems to have made inroads principally in the middle classes, and Kracauer, Buber and the contributors to *Die Tat* were clearly middle-class intellectuals. However, before generalizing these findings, other esoteric movements booming in the immediate post-war years would need to be assessed in detail on a case-by-case basis. Even so, more recent developments would certainly seem to bear out Kracauer's analysis as far as the German context is concerned. The protest movement taking issue with the measures introduced to contain the Covid pandemic was exactly what Kracauer would have expected it to be: an esoteric middle-class movement predicated on a range of conspiracy myths.[93]

Kracauer actually felt a much greater affinity for the neo-religious movements of the 1920s than the prevalent notion of him as a foundational contributor to Frankfurt School Critical Theory who had uncharitable things at best to say about neo-religious authors such as Steiner and Buber suggests. Among researchers focussing on leftist intellectuals, due attention to the religious, Messianic and esoteric dimensions of their objects of study all too often continues to be a desideratum. Conversely, scholars of esotericism would do well to take the dialectical approach of Critical Theory on board, not least in order to comprehend the authoritarian tendencies currently pervading their own objects of study.

93. See Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei, *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste*, 51; Brunner, Daniel, Knasmüller, Maile, Schadauer, and Stern, *Corona-Protest-Report*; Decker, Kiess, Heller, and Brehler, eds., *Autoritäre Dynamiken in Unsicheren Zeiten*.

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