



# Austro-Libertarian Themes in Three Prague Authors: Čapek, Kafka, and Hašek

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**Karel Čapek**  
**(1890-1938)**



**Franz Kafka**  
**(1883-1924)**



**Jaroslav Hašek**  
**(1883-1923)**





# Karel Čapek

- proponent of Czechoslovak independence
- denounced his era as a “damned century” of “wars, the arms race, bolsheviks, and fascism”
- “I think that I am slowly becoming an anarchist ... in the sense of being against collectivity.”
- died 2 months before German occupation of Prague
- too late to kill him, the Nazis killed his brother instead



# Karel Čapek



“Wherever violence is used against civilized humanity, you will find intellectuals by the dozens collaborating and further brandishing their ideological reasons for doing so. This is not about a crisis of or helplessness on the part of the intelligentsia, rather it is about a silent – or else extremely active – complicity in the moral and political shambles of Europe today. ... Have you ever known anything too horrible, too murderous or too nonsensical for an intellectual not to want to seize on it for the purpose of regenerating the world?”

KAREL

\* 9. 1. 1890

ČAPEK

+ 25. 12. 1938

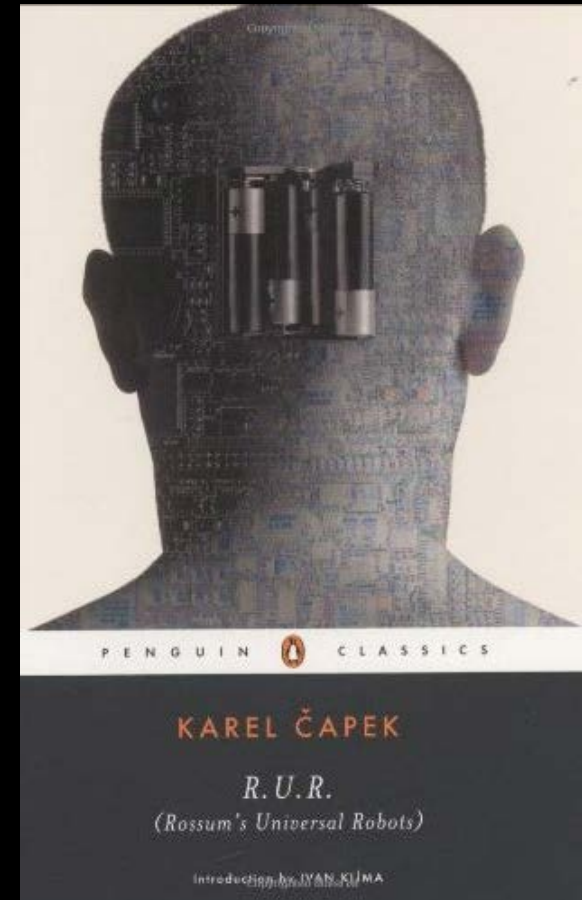
OLGA SCHEINPFLUGOV





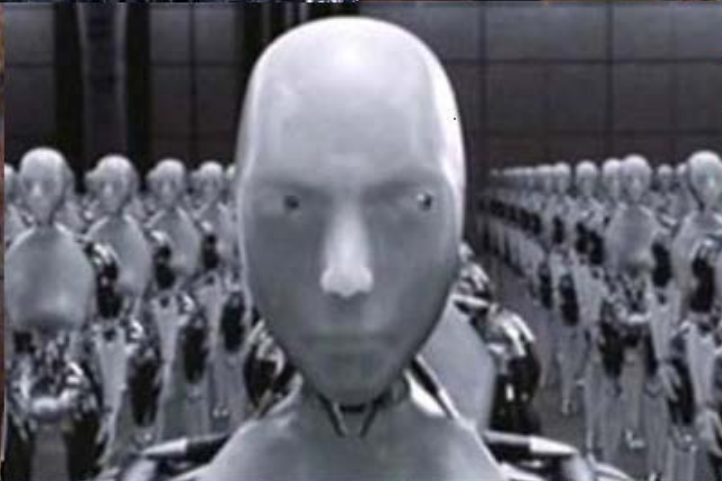
# *R.U.R. – Rossum's Universal Robots*

Čapek's 1920 play that introduced the word "robot" to world literature – and gave us the first story of robots rebelling against their creators





**ROBOTS  
REBELLING!**



# *R.U.R. – Rossum's Universal Robots*

- Workers' anxiety over being replaced by machinery
- Capitalists' anxiety over proletarian revolution
- Čapek's own anxiety over mechanisation and dehumanisation





# *R.U.R. – Rossum’s Universal Robots*

“The workers’ question is holding us back ... The worker must become a machine, so that he can simply rotate like a wheel. Every thought is insubordination! ... A worker’s soul is not a machine, therefore it must be removed. ... I have sterilized the worker, purified him; I have destroyed in him all feelings of altruism and camaraderie, all familial, poetic, and transcendental feelings ....”

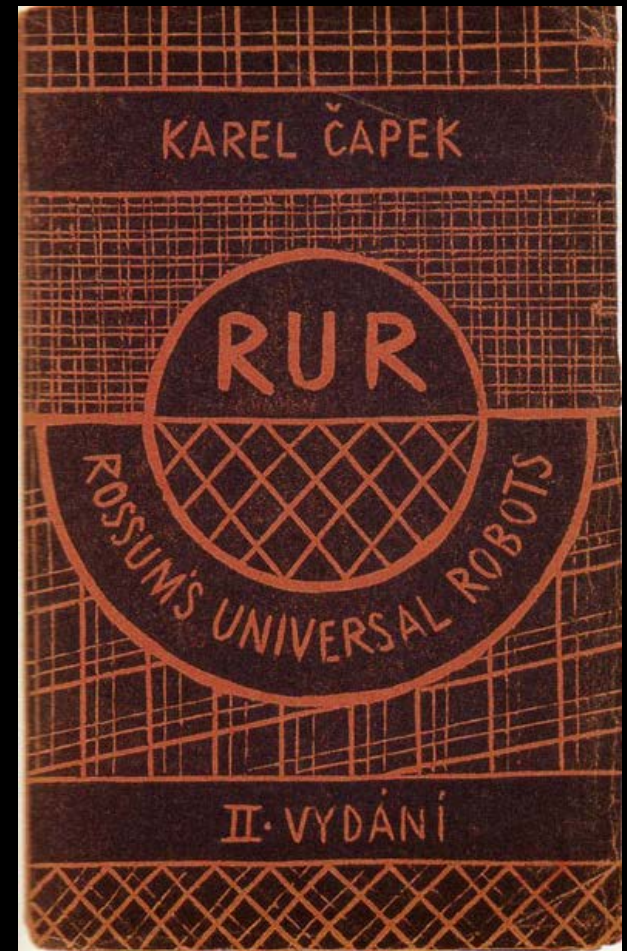
(– villain from “The System,” Čapek’s forerunner to R.U.R.)



# R.U.R. = K.u.K.?



Kaiserlich und Königlich

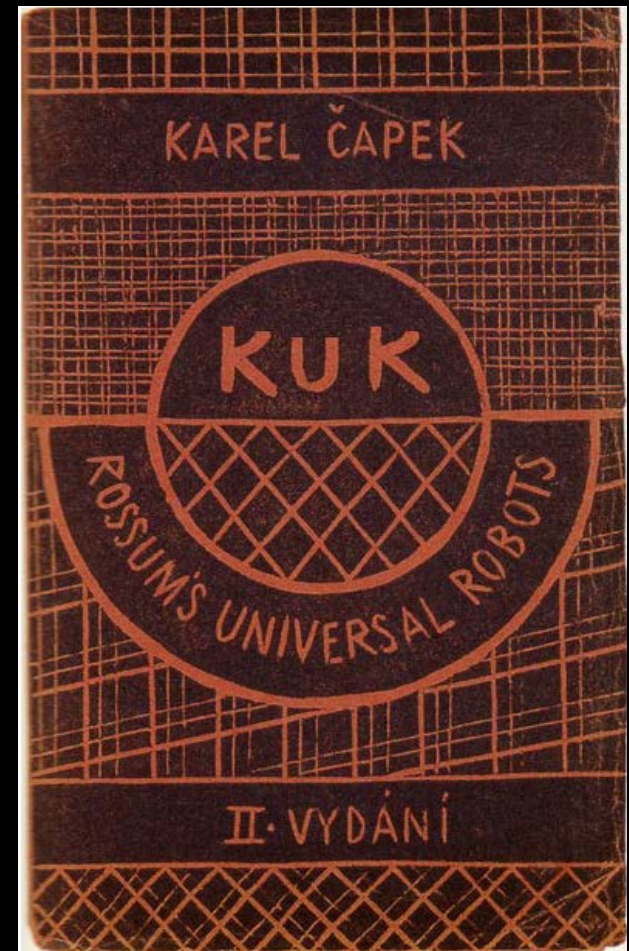




# R.U.R. = K.u.K.?



Kaiserlich und Königlich



# R.U.R. = K.u.K.?

“It was criminal of old Europe to teach the Robots to fight! ... Couldn't they have left us out of their politics? It was a crime to make soldiers out of living work machines.”

– *R.U.R.*





# *The Factory of the Absolute*

**IN THE DAYS  
OF THE COMET**



**H. G. WELLS**

INTRODUCTION BY BEN BOYA

1906

**THE POISON BELT**



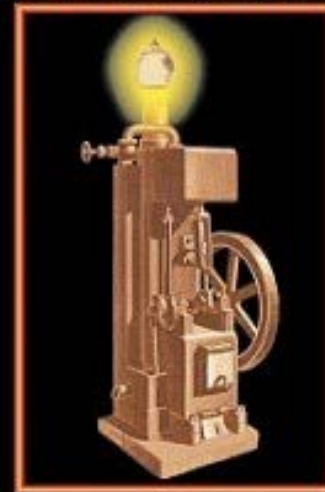
BEING AN ACCOUNT OF  
ANOTHER AMAZING ADVENTURE  
OF PROFESSOR CHALLENGER

**SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE**

INTRODUCTION BY KATYA REIMANN

1913

**KAREL ČAPEK**



**THE ABSOLUTE  
AT LARGE**

INTRODUCTION BY  
STEPHEN BAXTER

1922

# *The Factory of the Absolute*

Parodies Wells' and Conan Doyle's novels, in which passing through the tail of a comet causes Earth's population to convert to socialism (*Comet*) or at least to become more serious and humane (*Poison Belt*).

In Čapek's novel, atomic power releases, as a byproduct, massive quantities of the Absolute – the divine essence at the heart of all being. Machines become miraculously productive, while humans are filled with religious and altruistic fervor.



# *The Factory of the Absolute*

“Once it had thrown itself into production, [the Absolute] did not trouble about distribution ... While in one place there spread this sparkling ocean of tacks, in another only a few kilometres farther off there was not a tack to be had. ...

Where were you then, you business men of days gone by, who used to buy the necessities of life so cheap in one place and sell them so dear in another? Alas, you had vanished, for heavenly grace had descended upon you. You had grown ashamed of your gains; you had shut up your shops .... And in the meantime the supply of tacks ran out. ... Only somewhere, far away, they were piled up as by an inexhaustible avalanche.”

# *The Factory of the Absolute*

“The Absolute had likewise taken possession of the Government mints and printing establishments, and every day it flung out upon the world hundreds of millions of banknotes, coins, and securities. Utter devaluation was the result: before long a packet of five thousand mark notes meant nothing more than so much waste paper.”



# *The Factory of the Absolute*

“Just imagine the consequences if [the farmer] had been seized, like the townsfolk, with the mania for giving everything away .... Within a fortnight famine would have stalked through the cities .... Thanks to our sturdy farmer, this was not to be. ... *The farmer gave nothing away.* ...

And it is a testimony to the amazing soundness of the core of our countryfolk that without saying a word to each other, without any organization, led only by the redeeming inward voice, they raised their prices everywhere and for everything. By thus putting up the price of everything, the farmer saved it from destruction.”



# *The Factory of the Absolute*

But the Absolute also inspires violent conflict, as each faction becomes filled with religious and ideological enthusiasm, and so sets out to massacre all other factions, in a massive war that devastates the planet:

“198,000,000 men took part in the fighting, and all but thirteen of them fell. [But] in a few decades we shall succeed in arranging an even greater war, for in this respect also the human race is progressing ever upward and on.”

# *The Factory of the Absolute*

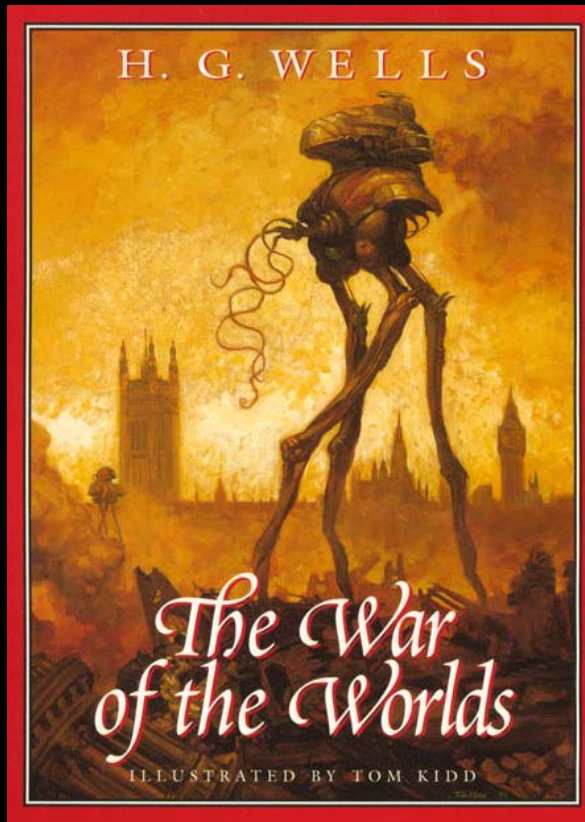


“Everyone has the best of feelings towards mankind in general, but not towards the individual man. We’ll kill men, but we want to save mankind.”



Compare Ayn Rand: “Why is it that the people who worry most about mankind have the least concern for any actual human being?”

# *War with the Newts*



1898



1936



# *War with the Newts*

- intelligent newts are discovered and enslaved; they rebel
- parodies Communism, Nazism, and colonialism

“Among the civil facilities and advantages actually granted to the Newts ... every salamander ... had to possess an official residence permit; he had to pay capitation tax ... docked from his food ... likewise he had to pay ... public dues, charges for the construction of the wooden fence [that penned the newts in], school fees and other public imposts. We simply have to admit quite frankly that in all these respects the Newts were treated like other citizens – which is equal rights of a sort.”

# *The Gardener's Year*

“No, I don't want to sing the praises of the Holiday of Labour, but of the Holiday of Private Property instead .... you are not doing this work because work is beautiful [but] so that a campanula will flower .... You should not celebrate this work of yours, but the campanula ... for which you are doing it. [If] you stand at a loom or a lathe, you would not do the job because it is work, but because you would get for it bacon and peas .... And therefore today you should celebrate bacon and peas ... and all that you buy for your work .... The roadmenders should not only celebrate their work, but the roads which they have made .... It is called the Holiday of Labour and not the Holiday of Achievement; and yet men should be prouder of what they have done than because they have merely worked.”

# “The Five Loaves”

Baker’s complaint, reminiscent of Bastiat’s “Petition of the Candlemakers”:

“If it gets to be standard practice ... to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes, then bakers would be put out to pasture”; thus Jesus is providing “unfair competition” that is “depriving local bakers of an honest, hard-earned profit. ... Crucify him! Crucify him!”





# “The Punishment of Prometheus”

A cross between “Petition of the Candlemakers” and Ayn Rand’s *Anthem*:

Prometheus charged with “criminal irresponsibility [for] endangering public safety” by discovering this “very dangerous element.” Use of fire will contribute to “softness” and “moral decay,” with people “huddled idly around a fire, wallowing in warmth and comfort ... instead of fighting ....” He gave this weapon “to shepherds and slaves ... foreigners ... enemies,” when he should have “surrendered it into competent hands.” Prometheus is convicted of “conspiracy against the state”; he “stole fire from us by giving it to everyone!”

# “The Emperor Diocletian”

“I’ve racked my brains to figure out how the Christian doctrine could be implemented politically, and I see that it’s impossible. ... Could you organize an army in accordance with Christian beliefs? Could you collect taxes in accordance with Christian beliefs? Could there be slaves in a Christian society? ... It wouldn’t be possible to govern for a year, not even for a month, on Christian principles. ... Christianity would undermine the sovereign power of the state.”

# “Cats In Spring”



Reminiscent of Ayn Rand yet again:

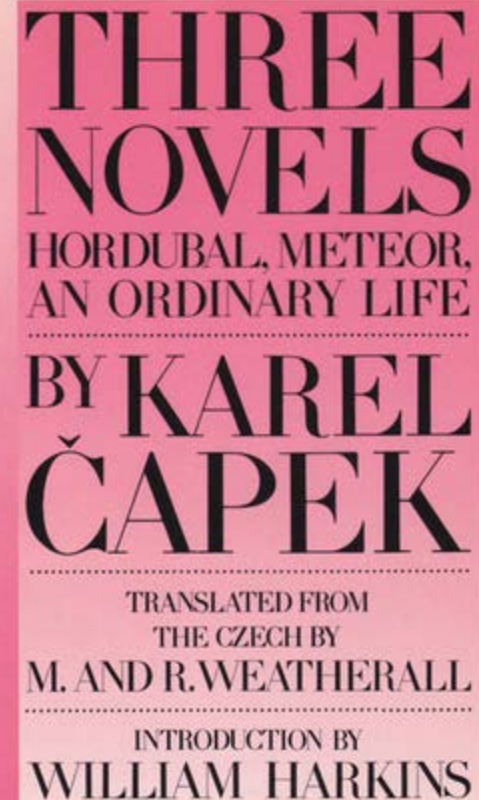
“Human beings have to learn everything for themselves, even motherhood and life itself. But if man were governed by instinct he would not be able to do or make anything new, not even to imagine or create anything which had not yet existed before. That which is creative in man is not instinctive; instinct is conservative, unvarying, impersonal, and eternally recurring, laid down from the beginning for the whole race. If in the world of men there is any real personal initiative, any real research and discovery, any real progress, it is the work of intellect.”





# *The Noetic Trilogy*

“Our knowledge of people is generally restricted to allotting them a definite place in *our* life systems. ... If what we apprehend is always encompassed by our I, how can we apprehend this plurality ...? The reason we can apprehend and understand plurality is that we ourselves are such a plurality! *Similia similibus* [‘Like by means of like’]: we apprehend the world through that which we are ourselves .... we are of the same stuff as that plurality of the world.”



THREE  
NOVELS  
HORDUBAL, METEOR,  
AN ORDINARY LIFE  
.....  
BY KAREL  
ČAPEK  
.....  
TRANSLATED FROM  
THE CZECH BY  
M. AND R. WEATHERALL  
.....  
INTRODUCTION BY  
WILLIAM HARKINS

# *The Noetic Trilogy*



**HAYEK:** “In discussing what we regard as other people’s conscious actions, we invariably interpret their action on the analogy of our own mind: that is, that we group their actions, and the objects of their actions, into classes or categories which we know solely from the knowledge of our own mind.”

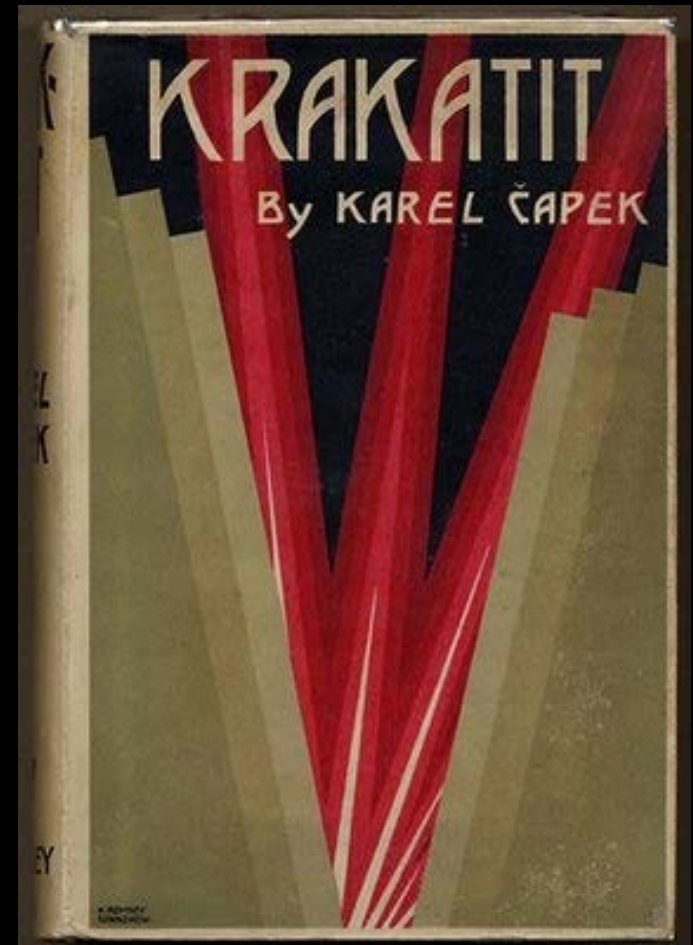


**MISES:** “How can the human mind ... deal with the reality of the external world? ... Both, a priori thinking and reasoning on the one hand and human action on the other, are manifestations of the human mind. ... Reason and action are congeneric and homogeneous, two aspects of the same phenomenon. In this sense we may apply to praxeology the dictum of Empedocles, *gnōsis tou homoious tōi homoiōi* [‘knowledge of like by means of like’].”

# *Krakatoite*

The hero, an atomic scientist, is tempted by the Devil:

“Do you want to make the world happy by forcing upon it eternal peace, God, a new order, revolution, or something of the sort? Why not? Simply begin; it doesn't matter what your agenda is – in the end, you will do only what the reality you've created forces you to do.”



# Čapek on Political Language

“‘Recognise’ [is a] magic word ... Some state or other can declare that it doesn’t recognise the Chinese government, at which point there is no Chinese government, China doesn’t belong to anyone, and it’s permissible to kill the Chinese without scruple. ... Only governments and states are allowed to use this power-word ... [If you] took it into your head that you didn’t recognise the board of directors of the Živnobank, and so could enter its nearest branch, shoot the cashiers and empty the tills, [you’d be] condemned as a bandit. ... In the international field it’s not really seen like that.”

“We sing in our political carols, ‘We the majority of the nation’, or ‘We agricultural workers’, or ‘We the working classes’. If we sang truthfully, ‘We the party-secretariat’, or ‘We the inner circle of the executive committee’ ... our carol would lose all mysterious power ....”