

# Goethe: The ambivalence of modernity and the Faustian ethos of personality

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## I. The phenomenology of a genius

Whoever tries to enter his world, treads onto a minefield. Goethe, the man and his oeuvre, is a cosmos of its own. He is *the* German poet comparable to Shakespeare who stands for English literature. He has given an epoch his name – the “Goethezeit” – and his name represents the most important cultural institution of Germany – the “Goethe-Institut”. Of privileged origin – he was born into a well-to-do burgher-family of the free city of Frankfurt – he became an aristocrat in the service of Prince Carl August in the principality of Weimar at the age of 26. Apart from his two-year-long journey to Italy he stayed there for the rest of his life and helped Weimar become a center of “world-literature” – a concept he coined which was later adopted by Marx and Engels in the “Communist Manifesto”. He accomplished the high status of a “Dichterstürm” or “the poet-prince” in the eyes of his many admirers. He became a “Fürstensknecht” or the “prince’s servant” in the eyes of his rampant critiques. From early on he had access to the most important people of his age: As a young boy he watched Mozart play in Frankfurt, as a poet in his 60ies he met Napoleon (who claimed to have read “Werther” seven times) in Erfurt: The famous encounter of the world-poet and the world-emperor. Napoleon’s remark “voilà, un homme!” became a standard-phrase in order to describe the character of Goethe’s incommensurable fame.

Goethe was probably one of the last “uomo universale” who disposed over the full knowledge of his time. And he was a beacon of activity playing multiple roles: he was a statesman, a poet, theatre director, university rector, a collector of art and stones as well as a passionate natural researcher (“Naturforscher”) to name but a few. One role though is missing: he certainly was not a sociologist *avant la lettre*. Would he have encountered the rise of this new discipline, he would not have become one of its advocates. Quite to the contrary: in a way, he might be regarded as an *anti-sociologist*. His whole work is animated by a philosophy and epistemology of nature which stresses the unity of knowledge. His evolutionary view of the “metamorphosis” of phenomena quite kindred to Darwin’s view who later acknowledged Goethe as a forerunner of his own theory deals with the emergence (“das Werden” or “becoming”) of entities while always in search of the original type or the archetypal model of every phenomenon (“Urpheänomen”) – from the so-called “Urworte” or archetypal words to the “Urpflanze” or the archetypal plant. And he draws all kinds of analogies and parallels between the different “natures” of man, society and culture. In his “Farbenlehre” for instance he rode an arduous attack on Newton and his mechanistic world-view. This critique from an organic standpoint today as untenable as it was bold in his own time was seen by him as one of his greatest scientific achievements. Goethe stressed the “great chain of being”, the natural order of things, the recurrent rise and decline of entities. The “godly” and the “true” coincide. The creator made nature and nature mirrors the creation of the creator. Reality is a natural reality not a social reality. *Nature* not *society* is Goethe’s basic concept. As such it is a result of natural evolution. People and things have evolved naturally and therefore only a natural scientific view of the world provides the royal avenue for insights gained by “Anschauung, Betrachtung, Nachdenken” or “viewing, contemplation, reflection”.

This complex and complicated concept of nature which Goethe never developed systematically but only in various intimations is at odds with the mainstream constructivist view of sociology that society is man-made and can be changed at will by social action and governance. Quite naturally, Goethe’s conservative view puts a premium on the established

order and careful, cautious change. He did not share the enthusiasm of his contemporaries on both sides of the Rhine for the French Revolution. And he was afraid of the Revolution of 1830 which would bring again turmoil, disorder, violence and war in its wake. Goethe equally disliked revolutions and wars. He was a pacifist and an advocate of diligent change by reforms which he had tried to realize in Weimar if so largely in vain. Evolution, not revolution is what holds the world together.

If Goethe's thinking is so distant from sociological thought what then can be learned from him? There are three features in his approach which merit sociological attention: *epistemologically*, the method of "Anschauung" i.e. the careful, concentrated "seeing" ("das Sehen") of phenomena, *analytically* the dislike of "grand theory" in favour of modest theorizing and *substantially* the conceptualization of man and society. Goethe is both a gifted painter of portraits of human beings or characters and a genial painter of societal constellations and projects. Goethe lived long enough to see the *Ancien régime* going into decline in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of the new "modern" society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His curiosity of and for history (Cassirer 1995, Koselleck 1997), his wide-ranging knowledge, his wisdom enabled him to read and understand the signs of the time (Borchmeyer 2005). Sceptical of historical progress he developed a certain degree of ambivalence towards the new age. "Alles velociferisch" – "all is velociferical" – was his diagnosis (Osten 2003). Modernity combines velocity, i.e. speed and Lucifer i.e. the devil in a curious way. Due to the "facilities of communication" life becomes faster but due to the devilish pressures upon man the result is a state of mediocrity. No time for quality, only regard for quantity. With respect to society and individual he sees two parallel processes unleashing which sociologists like Durkheim, Simmel and Weber after him described as "Vergesellschaftung" or societalization and individualization. Both processes go hand in hand but they form an uneasy coalition. Differentiation of society entails not necessarily integration into society as Durkheim (1978) had hoped in the "Division of Labor". Individualization necessitates modern man but this uprooted individual lacks the means, resources and "embeddedness" to lead a meaningful life. The sovereignty of the modern individual does not translate so easily into chances and realizations of a methodical-rational conduct of life as Weber (1972, Müller 2007) *pace* Goethe and Nietzsche observed. It is above all the late Goethe who begins to read Saint-Simon and discovers "la société industrielle" as well as socialism. This challenge for old Goethe was met by him in the "Wilhelm Meister"-novels, above all the "Wanderjahre" and the drama of "Faust", particularly part two.

## II. The sociology of an anti-sociologist

Modern society can be understood as a result of a triple revolution: the economic revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism; the political revolution and the emergence of republican democracy; the cultural revolution and the advent of individualism. Even today, at least in the Western world, the economic game is capitalistic, the political game is democratic and the cultural game is individualistic. But from the outset and since more than 250 years, the smooth interplay and harmonious balance of the three institutions of market, state and sovereign individual were seen as problematic and the equilibrium as endemically precarious. The so-called problem of order which philosophy and sociology alike preoccupied ever since their foundation had taken a new, "modern" form: How is a dynamic und just social order compatible with personal freedom and moral autonomy of the individual? How can these two dynamisms – society and the individual – be reconciled? How could a new synthesis of modern man and modern society look like?

To put the problem in this way is typical for sociology. This was not Goethe's way to address questions. Yet, he was a contemporary of the transition from "tradition" to "modernity". He lived through the seven years war, the French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, the Restauration and the Revolution of 1830. Being a member of the elite he was an eye-witness to what happened in Europe. He and his *alter ego* Faust accompanied all these transitions and "metamorphoses" in his parlance of revolution and restauration, of war and peace, of conflict and violence. The genealogy of Goethe's Faust from 1773, the "Ur-Faust", to 1831, the completion of Faust II, mirrors social change and its poetic appropriation as well as digestion. "Mon oeuvre est celle d'un être collectif et elle porte le nom de Goethe" (Goethe 2003b: 27) was his comment in a conversation with French guests in 1832. This is why Faust becomes a mirror of the times that are changing. Young Faust, a figure of "Sturm and Drang", resembles the young man in search of his self and himself. Faust I presents the estranged scholar and intellectual, Faust II sets on an odyssey to make and manage the modern times.

Faust is the archetypical modern man in restless, impatient and violent search of himself and his self. He expresses the cultural ideal of self-development in a fluid societal environment where the real social movement toward economic and political development (Berman 1988) prevails. The tragedy of development consists of the simultaneity of founding new man and new society. Who am I and in what kind of society do I live in? Who do I want to become and in which type of society would I like to live? This seems to be the modern condition of a "tabula rasa" which the great revolution prompted and which incited the imagination and visions of the people living in an age of transition. This open horizon for man and society equals the "project of a second creation" (Jaeger 2004, 2008): First time round it was God and/or nature who created primitive and traditional society; this time it will be man and society who in a "creatio ex nihilo" and upon the mechanism of a "deus ex machina" produce the modern individual and his social environment: A challenge of Promethean scale and scope but what a powerful and promising vision of "paradise on earth" with Adam and Eve not expelled by God for their vain curiosity. Goethe, therefore, presents Faust in the first part of his tragedy as the "Übermensch" or "Super-man" who sees himself on an equal footing with God as a future potential chance. At the moment, however, the reality looks bleak. Instead of a god-like superiority he feels worm-like inferiority sitting frustrated in his Gothic room fed up with academe and students, with science and research. He has studied it all yet could not figure out what the world holds together in its inner core – the problem of order unsolved. His titanic striving has lost its object and he falls back on "magic" as a kind of "mind doping" to go on in his quest for the ultimate. As known, Mephisto promises to help him fulfil his limitless search for the "God knows what" at the price of his soul. If Faust ever wants to relax and to enjoy the beauty of the moment ("Werd' ich zum Augenblick sagen: Verweile doch! du bist so schön", 1699/1700), then he has lost the bet with the devil and has to yield his soul. Mephisto, the "evil" force of negation, is positive to win. Faust, the modern Prometheus, is not sure if the powers of the underworld are really able to deliver what he is striving for. He does not pursue the traditional goods of society like money, power, fame, glory and sex, he wants more:

"Do you not hear, I have no thought of joy!  
The reeling whirl I seek, the most painful excess,  
Enamored hate and quickening distress.  
    ... my mind  
Shall not be henceforth closed to any pain,  
And what is portioned out to all mankind,  
I shall enjoy deep within myself, contain

Within my spirit summit and abyss,  
Pile on my breast their agony and bliss,  
And let my own self grow into theirs unfettered,  
Till as they are, at last I, too, am shattered.” (1765-75)

Faust wants to conquer the world by means of the devil’s magic. Goethe’s tragedy does not follow the path of Puritan religion Max Weber (1972) characterized a century later in his “Protestant Ethic”. He rather sets out on the way of irrational magic but to the same end - the rationalization of the world. The modern project is here and there world-domination, only the means vary: magic versus religion.

Goethe takes us on a journey into the wild open transcending time and space in order to gauge the adventures of self-creation. This modern odyssey includes several “makings” in order to fabricate the new society: The making of *love* in the tragedy of Gretchen; the making of *money* at the royal court introducing “paper-money” (Binswanger 1985); the making of *leisure* and diversion by producing the famous Greek couple “Helena and Paris” as idols of beauty for courtly consumption; the making of *man* by creating “Homunculus” as the first artificial “homo sapiens”; the making of *war* with the help of a military magic due to superior technology; the making of a new *society* by colonizing the world.

For the sake of brevity, let us look at one micro and one macro-case respectively: love and society. After rejuvenation Faust sets out to discover the other sex. Mephisto, though, has manipulated him to see in every woman his beloved significant other. Gretchen, a small town girl, is Faust’s victim. The conversation between the two is couched in the modern language of romantic passion. Faust pretends to love and Gretchen falls in love. The consequences are most “natural” if *modern love*, i.e. arbitrary and free choice, happens in a *traditional* small town setting. Gretchen is regarded as a prostitute by the public since Faust deserts her after having consummated the love. Brother, mother and her child die in the end and she too is condemned to death. Faust has faked love by the means of money and manipulation in order to have sex and instrumental control over the female body without taking responsibility for his action. He wanted fast love but prompted the death of four people as an unintended consequence of his “rational choice”. The first part of the tragedy ends with a Faust in despair but seemingly on his way to new adventures of modernity.

The final stage of the odyssey in “Faust II” sees Faust as a man of deed and activity at the peak of his career. He has become an entrepreneur who colonizes land from the sea by creating dams and canals. This new land should be the territory for new people, workers and their families, who are supposed to work and live together happily in this new type of society – a rational working and achievement society. Goethe uses projects and plans of Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians (Durkheim 1971) for a new industrial, scientific and socialist society. This utopia of an “active society” (Etzioni 1968) rests upon specific features which Goethe truly mirrors in Faust’s project: 1. *temporally* speaking, what is crucial is the future of mankind not the present let alone the past; 2. *substantially*, the progress of society rests upon restless activity based upon science and technology, industry and diligent administration; 3. *socially*, all relationships are based upon achievement and the distribution of goods among as well as the social stratification of the people should be based upon perfect meritocracy (Young 1958). This Saint-Simonian project of Faust seems to be the epitome of rational man in a rational society. The reconciliation of a dynamic and just social order with the personal freedom and moral autonomy of the modern individual seems to work. Mission accomplished?

Not quite. As all modernizers painfully experience, there are always pockets of tradition and resistance in processes of rapid social transition which hinder rational progress. What to do? Since progress is irresistible, they have finally to go – voluntarily or by force. The happiness of the majority cannot be undermined by the backwardness of minorities – this is the credo of modernization and development. In Faust's case, a small strip of land is still inhabited by Philomen and Baucis revenants of Ovid's "Metamorphoses", an old traditional couple living a friendly and contemplative life yet unwilling to yield to modernity. In the end, for the last time Faust asks the help of Mephisto and his development aid workers to remove the old couple. They do so as fast as possible by killing the couple and a wanderer who staid with them and burn down the old house and chapel. Faust is furious because he opted for "exchange" not "violence" but then at last such victims are the unintended consequences of modern progress. Faust believes to be at the end of his road to glorious self-fulfilment:

Green are the meadows, fertile; and in mirth,  
Both men and herds live on this newest earth,  
Settled along the edges of a hill  
Raised by the masses' bold, industrious will.  
A veritable paradise inside,  
Then let the dams be licked by the raging tide,  
And as it gnaws, to rush in with full force,  
Communal will fills gaps and checks its course.  
This is the highest wisdom that I own,  
The best that mankind ever knew;  
Freedom and life are earned by those alone  
Who conquer them each day anew.  
Surrounded by such danger, each one thrives,  
Childhood, manhood and age lead active lives.  
In such a crowd I would be glad to be,  
To walk on free ground with people who are free! (11563 – 80)

Being content at last Faust speaks the words ("Verweile doch, Du bist so schön!"), he enjoys the beauty of the moment, he wants to settle down, his eyes rest upon his oeuvre, he is ready to consume what he has accumulated. But like the Puritans, Weber described, this is a deadly sin undermining the dogma of restless activity. While he thinks his workers continue to make the greave ("Graben"), he sinks into his grave ("Grab"). The accomplishment of the development renders the developer at last obsolescent (Bearman 1988: 70) – a routine experience of today's project workers (Boltanski/Chiapello 1999)

### **III. The postulation of the day ("Die Forderung des Tages")**

Is this somber view of modernity – the quest for self-fulfillment and the establishment of a rational society as vain illusions – Goethe's last word in the shift from tradition to modernity? Not quite. On the contrary, he was fascinated by big canal projects and wanted to live until the Panama canal, the Suez canal and the Rhine-Danube-canal were accomplished which would have taken him well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His ambivalent attitude refers to the radicalism of modernity, the revolutionary claim to remodel man and society completely anew even if it means to destroy all traditions and institutions of the past. His counter-world to the "vita activa" which represents modernity is a "vita contemplativa" (Arendt 1958) which has a vivid eye for classical beauty. In fact, Goethe generously leads Faust into this classical Arcadia where he meets Helena, slows down peacefully and develops a regard for eternal beauty. They even have a son together, Euphorion modelled after Lord Byron, whose activism though

destroys the idyllic life of this nuclear family soon enough. Goethe's philosophy of the "kairos" – the proper timing – avoids "velociferity" in favor of a classical art of life schooled in Greek philosophy. According to this view, the good life starts once the lesson is learnt that the fleetingness of the moment is a symbol of eternity (Hadot 2002). In Goethe's eyes we have to stand and endure the ambivalence of an inexorable modernity but as self-conscious individuals we should not begin to overreach our personality in order to incorporate the idiosyncrasies of the modern times as Werther and Faust did in their inimitable ways. Instead, we should try to find out by means of "Bildung" who we are, what the demon of our personality tells us to do as a fulfilment of the fate of our self-determination and try to reconcile our unique individuality in a human manner (Simmel 2003) with the challenges of modern society. Needless to add that this task is easier stated in theory than realized in everyday-life. But whoever held that individual emancipation would be a cakewalk? With such a world-view, the modern individual should be able to cope with a globalized modernity unbound stoically and with the necessary distance as we experience this new "velociferity" at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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