

The Sorrows of Modern Subjectivity: Capital, Infinity Disease, and Werther's Hysterical Neurosis

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“What is this thing, the vaunted demigod, a man?”

— Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther

“Man’s characteristic privilege is that the bond he accepts is not physical but moral; that is, social. He is governed... by a conscience superior to his own, the superiority of which he feels. Because the greater, better part of his existence transcends the body, he escapes the body’s yoke, but is subject to that of society.”

— Durkheim, Suicide

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that Werther, the protagonist of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel The Sorrows of Young Werther, represents an extreme case of hysterical neurosis that results from the unique configuration of alienations present in modern societies. Especially important is the special fusion of anomie and egoism that Durkheim referred to as “the disease of the infinite” or infinity disease, which results from capital’s inherent systematic tendencies ([1897] 1979, 287). Further, I argue that Werther’s suicide was the (patho)logical consequence of his modernity-induced hysteria. I end with a brief discussion of what might be done today about the problems raised throughout the paper.

By using The Sorrows of Young Werther as an entry point into the sociological depths of modernity, this paper attempts to contribute to recent efforts to bring classic works of literature back into the purview of sociological analysis (e.g. McNally 2012; Worrell 2015; Krier and Feldmann 2017). Literature provides sociologists with a rich source of condensed, dramatized collective representations set up in varying relations with one another. In this sense, literature offers something of a sociological parallel to the manifest content of dreams for the psychoanalyst; it offers, in symbolic form, society’s unconsciously projected forces that emerge from (and through) social relations and practices. That is to say, literature offers the critical sociologist a “royal road” to the “structurally repressed unconscious” (Freud 1899, 604; Lichtman 1982, 252). The “chaotic aggregations” of collective facticities that appear in great works of literature should, therefore, be viewed as indispensable sociological data (Freud 1899, 161).

In Goethe’s works, society’s structural unconscious manifests in some of its most vivid and fantastic forms. The Sorrows of Young Werther is the novel that propelled Goethe to fame. The story of Werther is the story of a wandering artist, drifting aimlessly through the world, overflowing with passion and dreams. He meets a woman named Lotte, with whom he falls deeply in love, despite the fact (or, as I will argue, precisely because of the fact) that she is engaged. Eventually, Werther, “the turbulent heart,” as Durkheim called him, “[kills] himself from disappointed love” (Durkheim 1897, 286).

Goethe's novel was so influential in its day that many individuals adopted the fashion styles of its main characters, named perfumes, and other items after Werther, and some even went so far as to emulate Werther's suicide by shooting themselves while sitting at their desks (Belinda 2014). As Fromm has noted, "ideas can become powerful forces, but only to the extent to which they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character" (Fromm 1941, 279). That Goethe's novel was capable of exerting such an influence on so many people is evidence that the ideas contained within it articulated important aspects of modern social reality.

Modernity and Subjectivity

Werther's malaise must be understood psychologically and sociologically. In order to adequately grasp the psychological, it is necessary to begin with the sociological, which is ultimately the cause of the former. Werther's psychological pathology is eminently modern, and so are its sociological roots. I, therefore, turn next to a brief sketch of the key features of modern societies that bear most directly upon my analysis.

Modern Societies: Capital, Infinity Disease, Asceticism

At the heart of the issue is the interlacing of mutually constitutive alienations that define modern societies. Mark Worrell has continually pointed to the complex nature of alienation in modern societies by mapping out the affinities between Marx's conceptualization of alienation in a capitalist society and Durkheim's modalities of self-destruction as they are worked out in *Suicide* (Worrell 2019, 248-53; Worrell and Krier 2015, 9-11; *passim*). The crux of the matter is the way that modern individuals are beset, simultaneously, by the alienating forces of heteronomy and autonomy (Worrell and Krier 2015, 10). Put simply, the problem of heteronomy is the problem of an excess of authority, whereas autonomy is essentially the problem of a lack of authority. In both cases, the individual becomes alienated. But this simple, abstract dichotomy does not count for much when we turn to social reality and its concrete complexity. Instead, we find that in society, heteronomy and autonomy "mutually attract one another, repel one another, fuse together, subdivide, and proliferate" (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 426).

Modern societies are plagued by a tripartite structure of alienation consisting of these three distinct but interconnected 'moments': capital (heteronomy)—anomie and egoism, i.e., infinity disease (autonomy)—asceticism (heteronomy). All three alienations are objective in the sense that their origins are social and therefore transcend the individual by definition. In other words, these alienations are objective because they are imposed upon individuals as coercive social facticities (e.g., capitalism, a lack of social integration and regulation, and Protestantism, respectfully).

While the ultimate cause of each alienation is purely social and therefore objective, each particular alienation takes on a different social form and therefore results in a different kind of alienation. Alienation at the level of capital is an objective situation where the individual worker is alienated from "all material wealth" such that "the conditions of his labor confront him as alien property" (Marx [1867] 1990, 1003). Alienation at the level of egoism and anomie is intersubjective and consists of individuals being alienated from one another, resulting in their thoughts and emotions confronting them as alien forces, respectively (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 287). Finally, alienation at the level of asceticism (i.e., self-denial) is subjective, with a part of the individual's own psyche becoming alienated from itself such that one's super-ego confronts the individual as an alien force that functions like "a slave driver" (Fromm 1941, 98). In the following passage from *Capital*, we glimpse these three alienations in the process as a whole:

Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative... it is continually transforming not only the technical basis of production but also the functions of the worker and the social combinations of the labor process... it thereby also revolutionizes the division of labor within society, and incessantly throws masses of capital and of workers from one branch of production to another... large-scale industry, by its very nature, necessitates variation of labor, fluidity of functions, and mobility of the worker in all directions. But on the other hand, in its capitalist form it reproduces the old division of labor with its ossified particularities... this absolute contradiction does away with all repose, all fixity and all security as far as the worker's life-situation is concerned... this contradiction bursts forth without restraint in the ceaseless human sacrifices required from the working class, in the reckless squandering of labor-powers, and in the devastating effects of social anarchy (Marx [1867] 1990, 617-8).

As distinct aspects of the social totality that is modern society, each 'level' of alienation is dialectically related to the other. We see from Marx's words above that capital, as an impersonal, heteronomous social force, reproduces

itself (that is, reproduces the social relations of alienation necessary for its existence) through the destruction of virtually any or all other social relations (resulting in anomie and egoism) and through the constant expenditure of human time and energy (requiring asceticism). For its part, a lack of traditional authority (or its potential destruction) makes capital accumulation possible,¹ and leaves the individual free to pursue nothing but the perpetuation of this accumulation by devoting him or herself to capital through ascetic labor in a calling (Weber [1920] 2011, 157, 176-7). Finally, the tremendous amount of dutiful sacrifice on the part of the individual reproduces not only the relations of his or her domination by capital, but capital's destruction of other social relations, i.e., capital's (re)production of anomie and egoism on a larger and larger scale.

In sum, we might well expand on and concretize Zizek's quip that individuals are "free to choose so long as [they] make the right choice" (Worrell and Krier 2015, 10) by stating: modern subjects are forced (by capital) to be left alone (egoism) to freely choose (anomie) to enslave themselves (asceticism) for the sake of capital.²

It is worth pointing out that capital necessarily produces social anarchy where tradition (or culture, in a narrow sense) is concerned, but this is not the case when it comes to the state. Rather, capital depends upon "Calculability and reliability in the functioning of the legal order and administrative system" (Weber [1922] 1978(a), 296). But the state does not and cannot 'fill the gap' in authority leftover from capital's momentous social upheavals. Instead, the state functions alongside capital as a twin source of objective, heteronomous alienation:

Sociologically speaking, the modern state is an "enterprise" just like a factory: This exactly is its historical peculiarity. Here as there the authority relations have the same roots. The relative independence of [pre-modern individuals]... rested on their ownership of... that with which they fulfilled their... functions and maintained themselves. In contrast, the hierarchical dependence of [modern individuals]... is due to the fact that in their case the means indispensable for the enterprise and for making a living are in the hands of the entrepreneur or the political ruler (Weber [1922] 1978(b), 1394).

Despite the size and strength of the state's authority, it is too distant of an authority to compensate for the social bonds that capital has destroyed. The state is too "far from [individuals], it can exert only a distant, discontinuous influence over them; which is why this feeling has neither the necessary constancy nor strength... Thus [individuals] inevitably lapse into egoism or anarchy... [and] without mutual relationships, tumble over one another like so many liquid molecules" (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 389). Weber was right when he declared, "The future belongs to bureaucratization" ([1922] 1978(b), 1401). Today, modern societies are essentially constellations of distant, overgrown bureaucracies (e.g., the state and the multinational corporation) ruling over "an infinite scattering of disparate individuals," a scenario that Durkheim characterized as "a veritable sociological monstrosity" (Durkheim [1893] 2014, 27).

Modern Subjectivities: Neurosis, Hysteria, Obsession

What, then, are the psychological consequences of the sociological situation outlined above? Above all: neurosis.³ Neurosis is a psychological structure or a "subject position" defined by the presence of an overbearing super-ego and an ineradicable Big Other (Fink 1999, 193).

On one level, Freud's super-ego and Lacan's Other are two terms denoting the same thing: the psychical agency responsible for an individual's fundamental, unconscious mode of relating to authority, i.e. how a given subject positions itself in relation to authority (197). However, on another level, the Other is not only (relation to) authority internalized; it is also (relation to) authority in fantasy. The latter is not reducible to the former, but it is dependent upon and greatly influenced by it.

The super-ego or Other as a psychical agency is formed out of an individual's earliest experiences with authority and the stance adopted toward it at that point. As Freud puts it, the super-ego is "the representative of our relation to our parents" (Freud [1923] 1989, 32). So, the super-ego, or Other, is the representative of our early relation to authority, i.e. the internalization of one's relation to an external social force.

For the neurotic, this internalization is accomplished by means of repression (Fink 1999, 76-7, 113). Repression is a mechanism of negation whereby thoughts are forced out of conscious awareness (113). At the root of every repression is a conflict, which is why repressed thoughts are **forcibly** removed and rendered unconscious rather than simply fading into latency thereby becoming preconscious (Freud [1923] 1989, 4-6). The formation of neurosis requires the early experience of a conflict between the pleasures an individual derives from some physical object and the dictate(s) of an external authority (an Other). In this situation, the individual sacrifices the object and its associated pleasure, thereby recognizing the legitimacy of the Other. This can only be accomplished, however, if the individual represses the thoughts attached to the emotions caused by the perception of the Other denying the

individual his or her pleasurable object (e.g., “I still want the pleasurable object,” “I do not want to listen to the Other,” and so on). Where neurosis exists, it is because this repression existed first.

The sacrifice of the pleasurable object does not become a problem for the neurotic if a sufficient replacement is provided. The neurotic individual requires a symbolic, socially dignified replacement for the physical object of pleasure that has been lost. A neurotic psychological structure only leads the individual down a pathological path when this symbolic equivalent is not provided; otherwise, neurotic individuals simply appear to be ‘normal.’ Neurosis, in a pathological sense, requires certain social conditions, namely, egoistic and anomic social conditions. “The neurotic,” says Fink, “has made the sacrifice... They gave up *jouissance* in the hope of receiving the Other’s esteem and got less than they bargained for” (Fink 1999, 69). That is the crucial point—the neurotic subject has given up personal pleasures because of the intervention of some external authority (undergone “castration”), but then does not receive an appropriate substitute in the form of social esteem (lacks a symbolic “phallus”) (172).

Even if the neurotic subject does not receive the social recognition that he or she was hoping for in return for his or her sacrifice, this does not deter the neurotic. Once the initial sacrifice has been made, there is no going back.⁴ The neurotic subject is the subject scorned by authority, forever chasing after recognition withheld. If there is no recognition to be found in the reality of the individual’s social situation (from a sociological Other), then he or she must turn to fantasy (turn to a fantasmatic Other). That is to say, some neurotic individuals will flee from the psychological inadequacies of social autonomy (egoism and anomie) into the arms of psychological heteronomy in fantasy. We are now in a position to piece together the entire process. Below, we see how modern societies produce neurotics *en masse* because of the way the alienating operations of sociological heteronomy—autonomy—heteronomy affect the individual at a psychological level.

Modern individuals are forced to make the initial ascetic sacrifice of their pleasures for the sake of capital (negate themselves via repression—heteronomy), but find no sociological compensation for their troubles due to rampant egoism and anomie (lack a socially certified signifier and valued position in the social order—autonomy), so they aspire to Other things, as it were, at the level of fantasy (neurotic pursuit of the Other’s desire in fantasy—heteronomy). Now we see the Other’s desire functioning as a fantasy-level replacement for a social authority’s recognition that was never received. This is exactly where we find Werther, brimming with infinitude, desperate for the desire of Lotte, the particular individual who, in fantasy, stands in as the Other for Werther.

Before turning to an analysis of Werther there is one final point to make. The neurotic seeks recognition in the eyes of the Other through fantasy, but there is more than one ‘strategy’ for accomplishing this. The two primary ways a neurotic subject goes about wresting desire from the Other are by chasing after the object that the subject believes will render him or her complete in the eyes of the Other, or by becoming the object that the subject believes the Other desires. In the case of the former, we have obsession,⁵ in the latter, hysteria. Werther is a character plagued by an extreme case of hysteria, and a critical analysis of this extreme case should prove fruitful.

The Sorrows of Young Werther

In what follows, I argue, first, that Werther clearly expresses the signs of an individual suffering from life in a world replete with egoism and anomie. I then argue that Werther turns to Lotte so that she might assume the role of the Other in his fantasies, which allow him to rip off recognition from the Other that was not available in his social reality. Finally, I argue that Werther’s suicide can be interpreted as the psychological, fantasy-level equivalent of a magical act, namely, a sacrifice that, through an imagined transfixation of his fantasy, allows Werther to expropriate desire from the Other in perpetuity.⁶

Enamored of Infinity

Infinity disease is the product of egoistic and anomic social conditions. Under these respective conditions, society fails to sufficiently integrate and regulate its members and their thoughts and emotions run wild. As Durkheim puts it, in egoism “reflective intelligence is affected and immoderately over-nourished... thought, by dint of falling back upon itself, has no object left,” and in anomie, “emotion is over-excited and freed from all restraint... passion, no longer recognizing bounds, has no goal left” (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 287). So, egoism is characterized by an “infinity of dreams,” whereas anomie is characterized by an “infinity of desires” (ibid). In both cases, the individual suffers from a morbid attraction to the infinite (271). Turning to Werther, we see that he is undoubtedly an individual,

“enamored of infinity,” as Durkheim described him (286).

Werther’s story unfolds primarily through the letters he pens to his companion, Wilhelm. In Werther’s exasperated ravings and lamentations, infinity disease shines through. Nowhere do Werther’s egoistic sorrows manifest more unambiguously than in the following excerpt:

It has seemed to many that the life of man is only a dream, and I am myself always accompanied by that feeling... when I see that all effective effort has as its end the satisfaction of needs which themselves have no purpose except to lengthen the duration of our poor existence, and that any contentment on one point or another of our enquiries consists only in a sort of dreaming resignation as we paint the walls within which we sit out our imprisonment with bright figures and vistas of light—All that, Wilhelm, renders me speechless. I go back into myself and find a whole world! Again, more in intimations and a dark desire than in realization and living force. And everything swims before my sense and I smile at the world and continue my dreaming (Goethe [1774] 2012, 10).

We see that Werther feels his efforts do not serve any purpose, and because there is nothing for him in the real world, he goes back into himself, into his internal world of dreams.⁷ At one point, Werther explicitly connects his fantasies to his isolation: “and so our happiness or misery lies in the objects we keep company with and nothing in that respect is more dangerous than solitude. Our imagination, naturally impelled to lift itself up and feeding on the fantasies of poetry” (53).

There are also clear signs of Werther’s anomic torments. We see that Werther’s emotions lack regulation when he tells Wilhelm, “My heart is in quite enough ferment of itself. I need lulling... for nothing you have ever encountered is quite so uneven and unsteady as this heart of mine” (7). Indeed, each of Werther’s letters contains its own emotional frenzy, characterized by an outside observer as “a most powerful testimony of [Werther’s] confusion, passion, restless drive, and striving” (88). Such is the exact predicament anomie produces: “Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity. Being unlimited, they constantly and infinitely surpass the means at their command; they cannot be quenched. Inextinguishable thirst is constantly renewed torture” (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 247).

We can trace Werther’s tortured state quite directly to society’s insufficient regulating of his goals and its failure to provide Werther with a meaningful objective for his actions. At times, Werther cries out for social regulation: “I swear to you, at times I wish I were a day labourer just so that waking in the morning I’d have some prospect in the day ahead, some drive, some hope. Often I envy Albert, I see him up to his ears in papers and imagine I’d be well off being him” (Goethe [1774] 2012, 46). Individuals require—and, when they are wise, accept (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 256)—concrete goals and limitations to their actions, for “one does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or—which is the thing—when his goal is infinity” (248).

All of this leads Werther to “shift from sorrow to extravagance and from sweet melancholy to harmful passion” (Goethe [1774] 2012, 8). Here, Werther is oscillating between the effects of egoism and anomie, where “[egoism] is characterized by a state of depression and apathy,” but “Anomy, in fact, begets a state of exasperation and irritated weariness” (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 356-7). The dual forces of anomie and egoism leave Werther in a cage of freedom: “It is a calamity, Wilhelm, my active powers have waned to a restless lassitude, I can’t be idle but nor can I do anything” (Goethe [1774] 2012, 46). Ultimately, Werther is unable to accept his condition; he cries out, “Father, whom I do not know, who once filled all my soul and have now turned away your countenance from me, call me to you, **be silent no longer, your silence will not deter this thirsting soul**” (81, emphasis added). Unable to attain the recognition of any authority in the real world, Werther will turn to fantasy. As Durkheim explains:

At certain epochs, when disaggregated society can no longer serve as an objective for individual activities, individuals... will nevertheless be found who... aspire to other things... they seek some durable object to which to attach themselves permanently and which shall give meaning to their lives. Since they are contented with nothing real, however, they can find satisfaction only in creating out of whole cloth some ideal reality to play this role. So in thought they create an imaginary being whose slaves they become and to which they devote themselves the more exclusively the more they are detached from everything else, themselves included. To it they assign all the attachment to existence which they ascribe to themselves, since all else is valueless in their eyes. So they live a twofold, contradictory existence: individualists so far as the real world is concerned, they are immoderate altruists in everything that concerns this ideal objective ([1897] 1979, 289).

Of course, the ideal reality to which Werther submits is not made “out of whole cloth.” Although Werther’s relation to his ideal qua Lotte is a fantasized one, it is not one that he simply makes up of his own accord. Instead, it is, as outlined above, dictated by the structure of alienation in modern societies as it is inculcated in the individual. Simply put, this means that the relation Werther has to the Other in fantasy is of a hysterical nature.

Hysteria, Fantasy, and Impossibility

Since Werther has not been given a place within society's symbolic order, he escapes into fantasy. In fantasy, Werther constructs a scenario where the Other does recognize him as valuable, and in this way he can usurp what society has denied him. Since Werther is a hysteric, he goes about attaining this esteem in a very particular way. As Fink puts it, "the hysteric seeks to divine the Other's desire and to become the particular object that, when missing, makes the Other desire" (Fink 1999, 120). There are two important aspects to Fink's statement. First, the hysteric attempts to divine the Other's desire. Second, the Other's desire exists only while its object of desire is in sight, **but not in its possession**. Both aspects are essential in explaining Werther's hysteria and its culmination, his suicide.

Werther is absolutely consumed with divining the Other's (Lotte's) desire and this is most obvious in the way that Werther talks about Lotte's eyes:

"I sought Lotte's eyes. Oh, they passed from one to the next, but me, me, me, who stood there waiting and hoping for nothing else, they never looked at me!—My heart was bidding her a thousand goodbyes and she didn't see me. The carriage moved off and there were tears in my eyes. I watched it drawing away and I saw Lotte's hat as she leaned out and as she turned to look—oh, for me?—My dear friend, I am still uncertain. It is a comfort to me, perhaps she was looking back for me! Perhaps" (Goethe [1774] 2012, 31).

Here, Werther describes a time where he literally sought Lotte's eyes, hoping for one final indication of her desiring him as she was leaving his company. In the few moments when Werther does feel he has become the object of Lotte's desire, we see that her esteem briefly bestows upon him the symbolic "phallus" (i.e. the signifier of value) that he so desperately needs, but that when he imagines her desire is straying from him, his symbol of worth vanishes:

In her black eyes I read a real sympathy for me and for my fate. Indeed, I feel, and trust my heart in this, that she—oh, am I permitted to utter the heaven that is in these words?—that she loves me. Loves me!—And how I value myself, how... how I adore myself now that she loves me... And yet—when she speaks of the man she is engaged to, speaks of him with such warmth, such love—then I'm like a man stripped of all honor and status and whose sword has been taken from him (33).

The quest for Lotte's affection—for the Other's desire—dominates Werther's psyche. He has fled the alienation of social autonomy for the alienation of fantasmic heteronomy:

"How the apparition pursues me. Waking and dreaming it occupies all my soul. Here when I close my eyes, here in my head where the inner vision forms, are black eyes. Here, I cannot express it to you. I close my eyes and hers are there—like a sea, like an abyss, they lie before me, in me, they wholly occupy the senses in my head" (82).

As Werther seeks to divine the Other's desire through his compulsive interpreting of Lotte's eyes, he must also make sure that this desire remains unsatisfied. Indeed, in order for Werther's fantasy to continue, the Other's desire must always remain unfulfilled, for satisfaction brings about the end of desire. This point is crucial: fantasy presupposes, for its very existence, the impossibility of desire's fulfillment.⁸

Since hysterical fantasies depend upon not being realized, the hysteric's best bet is to find someone to play the role of the Other who is in a situation that precludes the person from acting on their desire. In other words, the ideal Other is the one that is already unavailable (either because this person is already committed to someone else or because the subject him or herself is already committed to someone else).

From the very first letter that Werther writes, his hysterical tendencies are apparent. As he recalls a previous relationship, he is clearly conflicted about the way that he led his partner's sister on:

Poor Leonore! And yet I was innocent. Could I help it that whilst her charming and heedless sister was amusing me, a real passion was forming in poor Leonore's heart? And yet—am I wholly innocent? Did I not foster her feelings? Was I not myself delighted by the wholly truthful expressions of her nature, which, though not in the least laughable, so often made us laugh, and did I not—? (5).

These opening lines hint at Werther's hysteria by providing a glimpse of the jouissance Werther derives from the desire he receives from this forbidden Other—he fosters the feelings of his partner's sister precisely because the desire cannot be realized and therefore will allow Werther to sustain his fantasy where he is desired by an Other.

Similarly, when Werther first hears of Lotte he is told she is beautiful and he is warned not to fall in love with her because she is already taken (17). Werther goes out of his way to note, "This information mattered little to me" (ibid). However, when we arrive at the denouement, Lotte delivers the line that reveals that this information mattered greatly to Werther; the impossibility of Lotte being able to satisfy her desires is likely the unconscious reason that

Werther was so drawn to her. She chastises Werther: “Can you not feel that you are deceiving yourself and with intention steering towards your ruin? Why me, Werther? Why precisely me, the property of another man? Why that precisely? I fear, I fear, it is only the impossibility of possessing me that makes this desire so exciting to you” (92). Strictly speaking, the phrasing of Werther wanting to “possess” Lotte makes him sound like more of an obsessive than a hysteric. But it should be clear from the foregoing that Werther’s relation to Lotte is that of a hysteric’s, and his attraction to Lotte stems from the fact that her desire (as the Other’s desire) cannot be realized.⁹

What’s more, it is actually Lotte who is the likelier candidate for an obsessive psychological structure. At the moment when Lotte is worried that Werther has left her, much is revealed:

Werther had become so precious to her... his going threatened to tear a gap in her existence that would never be filled... There wasn’t one [of her friends whom] she would let have him. Through all this thinking she felt for the first time deeply, without quite making it explicit, that her passionate and secret desire was to keep him for herself” (95).

Lacan’s well-known dictum, “There’s no such thing as a sexual relationship,” is clearly apropos (Fink 1995, 104). Neither Werther nor Lotte was engaged in a direct relationship with the other; rather, each individual was really engaged in a relationship with the Other, through the other. That is to say, Werther and Lotte used each other (however wittingly or unwittingly) in order to play out their fantasies with respect to a third term, the Other (fantasmatic authority). In many respects, this fact accounts for the success of Werther’s fantasy, and, by the same token, for Werther’s doom.

Werther’s Suicide: The Sacrificial Transfixation of Hysterical Fantasy

The sustained success of Werther’s fantasy brings with it the progressive imposition of the desires bound up in the fantasy on Werther’s psyche. That is to say, the longer the fantasy is allowed to go on, the more powerful Werther’s desires grow and the more they come to play a vital role in Werther’s psychical economy. So, at the same time that Werther’s fantasmatic desires demand fulfillment, so too does the dissolution of the fantasy that would result from the fulfillment of these desires become an all the more overwhelming and traumatic prospect. It is no wonder, then, that after Werther’s most desperate and direct attempt to throw himself at Lotte ends with Lotte sternly turning him away and telling him that he will never be allowed to see her again, Werther turns to suicide (Goethe [1774] 2012, 103). Werther turns to suicide because of Werther’s fantasy—and therefore Werther’s entire psyche—has been thrown into a state of crisis, and his suicide is his extreme solution to what he feels to be an extreme threat. Indeed, the best evidence seems to show that individuals turn to suicide “when they get into some kind of value trap or situation of excruciating social pressure which produces helplessness” (O’Keefe 1983, 306).

Werther saw suicide as a solution to his crisis because it could function as a sacrificial act. In sacrifice, the individual offers him or herself up to an authority by symbolizing his or her dependence upon the authority, and, in return, the authority’s recognition (i.e. the God’s mana, the Other’s desire, etc.) nourishes and encourages the individual (O’Keefe 1983, 214-7). By offering himself up to Lotte and killing himself to symbolize his dependence upon her, Werther imagines that he will become the missing object that is the cause of her desire for the rest of her life. By giving up his life, he gets his fantasy:

“I shall die.—It is not despair, it is the certainty that I have suffered my fill and that I am sacrificing myself for you. Yes, Lotte, why should I not say it? One of the three of us must go and I will be the one... So be it then.—When you climb the hill on a lovely summer evening, remember me so often coming towards you up the valley, and then look across to the churchyard and to my grave and see the wind in the glow of sunset waving the tall grasses to and fro” (Goethe [1774] 2012, 93-4).

Since the suicidal sacrifice is an irreversible act, this transfixes the fantasy—Werther dies fantasizing about how he has the desire of the Other, forever.

If O’Keefe is correct in his assertion that “Magic is, in general, a way of “expropriating social forces”” (1983, 124), then Werther’s suicidal sacrifice is best understood as an act of psychological magic whereby Werther was able to expropriate the Other’s desire by transfixing his fantasy in fantasy. Werther’s suicidal sacrifice is a way of fantasmatically ‘hacking’ one’s own psychological structure, just as magic is sometimes used to ‘hack’ society’s religious structure. In each case, one works within a pre-existing structure, using the system of moral-symbolic relations one finds there for one’s own ends. In this way, individuals are able to expropriate the forces generated by these structures, e.g. desire from their own psyches, prestige from society, and so on.

Conclusion

Werther's plight is a condensed, dramatized depiction of an extreme case of a neurotic individual's fantasies and sufferings, all of which resulted from the unique configuration of alienation in modern societies. Werther's sacrificial suicide was a magical attempt to expropriate desire from the Other in fantasy because there was no authoritative recognition to be found in his social world (again, because of the modern sociological configuration of alienation). A key takeaway from Werther's story is that, under conditions of alienation, sacrifice goes awry.

In a situation of alienation, the individual sacrifices for the sake of an alien force that rules over him or her. The individual gives up a part of his or her self to this alien force in the hopes of getting something back and being stronger for it. Actually, the individual finds that, despite whatever compensation is received, he or she is ultimately worse off for the sacrifice because, fundamentally, what is strengthened is the extent to which the individual is in a dominated and helpless position with respect to the alien force. Any psychological nourishment the individual might receive in the short run is undermined by its diminishing returns in the long run because it comes at the cost of a deepening of the individual's domination by this alien force and a concomitant exacerbation of his or her psychological and sociological impotence. Over time, then, the individual gives more than he or she gets. This means that under conditions of alienation, the sacrificial process by means of which the individual attempts to sustain him or herself contains a contradiction that tends toward a crisis point. This crisis point is reached when the individual feels utterly powerless,¹⁰ and the antagonism between the individual and the alien force (whether fantasmatic or sociological) then takes on the dimension of requiring a fatal solution—things can no longer continue the way they are. Suicide is the solution Werther felt would be most effective, and far too many modern subjects have apparently agreed.

Is The Evil Then Incurable?

Toward the end of his study of suicide, Durkheim asks, "Is the evil then incurable?" (Durkheim [1897] 1979, 378). Durkheim's answer is that suicide is not an evil that must persist everlastingly but is instead a social-psychological phenomenon with fundamentally social causes. Durkheim argues that in modern societies, the prevention of suicide requires the introduction of a more democratic social organization, specifically in the economic sphere of social activity (390-2).

Substantive democracy means the abolition of alienation.¹¹ In a democratic situation, individuals sacrifice for the sake of a group to which they freely belong and in which they participate as equal co-rulers. Under such conditions, it is axiomatic that sacrifice strengthens the individual since the strengthening of the group is really nothing but the strengthening of the collective aspect of the psyche of each individual that belongs to the group. So, the individual who gives up a part of his or her self to strengthen the group thereby strengthens a part of his or her self **and** the social conditions necessary for continued strengthening of all. The individual, therefore, gets back more than he or she gives.

Democracy's contemporary prospects may seem grim in the moment of Trump and Brexit. However, it is important to keep in mind that never before in human history have so many individuals valued democracy, freedom, equality, and caring for all of humanity (Welzel 2013; Inglehart 2018). What is more, these democratic values are overwhelmingly held by individuals belonging to younger generations, and the rise of authoritarianism in the West is, at least in part, a reactionary response to the cultural ascendance of the values of these generations (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

For better or worse, society is likely hurtling toward a crisis point where these democratic impulses will need to be capitalized on to avoid disaster. As the window for significant climate action narrows and authoritarianism rears its ugly head, a growing body of evidence points to the growing limitations, contradictions, and looming crisis of the current regime of capital accumulation (McNally 2011; Kliman 2012; Carchedi and Roberts 2018). It is telling that many thinkers feel it necessary to "conjure up into their service" (Marx [1852] 2003, 12) the spirit of Gramsci's words—"The old is dying and the new cannot be born" (see Carchedi 2018, 70-4; Fraser 2019, 28)—when making sense of the current situation.

So while subjectively (social-characterologically) the potential for democratization has never been greater, the objective (political, economic, ecological) stakes and difficulty of democratization have never been higher. The day no longer demands, but desperately cries out for genuinely creative thinking that emerges from rigorous empirical analysis and theoretically adept immanent critique of the social order (Antonio 1981; see also, Worrell and Krier 2015, 18-22, on critical poiesis). This paper is an attempt to make a small effort in such a direction.

Endnotes

1. Marx ([1867] 1990, 931-40, *passim*) and Weber ([1920] 2011, 169, *passim*) both make plain what a tremendous obstacle traditional authority is to capital accumulation.
2. This formulation is clearly a downgrade where literary value is concerned.
3. It should be noted that neuroticism and asceticism are not interchangeable concepts. For instance, asceticism sometimes goes hand-in-hand with authoritarianism. Individuals with an authoritarian disposition are often quite proud of the amount of suffering they can endure, but the cause of their suffering and self-denial is due to a fundamentally different kind of relation to authority than in the neurotic's case. The authoritarian relation to authority is perverse (specifically, sadomasochistic), which means that the authoritarian individual suffers (and doles out suffering) because he or she "gets off" on the **enunciation** of authoritative commands (e.g. "lock her up"), not because he or she respects authoritative commands in their own right. The neurotic's asceticism is rooted in the (unconscious) belief that authoritative commands are worthy of respect in their own right (e.g. "the law is the law"), and such neurotics therefore prefer dispassionate commands that are in turn executed dispassionately. So, perverts and neurotics can both be ascetics, but for different reasons.
4. Per Zizek: "by being filtered through the sieve of the signifier, the body is submitted to castration, enjoyment is evacuated from it, the body survives as dismembered, mortified... the order of the signifier (the big Other) and that of enjoyment (the Thing as its embodiment) are radically heterogeneous, inconsistent; any accordance between them is structurally impossible" ([1989] 2008, 136-7).
5. It is true that the obsessive refuses to veer any credit away from him or herself toward the Other's desire as the cause of his or her own desire, but the obsessive is nevertheless as hung up on the Other's desire as anyone can possibly be. Despite his or her seemingly exclusive preoccupation with the object cause of his or her desire, it is the Other that is responsible for the obsessive's maniacal pursuit of the object cause of desire. It is precisely because the obsessive refuses to accept this fact (refuses to subjectify the Other's desire that was the initial cause of his or her own desire) that the obsessive condemns him or herself to a perpetual state of psychological enslavement and alienation in service of the Other (Fink 1999, 118-9, 242-3).
6. My notion of transfixation of fantasy is meant to convey the opposite of the notion of traversal of fantasy. Traversal involves a going beyond or overcoming of the fantasy whereas my notion of transfixation implies that the individual submits to the fantasy. The difference is between life after fantasy and life for fantasy, respectively. The transfixing of fantasy is therefore the complete surrendering of life for the sake of the fantasy.
7. As Durkheim says, "the more the family and community become foreign to the individual, so much the more does he become a mystery to himself, unable to escape the exasperating and agonizing question: to what purpose?" ([1897] 1979, 212).
8. Neurotics are also especially concerned with not becoming the cause of the Other's *jouissance*, as distinct from the cause of the Other's desire. This is related to the resentful side of the neurotic's ambiguous feelings and thoughts toward the Other. On the one hand, the neurotic wants the Other's demands and desires. On the other hand, the neurotic never wants the Other to "get off" on him or her. As Fink explains: "The neurotic may follow his or her parents' demands to a T... but never let the parents know that: "I did what you asked, but I'll never give you the satisfaction of knowing!" Resentment is never relinquished" (1999, 69). The neurotic's grudge against the Other is important, but not fundamental. The neurotic would like to punish the Other by preventing enjoyment, but, more than this, the neurotic **needs** to prevent the Other from "getting off" on him or her in order for the fantasy to continue, and this is the essential point.
9. There are many other examples to support the interpretation of Werther as a hysteric. For instance, he tells Wilhelm, "no shape or form but hers appears in my imagination, and everything in the world all around me I see only in relation to her" (Goethe [1774] 2012, 48). Such is the hysteric's discourse, not the obsessives (see Fink 1999, 118-61).
10. Any "race for an unattainable goal can give no other pleasure but that of the race itself... once it is interrupted the participants are left empty-handed... Effort grows, just when it becomes less productive. How could the desire to live not be weakened under such conditions?" (Durkheim ([1897] 1979, 253).
11. Crucially, the abolition of alienation is not tantamount to the abolition of authority, since the latter leads to disaster, as this paper has shown (see also Worrell and Krier 2015). The abolition of alienation is not the elimination of authority, but, rather, authority's sublation (**aufheben**), such that authority is preserved but fundamentally transformed by being subject to rational and recognized control by the free and equal individuals who co-construct it through their social relations.

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