

# Ignoring Goethe's *Faust*: A Critical-Theoretical Perspective on American Ideology

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## Introduction

In English-speaking countries, the singular importance to modernity of Goethe's work, in general, and of *Faust*, in particular, often goes unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> In Germany, by contrast, and as is to be expected, the situation is entirely different, and from this angle alone, to refer to "modernity" and to "modern society" in Germany is to infer a profoundly and qualitatively different meaning than it does in other countries, including in the United Kingdom and in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In some regards, this is due to peculiarities in the history of German society, culture, and democracy, as a "belated nation" (see Plessner [1935] 2001; Dahrendorf [1965] 1969). In other regards, peculiarities in the history of German society, culture, and democracy resulted from the inextricable nexus between Goethe's influence on the specific incarnation of modernity (and modern society) that took hold in Germany, and which was interwoven with a particular kind of critical consciousness. "Goethe" – his work, thought, and status – as a historical figure and as an intellectual phenomenon influenced both the experience of, and a spectrum of prominent stances and reactions with regard to modernity and modern society, in ways that were not entirely separate from other poets and playwrights, such as Lessing, Schiller, and Hölderlin, though none of them were able to approach. As Randall Collins (1996:626) put, "Goethe became the great energy star of German literature, and with all such figures his reputation casts a glare that makes it difficult to see how he became that way." Yet, acknowledging the centrality of Goethe provides us with a window onto tensions at the core of modernity and modern society **in general**, i.e., in all modern societies – tensions which facilitated a particular kind of critical reflexivity that became widespread in German-speaking intellectual circles, but which did not rise to the level of shaping German history and society in ways that could have prevented the rise of National Socialism. Rather, it is possible that in some regards, National Socialism emerged in response to the culture of criticism and social critique that took hold in a society which was politically and economically backward, compared in key regards to other modern societies, such as the U.K., the U.S., and France. Still, absent Goethe (the person, writer and public figure), and especially absent "Goethe" (the socio-cultural phenomenon), this kind of critical reflexivity may not have taken form (and hold, to the extent that it did) at all, anywhere, at any point, and it certainly would not have taken form in the distinctive register in which it did, first in Germany, and later on, in transformed fashion that reflected socially, culturally, politically and economically specific features in diverse societies. In essence, in Germany, this critical reflexivity manifested as the combined ability and readiness to acknowledge and confront the contradictions that are built into modern society, especially in Hegel's philosophy, in Marx's critique of political economy, in the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School, and in the works and projects of many other theoretically inclined scholars as well as artists. Arguably, the more or less notorious penchant for theory in Germany, including especially for **critical** theory, can be traced to Goethe the person and the phenomenon, not in the sense that either he or the phenomenon (or both) "caused" related inclinations, but that they prepared the requisite turf for an entirely new kind of critical reflexivity and modern consciousness. Thus, to appreciate theory, and even more so critical theory, requires an appreciation of the role

that Goethe played during the initial phase of modern society taking shape. In this regard, especially, Faust played a pivotal role, as an opportunity to address explicitly issues whose lack of resolution burdens us to this day, as well as who we moderns are exactly, and how we exist and coexist.<sup>3</sup>

Goethe did not leave much of an intellectual and cultural imprint in most countries outside of continental Europe. Moreover, conservative and reactionary efforts in Germany to celebrate his work and thought as the contribution of utter genius have detracted from Goethe's overall importance, by avoiding and distracting from their critical content and underlying impetus. Yet, Goethe may be most noteworthy for having stood for a commitment to the prospect of an **undamaged** life and to the imminence of an **unalienated** existence as both emerged as categorical corollaries and "objective possibilities" **with** modernity and in modern societies, both in the sense of a person's life, and life (in the sense of **nature**) in general – depending on which exact form modernity and modern society was going to take, and what kind of developmental trajectory it would follow.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the subtitle of Rüdiger Safranski's recent book on Goethe – a minor literary event in its own right – refers to "life as a work of art," meaning **Goethe's life as a successful work of art** (Safranski [2013] 2017). At the beginning of his Adorno biography, subtitled "One Last Genius," Detlev Claussen addressed the problematic and paradoxical effort to write **any** biography, and especially a biography of a "genius," **after** what Horkheimer and Adorno referred to as "the decline of the individual" (Horkheimer 1947; Adorno [1951] 1974); referring to Goethe, he wrote:

Readers who take a look at Adorno's last great work, his Aesthetic Theory... will not need to search far before coming across the name of Goethe. Goethe's name is intimately connected not only with the bourgeois concept of genius but also with the model of a successful life capable of being captured in a biography. For the generation that, like Adorno, was born in the long bourgeois century between 1815 and 1914, Goethe stands at the beginning of this bourgeois epoch, to which even someone born in 1903 could feel he belonged. By the end of this period, of course, Goethe's works had long been buried beneath the Goethe cult dedicated to the worship of the artistic genius. (Claussen [2003] 2008, p. 2)

Continuing the theme of Goethe's importance to German culture, as well as to the members of the early Frankfurt School, Claussen turned to Horkheimer:

Goethe recurs constantly in Horkheimer's writings ... as the epitome of the successful individual. ... Reverence for Goethe, which [in 1961] ... was still accompanied by a knowledge of his works, continued to play an important role among the educated German middle classes throughout the nineteenth century. The Jews in Germany, however, who took a positive view of assimilation and who experienced their social ascent into the middle classes at this time, saw in Goethe's life a promise of human community made real. ... A familiarity with Goethe's Poetry and Truth belonged to the canon of bourgeois knowledge. (ibid., p. 3)<sup>5</sup>

In the English-speaking world, neglect of Goethe no doubt is owed in part to such trivial and predictable factors as theater directors and companies preferring to perform plays that were written in the language of the country where performances are being staged, for an array of reasons, including legitimate monetary concerns prevailing perceptions of audience preference and concurrently cultivated and reinforced audience "taste."<sup>6</sup> Along similar lines, there is less of an inclination among school administrators and teachers at public high schools to invest time, energy, and expenses on seemingly mystifying foreign literature, despite an author's or work's reputation. By contrast, Shakespeare's plays in many countries around the world are notable exceptions to this rule, as they have been popular, widely performed, and influential for centuries, regardless of whether English is the official language or not. Yet, while this is also true for Goethe in general (and in many countries), it is not true in countries where English is the dominant language, including the United States.<sup>7</sup> This is especially surprising with regard to Faust, which by general, near-unanimous agreement is Goethe's most important work, the most important work of German literature, and part of "world literature."

For present purposes, I will treat the dearth of Faust performances in countries where English is the primary or exclusive language, as symptomatic of a certain **Berührungsangst** (apprehensiveness; fear of coming in contact, usually with something unpleasant or undesirable) on the part of theater directors, audiences and readers alike, as well as non-specialized educators, with regard to demanding, disturbing and unsettling issues pertaining to **the modern condition**, which feature prominently in Goethe's entire work. Lack of interest in Faust cannot and should not be "explained" simply – as a common cliché would have it – with reference to the fact that the ravings of a frustrated academic are not particularly interesting to the wider public, as if that were all that the tragedy is about. This cliché only applies to the opening scene of Faust, in any case.<sup>8</sup>

Without doubt, Shakespeare's plays are (or, at least, appear to be) much more thrilling, attractive and compelling

than Goethe's work, as they are concerned with persistent dilemmas and challenges characteristic of the "human condition," as certain capabilities, concerns and challenges have guided, shaped and limited human existence, experiences, ambitions, responsibilities, and struggles, presumably since the beginning of (human) time, and as they continue to do so in the modern era. While it is possible and perfectly legitimate to read Shakespeare's plays in terms of how they highlight aspects of modern social, political, economic and cultural life, it is important to keep in mind that those aspects typically are neither unique, nor exclusive to modern existence, but instead characteristic of human life across time (history) and space (geography), including of modern life. Their **specific** manifestations, however, as they occur among modern humans without necessarily having also applied to pre-moderns, are likely to reveal hidden (unexpected, and possibly counterintuitive) dimensions of **modern** life, as long as they are detected in and for their specificity, and how exactly, **as a foil**, they provide insights into the contradictions of **modern** life. For instance, while *Macbeth* facilitates and encourages focus on the cunning, yet, short-sighted and hasty insidiousness and immorality with which many of those who are eager to – and in fact do – pursue power, Shakespeare's **current** relevance depends on us being able to explicate precisely what is uniquely modern about how power is being pursued today, within the matrix of modern politics, culture, and economy, i.e., especially within and via modern corporations, which evidently does not necessarily (or not at all) apply across the evolutionary arch of the species – if indeed there is a specifically modern aspect, e.g., to "pursuing power" that is being revealed in the process, as is highly probable. If *Macbeth*, as merely one occasion among many in Shakespeare's plays, is not conducive to doing so successfully, his relevance as a **modern** "literary dramatist" (Erne 2003) is bound to be limited, perhaps even non-existent. By implication, casting to one side, or ignoring entirely, both Goethe and *Faust*, and **their** modernity, is likely to be indicative as well as symptomatic of the operations of a particular kind of ideology that may be difficult, if not **impossible**, to discern without an effective and intriguing foil for comparison.

Boldly stated, my working assumption is that one important reason why Goethe's *Faust* is not being performed (or, according to my students over many years, taught) more regularly in the English-speaking world is that it puts forth and promotes a kind of **critical reflexivity** that is incongruous with Anglo-American thought, society and culture, and which – as a general rule – historically neither has been supported, nor cultivated, by the proverbial "powers that be," by institutions and organizations, except against their stated intentions, and despite the ubiquity of many of the best universities in the world.<sup>9</sup> If my working assumption is correct, or at least justifiable as the reference point for a related inquiry, it would suggest a perspective on ideology as a different sort of "iron cage", in the spirit in which Max Weber employed this ideation – really, as a **casing as hard as steel (stahlhartes Gehäuse**, the term Weber used; as opposed to **eiserner Käfig** – which would be the translation of Parsons's "iron cage" into German, a term Weber never used; see Tiryakian 1981, Turner 1982, Baehr 2001): a casing grounded in cognitive and intellectual limitations that correspond with specific languages and terminologies being conducive, or not, to accessing the intricacies of various dimensions of reality, including especially the intricacies of modern **social** reality.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, ideology is relevant less as a mental framework that imposes particular ideas on members of a society and compels them to think in a certain way (or ways), but rather, a framework perceived to be non-problematic, even though it prevents members of society, without their knowledge, from "accessing" certain layers and aspects of reality, especially where the latter are problematic, and where related awareness might impose constraints and the expectation of accountability on political and economic elites and decision-makers that they rather would avoid. **In other words, today, ideology is not so much about what people think, but about what they cannot conceive they ought to be able to think.** Yet, and this is where the perspective on ideology suggested here is most disorienting, those who benefit from the operations of ideology in this sense are bound to make efforts to reinforce this ideology or to distract from related critical reflexivity, but they are not likely to have been the progenitors of this ideology; rather, ideology of this kind tends to be an outgrowth of the underlying evolutionary logic of modern societies as it is defined and delimited by the material processes that sustain their stability – in Durkheim's sense of modern society as a reality "**sui generis**" (see Malczewski 2013) which follows and evolves according to its own principles and imperatives, in the interest of self-preservation and survival, rather than being a function of principles humans concocted and continue to adhere to, on the assumption that society should be what they – **we** – want it to be.

To be sure, it is difficult to conceive of, circumscribe and name real limits on critical reflexivity, since the general assumption is that all modern societies have in common practices and capabilities that distinguish them from pre-modern societies. Yet, since each modern society ought to be conceived of as a peculiar and simultaneous matrix of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern dimensions – especially since the latter part of the twentieth century, during the era that saw the rise of neoliberalism, i.e., since the 1980s – it is important to clarify exactly how and with regard to which aspects a particular society must be conceived of, viewed, and examined as such a matrix. Here, Goethe's

Faust and its neglect in American society and culture serve as precisely this foil.<sup>11</sup>

Given that Faust is a professor, and that the play starts with a lengthy contemplation about the futility of knowledge, or rather, the futility of acquiring and accumulating knowledge, in relation to the experience of that which knowledge is about – nature, life, endeavors, status, success, etc., and above all, the effort to live a meaningful life – it is particularly astonishing that Faust is not performed at least at universities. For instance, the scene early in the play, when a prospective student in search for advice about what to study appears in Faust's quarters, would be highly instructive to many students today. After all, the student **does** receive useful advice, even though not from Faust, but from Mephistopheles. But it is the specific advice the student receives that suggests a particular kind of reflexivity and willingness to criticize preconceived notions that all societies, including American society, are based upon and run on, and from which – from the vantage point of “common sense” – students purportedly and ardently are to be “protected.” Thus, the neglect of Goethe and Faust, and the related Teflon-character of American culture, must have to do with how they stood for and broached a series of subject matters which are prevalent in and characteristic of modernity, perhaps especially of American modernity. Goethe and Faust collide with key tenets of American ideology, particularly as it undergirds more or less regressive social, political, and economic structures that are inversely related to the avowed principles of modernity, and extremely difficult to change, such as the refusal to face explicitly the multifarious social, political, cultural and psychological costs resulting from worsening economic inequality, or from persistent race-relations, and corresponding forms of discriminatory practices, and how they shape and mediate between the ideology and culturally condoned and reinforced coping mechanisms at the individual and group levels, in the form of cognitive-mental and emotional practices and rituals. Worse still, such features are not being confronted adequately and critically, in a manner that would be transformative with regard to national identity and national consciousness. Instead, they regularly are being reaffirmed and supported by segments of the population and elected officials whose incongruity with the breadth of modern principles has begun to become conspicuous indeed, in part because and facilitated by these features never having been confronted in ways that would be conducive to a more realistic perspective on American society and culture at the national level, not to mention that American society – like any other actually existing social order – relies on such features as **material** to maintain itself, in its specificity. To give this observation a literary spin, one might refer to it as evidence of modern society's “evil genius,” combined with its ability to rely on humans who are happy to do society's bidding. By implication, providing at least a glimpse of what Faust is about may reveal aspects of American ideology that warrant closer scrutiny, drawing attention to aspects which frequently are being ignored, or – in effect, perhaps even in principle – indiscernible from vantage points that are located within its immediate reach.<sup>12</sup>

Focusing on the Faust/Mephisto dynamic will serve the purpose of addressing the following question: what would it take for those concerned with the development of a (critical) theory of modern society that is capable of recognizing, and of confronting in productive fashion, the paradoxical, socially stabilizing role of contradictions in this type of social organization, to be cognizant of and sensitive to the distinctiveness of each modern society, specifically with regard to the nexus between the particular role contradictions play and the functions they fulfill, on the one hand, and the specific and counterintuitive form of ideology and the functions which it fulfills, on the other?<sup>13</sup> Awareness of such distinctiveness appears to be essential to avoiding the pitfalls of trying to develop further and to refine the theory of modern society as the theory of an inherently irreconcilable **social system**, at a time when one type of contradictions have been allowed to fester for decades, while another type has been intensifying over the course of centuries, with their combination beginning to threaten the very integrity of a growing number of modern societies, including the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Is it possible to identify, in such a volatile context, the vanishing point of the trajectory that modern societies have been following, for better or worse?

## Goethe vs. Shakespeare?

As already mentioned, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Faust is the pinnacle of German literature, and one of the pinnacles of world literature.<sup>15</sup> Depending on the criteria one applies (to slightly overstate my point), Faust is to German literature and language what all of Shakespeare's plays combined are to English.<sup>16</sup> Without overstating my point, Goethe was to modern German literature and language what Shakespeare was to English, especially if we consider all of Goethe's diverse literary works – including his novels and contributions to science, which add up to many volumes.<sup>17</sup> Both Goethe and Shakespeare from their times forward have been looming “larger than life,”

and in both cases, subsequent literary works by other writers within Goethe's and Shakespeare's respective linguistic realms could not (and cannot) avoid relating back, and in certain regards still being a response, to Shakespeare's plays and to Goethe's writings, especially *Faust*. Yet, while both Shakespeare and Goethe exerted considerable and lasting influence on literature and languages beyond the English-speaking world, the same cannot be said of the reception of Goethe in the latter, especially when comparing the **amount and depth** of attention Shakespeare's work received in non-English-speaking countries, including Germany, with the extent of the acknowledgment and **presence** of Goethe's work, including *Faust*, in the English-speaking world. Whereas both Shakespeare and Goethe (especially *Faust*, but not only) left their mark in many other languages and cultures, in theater, operas (e.g., Verdi's adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, or Gounod's and Berlioz's of *Faust*, or Lili Boulanger's *Faust et Hélène*), and films (especially Kurosawa's adaptation of Shakespeare in *Ran* (1985), or the adaptations of *Faust* by the Czech director Swankmajer (1994) and the Russian director Sokurov (2011); as well as the odd, yet intriguing and exceedingly short exercise in puppetry by director Hoku Uchiyama and writer Steven Ritz-Barr (2008), both Goethe's work in general, and *Faust* in particular, might as well be non-existent outside of small academic circles in the English-speaking world, and beyond mere name-recognition. The most notable exceptions are Goethe's early novella, *The Sufferings of Young Werther* ([1774] 2012) and the poem, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," whose allegorical fit and utility with regard to a well-known pattern in modern social life – conjuring forces that are difficult or impossible to control, especially with regard to "unintended consequences" – is blatantly apparent and undeniable, but whose authorship is unknown to most.<sup>18</sup> In countries where English is the primary language, performances of *Faust* continue to be rare occurrences (and frequently amount to **de facto** events), so much so that they even lead to related publications (e.g., at the University of Delaware; see Haus and Lovell 2016). There are no films that were produced in English-speaking countries dedicated to Goethe, despite his qualities as a sort of "Renaissance man," and there are no versions or adaptations of Goethe's *Faust* in English, nor even publicly available recordings of theater performances, either on CD, VHS, DVD/Blu-ray, or streamed online, which is even more telling.<sup>19</sup>

More or less pronounced ignorance regarding *Faust* in parts of the world that at one time or other were part of the British empire, and where its culture and language continue to exert a discernible amount of gravity, neither is likely to be accidental (without identifiable cause), nor an oversight (due to neglect, for whatever reasons), nor due to its foreignness (originating in a different linguistic and cultural realm), although it is undeniable that compared to many other cultures, Anglo-American culture may have a greater tendency to be hermetic, self-contained, and self-referential, despite its willingness and ability to draw – selectively – on forms of entertainment from many different countries. Rather, from a social-theoretical perspective, it is likely that there is a more intriguing reason for neglecting *Faust*, and that this neglect is related to the underlying impetus and "message" (or "messages") of Goethe's main work, compared to lessons built into many of Shakespeare's plays. Both bodies of work are typified by the kind of ideas and issues they raise, relay, and address, respectively, the sentiments they conjure, the sensitivities they touch upon or cause to resonate. Both in Shakespeare and in Goethe (whose dramatic work, in particular, in many ways, was greatly influenced by the former, though not to the same extent as Schiller's "quasi-Shakespearean history plays"; Collins 1998:626), the messages, themes, sentiments, sensitivities and resonances as they are being presented to or conjured in audiences are not necessarily or exclusively pleasant or elevating or reaffirming, but frequently critical in orientation, even if and when amusing, startling, or shocking. Where, then, lies the difference?

It would seem that what separates Shakespeare and Goethe the most is their position in relation to modernity, respectively: the question of how modern they are, how they were modern, how they had a bearing on or anticipated modern issues and challenges, and the kind of stance each represents with regard to the need to illuminate and scrutinize modernity, and which aspects of the latter.<sup>20</sup> Both Shakespeare's and Goethe's heroes and themes frequently are fraught with ambivalence. Yet, from today's perspective, it would appear that what is most noteworthy about *Faust* is that it is much more modern – more consonant with modern themes, experiences, conditions, and challenges – than Shakespeare's plays, which are often based on historical material, even though they did address themes with contemporary relevance at the time of their writing (as suggested, for instance, in the film, *Anonymous*). Yet, the temporal reference frame of most of Shakespeare's plays is located in the past, and how the past provides lessons for the present, without the future necessarily factoring in, in discernible fashion – especially as a future that is qualitatively different from the present or the past. Indeed, the **time-horizons** of Shakespeare's plays and Goethe's *Faust* (and many other works) are inversely related: for Shakespeare, it was the present in relation to the past that mattered; for Goethe, the past and present in relation to the future. Evidently, Goethe, who lived from 1749 until 1832, was writing at the beginning of the modern era, and during its early decades, while Shakespeare wrote well before the dawn of our age. Concordantly, the themes addressed in their respective works pertain to different subject matters:

to Shakespeare, they typically pertain to traditional issues and moral dilemmas relating to power, hierarchies, family relations, murder, inequality, legacy, etc., and how individuals are situated within circumstances shaped or determined by related realities or events, and how they cope with them. In these regards, Shakespeare is about the vicissitudes of what used to be referred to as “human nature” – aspects of human existence and human practices **in society** that are (or tend to be) constant, independent of time and space, i.e., **transhistorical**. By contrast, Goethe was eminently concerned with how the emergence of modern conditions will transform the meaning of “human” (as exemplified, for instance, in Faust’s student Wagner successfully creating the homunculus). In addition, to Shakespeare, of necessity, successful entertainment was a persistent and imminent need and goal, and not a secondary challenge, given his struggles with scarce financial resources and the need “to keep the money flowing.” The Globe Theater mirrored the hierarchical structure of society and necessitated serving at least two very different audiences to satisfy at the same time, which prominently reflected the very structure of the society at the time.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, given his financial independence due to regular employment at the court in Weimar, success with a live audience was a not a major concern for Goethe, especially with regard to Faust, which is above all a literary work, though truly enjoyable only on stage, and whose first part in its final form was not put on stage until 1829, three years before the end of Goethe’s life (in Braunschweig).

Goethe’s Faust, and its protagonist, Heinrich Faust, tackle issues that are “post-feudal” and post-aristocratic, even post-religious, as Faust’s transition from disenchanted and alienated scholar at the beginning of part I – who has reached the limits of what can be known – to successful **man of the world** and powerful entrepreneur in part II (who, e.g., is involved in the invention of paper money, with Mephisto’s help) illustrates very well. Ironically, the evolution of the commoner Faust is much more consistent with the pursuit of individual professional success in the United States and its social, political, and economic structure, than with England during Shakespeare’s time, with “the Bard” being preoccupied, if not obsessed, with more or less glorious tales of the alluring or abhorrent lives and times of the noble-born.

Indeed, with Heinrich Faust, we encounter a character who has shed traditional perspectives on God and life, since he is no longer able to delude himself into expecting that life – even a good life – will lead to salvation (even though for him, it will, in the end), and who – as a consequence – is determined to draw conclusions from and take action in response to the fact that he is no longer able to frame his existence in terms of well-established traditions, notions and ideas. How else could he agree to make a pact with the devil? As Erich Fromm put, “[in] a poetic form the concept of productive activity has been expressed beautifully by Goethe... Faust is a symbol of man’s eternal search for the meaning of life. Neither science, pleasure, nor might, not even beauty, answer Faust’s question. Goethe proposes that the only answer to man’s quest is a productive activity, which is identical with the good.”<sup>22</sup> Inevitably, by implication, Faust is a critique not just of patterns that determine social relations, especially the carnival scene at the beginning of part II, but of society in general as it compels individuals to expend large amounts of time and energy on the search for meaning, a search that must be frustrated, as it distracts human beings from understanding the circumstances under which they can develop and commit to a self, through productive activity that inevitably is eminently **transformative** in nature, rather than reinforcing existing conditions. Thus, Faust is both a critique of emerging **modern** society as an empirically discernible world and a program for how this society should evolve if it would allow or encourage members of society to be active agents. However, Goethe did not frame this critique in a manner intended to translate into a novel framework for controlling an increasingly complex and befuddling reality, either via democracy or socialism. Rather, just as he was critical of established religion, he also was critical of efforts to propagate solutions to the tension-filled condition of human existence under conditions of emerging modernity that are purported to engender a happier world, while depriving individuals of what we have been referring to as agency.

It is important, at the same time, to resist the temptation to infer that either Faust or Mephisto are Goethe in disguise. As Rüdiger Safranski, noted biographer of Schiller, E. T. A. Hoffman, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger and others, wrote in his superb chapter on Faust in his recent book on Goethe,

Goethe has not tidily apportioned the bright and dark side sides to Faust and Mephisto in the sense that Faust wants to do good and Mephisto turns it into evil. It’s not that simple. ... Mephisto is the deed to Faust’s thoughts. Faust’s competence casts a shadow, and the shadow is Mephisto. He makes it manifest that the competent, successful Faust becomes entangled in guilt ... Goethe’s world theater shows how, via long chains of causality, a successful life in one place sooner or later results in the destruction of life in another. The world is not fair, and the dead litter the course of Faust’s worldly career. If the causal connection between an action and its evil consequences is short, we speak of guilt; if somewhat longer, we speak of tragedy. If the causal chain is very long, guilt and tragedy can be attenuated to mere unease. Knowing ourselves to be

survivors because others have suffered and died, we cannot escape feeling such unease. (Safranski [2013] 2017: 538)

Thus, as Freud ([1929] 1961) observed, the history, the character, and the preliminary end result of modern societies is fraught with unease due to the requirement to continuously engage in active self-repression: **Unbehagen** is what characterizes modern existence, whether we are fully cognizant of it or not.<sup>23</sup> Concurrently, neither Faust nor Mephisto are simply “evil.” Rather, they are at the same time manifest expressions and means to reveal the underlying logic of modern society. Goethe was not comfortable with the category of evil; rather, he appears to be suggesting, in his many writings, and in ways that foreshadow key observations in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 2002), that facing modernity **and** modern society requires willingness to recognize that many of their principles, and even more of their consequences, are highly destructive, without it being justified to push their destructiveness, as it is inherent to modern society, onto “the devil” (or onto evil). As Safranski explains,

First, Faust and Mephisto: as for the devil, there was actually no room for him in Goethe’s worldview. He often said that he would not **institute** an independent evil power, and when Kant introduced “radical evil” into his philosophy, Goethe declared that the Sage of Königsberg had now **beslobbered the mantle of philosophy**. For Goethe, the devil did not exist. If you believe in God, you have to believe in the devil as well, and Goethe believed in neither a transcendent God nor the devil. He had been a Spinozist all his life, and his watchword was **deus ex natura**. God is nature in its entire richness and creative power. And man [in the sense of *Mensch*, human being; H.F.D.] can and should discover, preserve, and use his creative power, which also lives within him. Activity is thus the true service to God in nature, and the drive to create is absolutely never ending. ... Man fulfills his purpose when, as **natura naturata** (incarnate nature), he participates in **natura [naturans]** (creative nature). Goethe’s dialectical formulation is that of a creative process, nature means polarity and enhancement. Opposites create a tension that enhances what is alive without being locked in rigid dualism. Light and darkness together bring the world of color into being. (ibid., p. 526)<sup>24</sup>

What might appear as the “evil” of modern society, then, is the result of a misinterpretation: it is neither that modern society at its core is an embodiment of evil, nor that humans are inherently evil. Instead, what is interpreted as evil is the result of the violation of nature (inner and outer) perpetrated by human beings who neither are capable of respecting, nor of recognizing nature, nor of applying their creative activity and of appreciating themselves in their productive activity. Rather, they are executors of a program there are oblivious to and which, by implication, they are in no position to understand. The compounding of this disrespect and the inability to recognize inner and outer nature across time and space manifests as what might be referred to as the evil of modern society. At the same time, as indicated in the earlier quote, creative and productive activity are neither inherently good or evil; what they require – indeed: demand – is a kind of awareness and reflexivity that must be conceived of, understood, faced, and struggled with. As a result, in *Faust*, the prospect of modern society appears as a warped reality.

[In the] interplay between the metaphysician Faust and the realist Mephisto, the proprietary secret of modernity [comes to the fore. What we are witnessing is] how the vertical striving of previous ages is redirected into the horizontal and becomes thereby a historical force of unheard-of power. [Modernity] no longer strives upward, since it has discovered that heaven is **empty** and God is dead. ... The passion formerly directed at God becomes a passion for exploring and taking possession of the world. That is exactly what it means to move “outward.” Instead of trying to approach God, man circles the globe. [Modernity] is no longer disposed to be cosmic, but to become global. ...

Goethe imagines all the things that [modernity] could do with man—including, for example, producing him in a laboratory. The homunculus scenes are his contribution to the discussion of anthropotechnology... (ibid., pp. 531-32)<sup>25</sup>

There are many other instances in *Faust* where economic, organizational and technological developments are being anticipated that came to be realized later on, such as the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal. Both Faust and Mephisto enabled Goethe to relay insights into modernity as it was taking shape in England, France, and the United States, and beginning to transform society, politics, and culture – as well as economy – in German lands before *Germany* itself came to be, almost forty years after Goethe’s death, following the Prussian army’s victory over France, in 1871, a war that was unleashed and served the purpose of guaranteeing compliance of all parts of Germany with Prussia’s strategy for creating a German nation-state via unification, under the dominion of Prussian emperors, to be sure.

In his essay on Goethe and modern civilization, Gernot Böhme (2015) addresses the question of what is modern in civilization, to tackle the fact that in Germany, since the nineteenth century, civilization is being distinguished from culture, with the latter referring to the basis of national identity, and the former to the external regulation of life via politics, social order, and economy. This distinction also applied to Goethe, who did not regard himself as living in

modern civilization, and who perceived modernity rather as a threat than a promise. Still, one might add, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Goethe's perception of modernity as a threat is in the process of attaining unprecedented currency, especially if we consider that, as Böhme points out, Goethe's view of modernity also transformed his perspective on traditional forms of life and society. Böhme cautions that efforts to interpret Goethe as an author of a different kind of modernity (as in Kreutzer 2011), strictly speaking, should be confined to his ideas relating to a universal literature, a "world literature." Yet, at the same time, and in the absence of an explicit (and reliable) concept of **modern civilization**, Böhme set out to develop the outlines of such a civilization, as it were, in reverse, from Goethe's critical perception of traditional conditions of life. Suffice it to say that Böhme proposes an intriguing catalog of four themes that clearly were addressed by Goethe, especially in *Faust*, but also in other works: the imaginary society, monetary policy, artificial nature, and technological civilization. Briefly summarized, Böhme suggests that Goethe anticipated a social world that to an ever greater extent will be shaped and molded according to human principles, rather than to such principles as divine right (even though, one must add, humans are neither fully aware of this fact, nor capable of effective self-regulation, especially at the collective level). Further, the invention of paper money that occurs at the beginning of *Faust II*, at the behest of Faust and Mephisto, anticipates governmental monetary policy, i.e., strategic actions on the part of the state vis-à-vis society. Next, the strict opposition between nature and culture, as well as between nature and civilization, is being suspended in modern societies: nature no longer is accepted as given but tends to be subject to creation. Finally, nature ceases to be the established basis of human living conditions and relations, and is being replaced by domination of nature as the new foundation: "emancipation from nature tends to lead to life according to a plan on the basis of relations of exploitation" (p. 134).

Böhme develops each theme in greater detail, drawing on his analysis in his work on Goethe's *Faust* as a philosophical text (2013). He concludes as follows:

Following Goethe's critical analysis, what is the essence of modern civilization whose development he anticipates? Society no longer is a community, but an assemblage of carriers of [social] roles. Their status and social relations are constituted via reciprocal relations of recognition. The state no longer is a moral authority, but an abstract regulatory agency. Politics turns into policy, with monetary policy being most important. Human beings in modern society draw their self-understanding mostly from emancipation from nature, especially from their own, i.e., from their body. They try to replace what used to be given with what has been made, which leads to a technologization of all human relations. Domination of nature is being regarded as the material foundation of modern civilization. Industrialization of relations of production taylorizes human labor power or replaces it via automation (*Maschinisierung*).

Goethe's critique of the approaching civilizational development is devastating. Human relations are becoming abstract. Human beings lose their natural foundation. Labor relations are becoming repressive and the ideologies of liberty that are linked to modernization turn out to be an illusion. The project of dominating nature will lead to natural catastrophes. It is not possible to reduce this skeptical assessment simply to Goethe's conservatism. He does not glorify existing conditions at all, such as the feudal system, which he also frequently criticizes. Rather, here too, in the area of politics and society, Goethe must be regarded as a phenomenologist. He describes trends of his time with the greatest attention – and thinks them through to the end. Doing so fills him with horror. He can save himself from the latter only by the thought of emigration, in utopias of humane modes of life in America. (p. 140; my translation)

Is it possible to employ the neglect of both Goethe and *Faust* in the English-speaking world as a means to delineate a critical theory of American ideology which cannot be developed from within the perimeter of American society and culture? Given that the four themes Böhme identified – **imaginary society, monetary policy, artificial nature, and technological civilization** – may be more pronounced in American modernity than in modern societies that sprung from traditional social orders, do Goethe and *Faust* help us in circumscribing the role ideas play in sustaining a paradoxical social system in which forces of change and forces of stagnation produced a force-field that is experienced by most members as entirely normal and even natural, but which has been leading human civilization in a direction that in the long run is unsustainable – economically, socially, environmentally, psychologically – but which, at the same time, has been misdirecting the impetus to recognize fully related dilemmas and conundrums, thus thwarting efforts to prevent in the long term, and perhaps increasingly even in the medium term, the threat of ecological or societal apocalypse?



## Critical Theory between Faust and Mephistopheles

In many ways, Goethe's overall stance with regard to modernity and underlying philosophy with regard to human existence precipitated and prepared, and was part of, the mindset shared by the members of the early Frankfurt School, as his "spirit" – along with the spirits of many others – became integral components of intellectual life over the course of the nineteenth century. Indeed, in the twentieth century, familiarity with his works was part of the **cultural capital** (in Bourdieu's terminology) of any self-respecting well-educated person, though not in a manner that would have compelled Germans, in general, to receive Goethe's message, especially about how to relate to reality. If they had, National Socialism would have been a categorical impossibility. Though Goethe certainly was not "without flaws," nor a "morally pure being"; such categories only exist within the realm of religion and ideology, in different ways, but they do not – or are extremely unlikely to – apply in reality. Rather, as a "citizen of the world," Goethe would have regarded the perverse strategies for destroying life the Nazis devised (and which, under different circumstances and in other ways, were committed at the same time, e.g., in Soviet Russia, or later on, e.g., in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979) – especially human life as living, embodied spirits – as the end of civilization.

The affinity between Goethe's thought and critical theory goes deeper, however; the link between his thought and German social and critical theory amounts to the latter **in a certain way and some regards deserving to be regarded as the execution of a sort of program underlying the former, as it was concerned with the issue of nature.** For instance, Goethe's theory of colors criticized Newton's preoccupation with the optical spectrum; Goethe was interested in human color perception as a living instantiation of the disembodied view of science that Newton represented, which effectively took life and spirit both out of inanimate and – more importantly – out of animate objects and processes: it kills them in order to understand them, the way the nature painter Audubon killed his animals in order to create perfect, and perfectly **static**, visual representations of them. In many ways, Goethe's critique of Newton anticipated the critiques of instrumental reason (Horkheimer 1947) and positivism (Adorno et al. [1969] 1976) developed by members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

To be sure, the affinity between Goethe and social theory, in general, has been obvious for almost two centuries. From early on, efforts in Germany to pursue and develop the theory of modern society have been interspersed with references and allusions to Goethe's works, especially Faust, so much so that the affinity between his thought and the project of formulating a theory of modern society is undeniable. Marx frequently cited Goethe and Faust, e.g., to illustrate, bolster or elaborate on points he made.<sup>26</sup> In Max Weber's work, references to Goethe are common occurrences, as well in the writings of Georg Simmel. Accusations that have been leveled at Adorno for being a "cultural conservative," or a "cultural pessimist," e.g., with regard to his writings about music and aesthetics, may be illuminated on the basis of similarities between his and Goethe's stances regarding the **destructive potential** of modern society, rather than regarding the totality of modern society which, while in need of close scrutiny, still deserves to be protected and preserved, not least because of its categorical and unique potential for qualitative transformation.

Critical theory, especially **early** or **classical** critical theory, as represented by Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor W. Adorno, insisted that envisioning a future and qualitatively superior state of affairs demanded a departure from religion and the radical reconfiguration of the self-understanding and practice of science. In several regards, Faust anticipated the stance critical theory would develop with regard to both religion and science, and the purpose of theory, and frequently is stated explicitly by Mephistopheles, who has a penchant for engaging in negation. Though not all the early critical theorists discussed Goethe at length, as mentioned earlier, he made regular appearances throughout their works, including in several of their precursors. Andy Blunden (2018) has pointed out how Goethe's concept of the "original phenomenon" (**Urphänomen**) reappeared in Hegel's **concept** and in Marx's **capital**. One of the direct precursors of critical theory, George Lukács, who was present when the Institute for Social Research was founded in Frankfurt in 1923, explicitly wrote about Goethe (especially Lukács [1935] 1969; see also Vazsonyi 1997 and Bahr 1989). Walter Benjamin wrote a famous essay on Elective Affinities ([1924-25] 2004) and Adorno wrote a less well-known but also important essay on Iphigenia on Tauris ([1958] 1992). Leo Löwenthal, the Frankfurt School's sociologist of literature and one of the first members of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, and who spent the bulk of his career at Berkeley, wrote an essay on "Goethe and false subjectivity" ([1982] 1989), and frequently referred to him in other works. As mentioned earlier, Horkheimer and Adorno each frequently cited and referred to Goethe, as evidenced in their respective collected works.

The most obvious link between Faust and critical theory is with regard to the imminence of negation in

developing a critical theory of modern society. As Mephisto describes himself to Faust, “I am the spirit that denies forever! And rightly so! What has arisen from the void deserves to be annihilated. It would be best if nothing ever would arise. And thus, what you call havoc, deadly sin, or briefly stated: Evil, that is my proper element.” (Goethe [1808] 1988:82- 83); what makes Mephisto’s statement even more suggestive is that it follows his admission that he is “[a] portion of that power which always works for Evil and effects the Good” (ibid.). While “the spirit who always negates” (as the literal translation would have it: “**der Geist, der stets verneint**”) appears to be frightful and scary to those who are unwilling or unable to question the (social, political, economic) world **as it is presented to them**, this spirit also is a necessary precondition for facing reality in a manner that is congruous with the range of principles and patterns, and the material forces, that sustain it. **In a strictly dialectical fashion, the other of modern society is not just another type of society, but much more importantly, the prospect of no society.** In a variety of ways, Mephisto provided Goethe with the opportunity to present the outlines of modern society whose inherent problematic and destructive features entail the potential of the collapse of social relations, social integration, social order – and civilization. For decades (except in relation to the prospect of nuclear catastrophe, which is returning fast<sup>27</sup>), contemplating the categorical possibility of societal collapse as the vanishing point of modern society was mostly an abstract heuristic device and venue for raising certain issues and formulating questions; today, refusals to consider this possibility are among the most reliable indicators that we are encountering an instance of ideology in operation that requires radical deconstruction and critique.

Goethe’s work was characterized, as a matter of principle, by a commitment to confronting reality, ideally on its own terms, and opposed to serving utilitarian or instrumental goals; and he was concerned less with the performance and performative aspect of his work, and more with truth and honesty regarding the subject matter. He generally was unwilling to entertain easily revealed delusions, and illusions generally, including, as mentioned earlier, the notion that democracy or socialism per se would have the capacity to resolve and overcome the inherent tensions and contradictions of modern society, as it is directly entangled with, and partly an expression of, certain features of the human condition that are disturbing, and inversely related to the prospect of the successful pursuit of a reasonable, “rationally organized” or “sane society” (see Fromm 1955, Cooke 2004). Goethe’s **qualified** rejection of romanticism, and his promotion of and adherence to classicist principles, did and do not jive well with American culture, and especially the role and functioning of the **culture industry**, including the spectrum of responses and coping mechanisms related to the persistent prevalence of social problems and their elimination; nor do his reservations about optimism, which American society, culture, and workplaces expects those who participate in an array of social contexts – expectations whose social and psychological costs are reflected, negatively, in the rampant practice of drug abuse, both legal and illicit. Goethe especially abhorred purposive optimism and favored the position of **romantic pessimism** (see Singer 2009).

## **Towards a Critical Theory of American Ideology: Another “Casing as Hard as Steel”?**

“...the situation is too critical for an uncritical mind to be a match for it!”  
—Nameless Visitor, in: Thomas Mann, Doctor Faustus<sup>28</sup>

“American ideology” is a phenomenon that by turns often is alluded to, implied, condemned, praised, criticized, blamed for an array of pathologies and perplexing peculiarities of American society, politics, and culture, and linked to the success of the young nation. It also has been described as having played a key role in ensuring that America became and continues to be “the greatest nation on the face of the earth.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, what exactly is American ideology? Is it possible to delineate it beyond vague suggestions, to identify its defining features, to specify its concrete and distinctive form and content (e.g., when compared to other ideologies, especially national ideologies)? Sociologists, social theorists, and especially critical theorists must guard against overlooking—and as a consequence, replicating and reinforcing—aspects of any ideology that is inversely related to, and which threatens to undercut efforts to do justice to, their central charge: the development of a theory of modern society that is conducive to enabling individuals to work together in a manner which would narrow the gap between the qualities modern societies purport to embody, and the corresponding realities, which are in conflict with the former.

The stability of each modern society depends on its ability to regenerate on a continuous basis a matrix of ideological operations which individuals persistently and “automatically” rely on and engage as they try to meet social

expectations and fulfill an array of responsibilities more or less successfully, but which they do not recognize as such, since these operations constitute both the basis and the perimeter of everyday life. Some of the ideological operations are more or less common to and characteristic of the genus, modern society, especially as opposed to pre-modern society (to the extent to which the distinction between “modern” and “pre-modern” is clear-cut, empirically speaking, which it is not, though relevant and unavoidable). Other operations are specific to individual modern societies, and inherent to what often is alluded to, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of “national identity.” For the most part, and as a matter of course, with regard to how most people live their lives, they are not aware of the different qualities and levels of ideological operations, e.g., whether they apply to all modern societies, or – in the extreme – are specific to one modern society only, respectively. In addition, the ideological operations do not occur in monolithic form, but rather, are spread out across different areas of social life and segments of the population, within a larger spectrum of ideological frames and fields, and may even appear to contradict each other or to be mutually exclusive. Still, within specific sections of a spectrum, they fulfill key functions relating to the protection and preservation of a particular “society” as a specific set of social, political, and economic structures and systems of power. Most social scientists, including social theorists, even though it is their charge to identify the characteristics of modern societies, also often fall prey to related pitfalls and lack of critical reflexivity, especially when their research area does not involve related curiosity and investigative stamina, as well as rigorous comparative-historical attentiveness. As a result, many researchers whose interests pertain to one society only **de facto** are in danger of being oblivious to the concrete feedback loops between modern and national operations, or underestimate their empirical importance, and often conflate both. In effect, without sufficient familiarity with at least one additional societal reference frame – i.e., another modern society – many nationally specific ideological operations often are assumed to be typical of all modern societies, and thus, impossible to distinguish from modern operations, which – by implication – effectively conceals them from detection, unless an imminent crisis or threat draws light to them.

Ideological operations that are prevalent in all modern societies tend to be invisible to most individuals socialized in this type of society – they simply are taken to be “normal” and “natural.” In many instances, to members of modern societies, not relating to the world on the basis of ideological operations provided by their societies would be truly “unthinkable” (see Lemert 2007). Yet, frequently the characteristics of modern ideological operations are evident to outsiders who were not socialized in (and into) one particular modern society, while the operations of their own society, in turn, tend to be invisible, if not inconceivable to them (see Hauck 2003). Individuals who were socialized in (to) more than one society, e.g., who spent parts of their childhood in two different modern societies, or in one modern society and another that is at an earlier stage of development – e.g., organizationally or technologically – are prone to noticing characteristics of their own and other societies, but still may be oblivious to the characteristics of modern society in general.<sup>30</sup>

Social scientists and social theorists would be well-advised to start out from the assumption that primary and secondary educational institutions, churches, and political parties have a vested interest in thwarting critical reflexivity with regard to contested areas of social life, such as **the role** inequalities, injustices, forms of discrimination and violence play in protecting an existing social order **in its specificity**, and the corresponding reinforcement of patterns in society, culture, and individual identity. At the same time, it is important to ascertain whether there are other areas of social and public life that compensate for established efforts to undercut critical reflexivity, by encouraging, supporting, and even celebrating the latter without readily dismissing them as the grumbling of supposedly perpetually dissatisfied segments of the population or professional complainers. Along such lines, the **latent** national crises that became visible in 2016 during the lead-up to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the Presidential election in the United States are likely to be symptomatic of societies not known for tying socialization and education to the development of skills which would be conducive to critical reflexivity as it must be applied to modern institutions and politics. The **manifest** crises that resulted from those events in both countries, and many others that followed, go to the very heart of the future of social integration and national cohesiveness, and suggest a longstanding pattern of discouraging the recognition and cultivation of critical reflexivity from the individual (i.e., with regard to proliferating experiences of cognitive dissonance) to the societal level (in terms of increasingly intensifying contradictions). In light of these developments, it is most intriguing that Germany and the United States, and to an increasing extent the United Kingdom, are the societies where critical social theory in the Frankfurt School tradition is more prominent than in many other modern societies, and worthy of further investigation, as this fact alone is indicative of the peculiar condition of critical reflexivity in these three contexts, which may provide venues for accessing variations in unusual constellations of historical, social, intellectual, and social-psychological resources and needs. Still, my focus here will be solely on the United States.<sup>31</sup>

The most productive opening for examining American ideology and its workings is likely to be a discourse that sociologists and social theorists scarcely have paid attention to: the ongoing debate about **American exceptionalism** that began after the Civil War, during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The issue of “American exceptionalism” has the potential of being as multi-faceted as any, to sociologists. It is located at the intersection of political ideology, comparative-historical analysis, political and cultural sociology, and social theory. Related debates range from the descriptive to the normative—from efforts to assess the relevance of the United States being unique (i.e., an exception among industrialized societies), to assertions that American politics, culture and society are truly “exceptional” (i.e., superior to and better than in any other society, including other industrialized societies). A further complication for sociological analysis relates to the fact that views on “America” (i.e., the United States) being exceptional reach from the most micro level of social life (individual identity and the shape of the self) to the most macro levels (especially in business and politics), thus permeating to the very core the configuration and content of everyday life (see also Kalberg 2013).

How, then, can sociologists engage in empirically oriented analyses of social life in the United States in ways that are not, more or less directly, influenced or shaped either by (unrecognized) assumptions about and prevailing patterns of American exceptionalism in everyday life? How should sociologists (and social scientists, more generally) navigate tensions between the desire to engage in sociological analysis and social research according to its own standards and principles, in ways that nevertheless are in accordance with everyday life assumptions about the uniqueness and/or exceptionality of U.S. American social, political, cultural and economic life, while avoiding accusations of elitism and intellectual arrogance? To date, there have been five recurring themes in the literature on American exceptionalism that are relevant to sociologists, social theorists, and critical theorists: the centrality and character of democracy (as presented by Alexis de Tocqueville [1835/40] 2016); the American “creed” (with a special focus on the role of “individualism”, as outlined by Seymour Martin Lipset 1996); the historical absence both of a national discourse about socialism and of political representation of the working class (as analyzed more than a century ago by Werner Sombart [1906] 2001); American exceptionalism as a “myth” (see Hodgson 2009); and the difficulties (impossibility?) to reconcile facts and norms in American society so that the latter will be able to move beyond an engrained and more or less insidious system of social inequalities and social relations (see Wuthnow 2006). With regard to each of these themes, the primary concern must be directed at implications for sociological analysis and categories, with a specific focus on the link between politics and economics; the second concern would pertain to efforts to theorize modern societies in general, and U.S. American society in particular, with regard to its distinctiveness.

Presently, modern societies are moving through the worst crisis since the end of World War II: we are observing the more or less rapid decline – if not disappearance – of democracy, of socialism, and of social democracy. This is an era during which the downside, if not the dark side, of how democracy politically as well economically did in fact take shape, is becoming impossible to ignore, embedded as it was from the beginning in a specific kind of **political economy**, and how it came to be normalized. Related dilemmas are captured very well in Astra Taylor’s recent book, **Democracy may not exist, but we’ll miss it when it’s gone** (2019). That socialism – i.e., “actually existing socialism,” as it took hold in various countries – to a greater extent emerged as a perverse system of power and of controlling and destroying humans and nature, rather than an enabling societal reference frame grounded in a different system of political economy that would have been truly empowering to all living beings, became evident decades ago. In Europe, the slide toward political irrelevance of social democracy, along with Social Democratic parties, has been precipitous indeed.

At the current historical juncture, progress appears to be increasingly precarious – especially if we differentiate between social, political, and cultural progress, on the one hand, and economic, organizational, and technological progress, on the other – so much so that it is beginning to seem doubtful, whether, **overall**, in sum total as opposed to in certain regards only, modern societies are progressing at all.<sup>32</sup> If we further consider the manifold consequences that predictably will result from the proliferation of imminent crises, such as climate change, continuing population growth, the destruction of animal and plant life, automation, etc., and the increased need to manage truly unprecedented crises for which state and corporate actors are utterly unprepared – probably with multiple expected and newly emerging crises at the same time – modern societies will be entangled in highly disruptive processes that translate into a diminished (rather than enhanced) ability to face future challenges, at the expense of achievements like democracy, and while reaching for the “toolbox” of fascism and totalitarian governance. After all, the lack of civilizational progress in recent decades is undeniable, along the lines of an array of indicators (e.g., accelerating instrumentalization and industrialization of education for purposes of skilling, to satisfy the corporate machinery as it is increasingly ravenous for a mindless artificial workforce – human or not – i.e., a workforce incapable of

transgressing the cultural, social, ethical and intellectual confines of the neoliberal public-policy regime; progressive democratic governance; and the erosion of solidarity across race, class, gender differences, including the ability to recognize and anticipate its manifold benefits and overall value).

In 1959, Adorno ([1959] 2005) observed that the societal preconditions of fascism continue to exist; sixty years later, it appears that these preconditions still are in place, and not just in West Germany, which was his focus at the time, but also in unified Germany and Europe, but in modern and modernizing societies around the planet, including the United States.<sup>33</sup> And why would they not be? The societal processes of transformation that set the stage for the rise of fascism during the 1920s and 1930s still are at work, in many ways at higher levels of intensity, and more discernibly so, unless we disregard related evidence and information, based on the conviction that the end of World War II constituted a radical departure from those processes, such as the continuing accumulation and concentration of capital and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, the rationalization and bureaucratization of all aspects of life, urbanization, alienation, anomie, the combined meaningless of paid labor and its increasing importance with regard to social status, citizenship rights, and the ability to be a consumer, and so forth. Yet, to the extent that a departure from these trends – or rather, a detour – occurred after 1945, it was owed more to the temporarily emerging opportunities for different kinds of public policies and for national and international institution-building that resulted from the exceptional circumstances created by how World War II ended, and the imperatives of competition between two opposed military and economic blocs centered on the Soviet Union and the United States.

Indeed, today, social scientists and social theorists must be more willing and make more of an effort to acknowledge evidence revealing that the gap between the much-acclaimed **appearance** of progress in modern societies and the **actuality** of corresponding societal conditions is much greater than **mainstream views** (which took hold **during** the post-World War II era, and reflected corresponding conditions) would have allowed for; and in terms of national and planetary cost-benefit analyses, the costs certainly appear to have started outweighing the benefits some time ago. After all, mainstream views are defined by how they are tied to and often obscure existing systems of power and structures of inequality, along with the regimes of control and domination through which they reconstitute themselves.<sup>34</sup> For instance, it is typical of mainstream approaches that they decry the injustices – social, legal and otherwise – of persistent inequalities and forms of power in modern societies, without being capable of accepting their persistence as integral components of the stability of modern societies. Instead – and mystifyingly so – representatives of mainstream views and approaches often assert that, “evidently,” processes are at work in modern societies which point beyond not only the persistence of injustices but those injustices themselves. In light of evidence to the contrary, such paradoxical stances highlight the need to confront the affinities between “national” ideologies, i.e., **nationally distinctive** ideologies, and persistent systems of power and structures of inequality, and the entire array of discriminatory practices, myriad injustices, normatively spurious validity claims on the part of decision-makers at the top of institutions and organizations which form highly stable and seeming impenetrable fields of tension that resemble permanent feedback-loops.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is essential to be cognizant of how each modern society is likely to rely on a particular ideology to maintain itself in its distinctive specificity. What are the ideology’s mechanisms, how does it reproduce itself? What role do socialization and education processes play in shaping individual selves and processes of identity formation, typically in ways that either are considered “normal” and “natural” by members of society, or which appear to be unnoticeable, and typically tend not to be noticed, unless the processes are fraught with tension, violence, abuse, or other disrupting circumstances – while noticing them has little or no bearing on overdue changes, especially improvements?<sup>36</sup> Is it possible, then, to delineate the specific operations of a national ideology in different areas and arenas of power, in politics and the economy – in **political economy** – in the world of corporations and public institutions, in the mental operations and social mechanisms through which an ideology is being maintained, or maintains itself?<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

“If once you scorn all science and all reason, the highest strength that dwells in man, and through trickery and magic arts abet the spirit of dishonesty, then I’ve got you unconditionally.”  
— Mephistopheles, in: J. W. von Goethe, *Faust, Part I*<sup>38</sup>

For modern society to be a social system that is in sync with itself, i.e., for there to be correspondence between

the claims its “it” makes about “itself” (especially with regard to its superiority over other types of social organization, as this superiority is integral to its legitimacy) and the social, political, economic and cultural conditions of human existence that prevail within its perimeter, it must refrain from imposing on its members persistent and manifest distortions of reality. Yet, as the distinctive social system that started to become discernible during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as a modern **bourgeois** society, persistent and manifest distortions of reality were necessary for its success as a new social order, and for the success of the social class that benefitted most from the novel socio-economic structure. In order for modern society to be able to maintain order, it must legitimate itself, which it typically achieves based on claims of superiority over all earlier and other types of society. Providing to its members a societal “self-description” (as Luhmann 1984 introduced the concept, though for present purposes turned in a manner that is consonant with ideology critique) that is widely and implicitly accepted as sufficiently justified, and which is being replicated through institutions and organizations, under “normal” circumstances suffices as what Durkheim referred to the necessary function the “collective conscience.”

Yet, it is the collective conscience that appears to be fraying, if not falling apart in modern societies, especially in the U.S. and the U.K., two of the main drivers of modernization processes that have shaped today’s world. In terms of its claims to legitimacy, the vitality and functioning of modern society depend directly on a majority of its members having the mental, intellectual and psychological skills to face unpleasant facts, and the emotional makeup, moral determination and political willingness to put those skills to work. Yet, as semi self-reflective biological creatures, and contrary to the generous view put forth by liberals, many humans – when given the opportunity – appear to be inclined and eager to resist more or less ardently (if history is any indication, at times even violently) the need to face unpleasant or inconvenient facts about their societal universe and, by implication, themselves and their own selves. Opportunities to buy into, and subsequently to staunchly hold onto notions whose empirical falsity in many instances is easily and quickly demonstrated, seem to have increasing appeal, presumably in part in response to the fact that it is a defining characteristic of modern societies that they are not able to provide authentic sources of meaning, unless they are linked to the productive activity of individuals, and their willingness to understand their circumstances and to make appropriate choices. Evidently, admitting the fact of ultimate meaninglessness puts a burden on every human being, and it is impossible to lift this burden by establishing and maintaining a system of distraction that prevents individuals from grasping that and how this burden is a fact of life in modern society, from which there is no escape, but which – with proper cognitive, intellectual, and normative adjustments and training – is conducive to an entirely novel kind of meaning which only modern society provides, and which must be rendered socially, and translated into a qualitatively superior form of solidarity and ethics (see Zuckerman 2019). Empirically speaking, the ideologies that have taken hold in modern societies, and which simulated meaning in their context and facilitated their (preliminary) march to victory, do not translate into non-regressive forms of solidarity, which instead must be superseded. Yet, non-regressive forms of solidarity are precisely what modern ideologies, including in its own register, American ideology, are inversely related and resistant to.<sup>39</sup>

Encouraging humans to abandon resistance to facing facts, will, however, only be the first step. Moreover, it is a lesson to be accepted, learned, and disseminated, that intriguing empirically observable phenomena tend not to be **explainable** with reference to other empirically observable phenomena, even if we would prefer for this to be the case. Rather, there is a high degree of probability that individuals will jump at opportunities to avoid facing unpleasant facts, a factor that must be included in assessments of the possibility of qualitative social change, and of predictable difficulties. The reason may be quite simple: willingness to face facts on their own terms requires determined resolve to confront unpleasant experiences of cognitive dissonance in constructive fashion, rather than in terms and in the context of a preferred interpretive reference frame, especially if the latter is tied up with and supported by material power relations and structures of inequality in society, and regardless of whether those who adhere to a preferred interpretive reference frame support the actually existing material power relations and structures of inequality or not. After all, one of the defining features of life in modern society is that experiences of cognitive dissonance are both inevitable and ubiquitous. Yet, confronting experiences of cognitive dissonance constructively – along with their material social, political, cultural and economic bases – rather than trying to conceive of them in narrow psychological terms, involves curiosity about the tension-filled and contradictory operations upon which modern societies rest, and on whose operations – empirically speaking – the stability of societies of this type has depended and continues to rely.

Thus, Goethe’s **Faust** ought to be understood as a modern manifesto of sorts, which is especially relevant with regard to the American experience. The reason why **Faust** has been ignored to the degree that it has is not a consequence of its irrelevance in and to education, sociology and critical theory in the United States; rather, it could

not be more relevant. Avoiding Faust goes hand in hand with avoiding acknowledgment of aspects of American reality awareness of which is an indispensable prerequisite for agency – individually and collectively. Viewed from this angle, the prominence of Shakespeare's plays may have been fulfilling a key role in normalizing a mindset that has been integral to key aspects of American ideology, as his plays appear to jive well with views of American history as a sequence of glorious achievements, while disregarding, downplaying or sidelining disturbing events and patterns. This mindset, however, from the beginning, has not been conducive to the kind of qualified perspectives and careful modes of assessing historical progress that are required for truly meaningful productive activity and a successful life in the early twenty-first century.

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## Movies

- Anonymous (2011; Columbia Pictures); dir. Roland Emmerich (U.K.)
- Fantasia (1940; Disney); dir. Samuel Armstrong. (U.S.)
- Faust (1994; Athanor); dir. Jan Swankmajer. (Czech Republic)
- Faust (2007; Belvedere), dir. Peter Stein. (Germany)
- Faust (2008; Classics in Miniature); dir. Hoku Uchiyama (U.S.)
- Faust (2011; Proline Film); dir. Aleksandr Sokurov (Russia)
- Macbeth (1971; Columbia Pictures); dir. Roman Polanski. (U.S., U.K.)
- Ran (1985; Greenwich Film Productions); dir. Akira Kurosawa. (Japan)

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## Endnotes

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was born in Frankfurt. He worked on Faust over the course of 60 years, and finished the second part shortly before his death. Faust frequently refers to the first version only, but the work comprised both Part I (or Faust I, published in 1808) and Part II (or Faust II, published 1832). While Faust I is straightforward drama, with a linear and coherent story arch, and a mode of getting messages to the audience rather clearly, Faust II is much more intricate, demanding, many-dimensional, and open to myriad interpretations. There also was an earlier first version (Urf Faust, 1772-75, published posthumously in 1887) and Faust. A Fragment (finished in 1788, published 1790). Long considered impossible to perform, and never seen on stage as whole by Goethe, there have been numerous performances since the end of Goethe's life, in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria; the first unabridged performance of both parts by professional actors occurred in 2000, during the EXPO in Hannover, with subsequent performances in Berlin and Vienna. The performance lasts 21 hours (with breaks; 15 hours without interruptions), and has been available on DVD since 2007.

2. While Goethe and Faust have been prominent in Austria and in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, too, Goethe's influence on their respective versions of

modernity and modern society was far less pronounced, and different, in any case. For instance, in religious terms, Germany remained split between Catholics and Protestants, with many regions where one confession was more prominent than the other; by contrast, in Austria, the counter-Reformation was victorious, securing the persistence of an essentially Catholic culture, whereas in Switzerland, the Reformation took hold; in both cases, more homogeneous cultural environments resulted than in Germany, not just in terms of religion.

3. I should clarify that my purpose here is not to add another lament decrying American culture and ideology for not **recognizing**, or "misrecognizing," yet another of aspect of the world within or beyond the United States and related practices and populations, but to take a stab at delineating, within the space allotted, the costs American society and, by implication, societies influenced by American culture have been paying for being oblivious to a key dimension of modern social life, and what it would take to engender related reflexivity across society pull it into consistent consideration – not in order to suggest that the latter is likely, but to asserts the importance of recognizing – and persistently being cognizant of – the importance of encouraging and cultivated such reflexivity, as a matter of principle.

4. Readers familiar with Adorno know, of course, that I am referring to his “reflections from damaged life” – the subtitle of *Minima Moralia* (Adorno [1951] 1974). One of the key messages especially of the early Frankfurt School was that in the age of post-liberalism (see Dahms 1999), an unalienated existence is about as “objectively possible” as a genuinely happy life, i.e., **highly unlikely**, given that “alienation” no longer refers to a personal experience (if it ever did), but a **structural condition** that configures all individuals’ lives and existence, not just those of exploited workers (see Dahms 2005). Evidently, it is possible for certain individuals to regard themselves as “unalienated” and “undamaged,” but it is highly probable that those who regard themselves along such lines are truly successful (and truthful) only if they are submerged within the regime and the logic of capital (see Dahms 2017b), and today, specifically within the ideology of neoliberalism (Brown 2019) as the current version of the ideology of capitalist economics (see Bonefeld 2017).

5. *Poetry and Truth* ([1811-1833] 1994) refers to Goethe’s four-part autobiography, which covered the first 26 years of his life.

6. Evidently, this “neglect” is relative rather than absolute. E.g., David Mamet (2004) has written a play that was inspired by Goethe’s *Faust*, and which constitutes a variation of the latter (see Lublin 2013). Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* ([1592] 2005) is evidence that Faustian themes have exerted a measure of appeal in the English language, too. For an example of a recent assessment in a prominent English-language news outlet, of the current relevance of Goethe’s *Faust*, see Ramm (2017).

7. This fact is especially striking in the U.S., if we keep in mind that in terms of rates of immigration between 1820 and 2000, Germans were the largest group with approximately 7 million, ahead of 6 million from Mexico, and 5 million each from Great Britain, Ireland, Italy and Canada (SiteSeen Limited 2017). At least in part, the neglect or marginalization of Goethe may be a residue of the rejection and concealment of all things German during the two World Wars, especially the Second World War, but this residue would not explain the **persistence** of the pattern. It is more likely that the themes Goethe was interested in did not jive well with aspects of American culture, as they suggest a mode of social critique that, for better or worse, has been anathema in the United States, especially with regard to the society-nature nexus, even though frontal verbal attacks on government and those who represent or embody it have had a long tradition, hinting at a peculiarity of the form and substance – and meaning – of American “society” as it is, in essence, an “exceptional” combination of polity and economy that is reflected in a peculiar form of sociality. We will return to both of these issues – the society-nature nexus and society qua political economy, below.

8. Summaries of *Faust I* (as well as of *Faust II*) are readily and easily available, relieving me of the need to add another. Suffice it to say that the play starts with the aging scholar Faust being tired of and disappointed by

the haphazard ways in which research and learnedness – futile as they are, in the end – remain removed from what living a full life would be like, to the point where he considers ending the one he lived, but in the pivotal moment is drawn away from doing so by fond memories of his childhood. The following (Easter) day, he finds himself in circumstances that enable him to make a pact with Mephistopheles, an amusing but still dangerous devil (who God refers to as a hardly burdensome joker in the “Prologue in Heaven,” which precedes the play), with Mephisto promising to enable Faust to live life to the fullest. As is well known, across the different versions of the Faust tale, the pact amounts to Faust’s willingness to sell his soul to the devil – in this version, if (and **only** if) Mephisto succeeds at fulfilling his promise that he will enable Faust to probe the heights and depth of life, and getting to the point of finding himself “to ever ... tell the moment: Oh stay! You are so beautiful!” (p, 104/105). Mephisto takes Faust on various adventures and to different locations; in the process, Faust’s body is rejuvenated with the help of witchcraft, he falls in love (or is it just lust?) with a young woman (Gretchen), and – with Mephisto’s less-than-eager and inevitably twisted help – is co-responsible for her death, and the deaths of his and Gretchen’s child, and her brother – but still gets away. *Faust II* is much more involved. Suffice it to say, in this regard, that Faust learns to appreciate the appeal, advantages, and pleasures, initially, of access to worldly power (at the Emperor’s court), before he meets the ideal woman (Helena, of Greek mythology) with whom he has a rather wild son who, like Icarus, flies too high and dies. After losing Helena also, he dedicates himself entirely to the pursuit of wealth and worldly power, is successful in this pursuit, but in the end, unintentionally – due to a (purported) misunderstanding on the part of Mephisto – commits a final sinful act, which renders him regretful and guilt-ridden, before he dies. His soul still is allowed to rise to heaven, and Mephisto remains behind, empty-handed.

9. In recent years, evidently, the mask has come off, for better or worse; see Blacker (2013).

10. There is an extensive literature on how different languages and terminologies open up or close off dimensions and readings of reality, e.g., Giang (2018).

11. The analysis presented here is informed by and draws on my book manuscript (Dahms forthcoming).

12. If space and time would have permitted, I would have added a secondary perspective intended to illustrate, empirically, frictions and tensions in the operations of American ideology, by drawing critical attention to the figure and role after World War II of Wernher von Braun, who was instrumental as a visionary, administrator and propagator of space exploration during the 1960s, after having played an important role in the Nazi’s V2-rocket program (see Piszkiwicz 1995, 1998; Neufeld 2007; Biddle 2009; Jacobsen 2014; Teitel 2016. Günter Anders, author of *The Obsolescence of Man* (*Die Antiquiertheit des*



*Menschen*; 2 vol.; [1956] 1992 and [1980] 1992) and the third recipient of the City of Frankfurt's Adorno Award, suggested such a treatment ([1970] 1994); regarding Anders' work and contributions, see Bischof, Dawsey, and Fetz (2014). The prominent position and celebrated treatment of von Braun in the United States especially in connection to the space program, when he gained access to the highest echelons of power in Washington, and his subsequent erasure of sorts from the official history (and public representations) of the Apollo program provides an intriguing glimpse of these ideological operations, which typically eliminates the possibility of critical reflexivity fulfilling an important educational and political function. In addition, the American space program (not to mention its Soviet/Russian equivalent) would provide an excellent reference frame for how the pursuit of progress in modern societies at its most ambitious (with regard to economic, organizational and technological challenges) has been playing out to date; sociologists have barely begun to examine this exceedingly fertile soil (e.g., Vaughan 1996, Fischer and Spreen 2014), especially when we consider how issues of race, class, and gender factored into its history (Weitekamp 2004; Stone, 2009), particularly with regard to success and failures (McConnell 1987; Cabbage and Harwood 2004; McDonald and Hansen 2009), as an endeavor to escape from earthly confines, as most recently in Mars-related projects, which von Braun advocated almost seventy years ago (Braun 1952), and which ultimately had inspired von Braun's vision of space exploration (Braun 1963, 1976). In addition, I would have considered Thomas Mann's mid-twentieth century novel, *Doctor Faustus*, to support further my stance with regard to the affinity between critical reflexivity as it originated in German society, culture, and intellectual life, and the imminent need for and consistent use of **negation** in the process of understanding and appreciating modern society as a contingent historical formation.

13. Regarding the concept of contradiction, see Conze [1932] 2016.

14. See, e.g., Jouet (2017) and Marietta and Barker (2019).

15. Since I cannot claim to be an expert on either Shakespeare or Goethe, nor of the breadth and depth of German or English literature generally, my stance in the following is similar to Vittorio Hösle's comparison of Dante's *Commedia* and Goethe's *Faust*, which he boldly refers to as "Europe's two most important philosophical literary works": "I undertake ...this comparison because I regard it as a problem of the academic system of our time that we specialize ever more narrowly, due to the legitimate fear of dilettantism, thus avoiding the task of discussing those questions that exceed the narrow horizon of our specialized approach. But these questions are legitimate, even indispensable for our existence as humans" (Hösle 2014:11; translation mine). To be sure, my social-theoretical intentions and conclusions are entirely different from his explicitly philosophical orientation.

16. If, for purposes of comparison, we only refer to Goethe's *plays*, combining them with Friedrich Schiller's plays – since both writers for a time formed a literary tandem of sorts, living in the same city (Weimar) – their combined plays might be compared to those of Shakespeare, with regard to their importance to the language of German and to Germany. Both Goethe and Schiller were invigorated by their encounter and friendship, after floundering for a while – Schiller, using his distinction between naïve and sentimental poetry (Schiller [1795] 1983) (in terms of the evolution nature-culture-ideal), referred to Goethe and Shakespeare as "naïve" poets (like those of Greek antiquity who wrote organically, as it were, without explicit self-awareness, with the exception of Euripides), while he himself was a sentimental poet wrote with utter self-awareness as an author– contrary to Nietzsche and Adorno, Hegel regarded Goethe and Schiller being on the same level (see Alt 2009: 253).

17. The standard, so-called "Hamburg edition" of Goethe's collected works comprises 14 volumes and over 11,000 pages (Goethe 1999).

18. "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" served as the basis of the famous related segment of the Disney movie, *Fantasia*; the music was from French composer Paul Dukas, based also on Goethe's poem. The theme resonates strongly with aspects of *Faust*, whose title character first captures (or seems to do so) and then makes a pact with Mephistopheles, who is to serve Faust for the rest of his life, without the latter having an inkling of what this will entail, especially with regard to an array of unintended (and no less destructive) consequences, and his inability to control and contain Mephisto's actions. The theme evidently resonates with the modern experience as far as agency is concerned, in general: never being able to anticipate what the real consequences of one's actions will turn out to be, e.g., when developing, applying, implementing or making widely available a new technology.

19. In this context, it is interesting to note that the German poet, critic and Shakespeare translator August Schlegel (1767-1845; and brother of Friedrich Schlegel) was so proficient that his translations could be used directly useful for voice synchronization (dubbing) of film versions of Shakespeare plays, such as Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), without the need for further adjustments.

20. On Goethe and enlightenment and modernity, see Kerry (2001) and Anderegg (2006), respectively. On Shakespeare and modernity, see Taylor (1934)

21. In short, prose for the plebeians and verse for the aristocrats and wealthy and powerful.

22. Fromm, referring to the "Prologue in Heaven" and the end of *Faust II* to back up his interpretation, cites Ibsen as another author who took this stance. See Fromm ([1947] 1990: 92).

23. Despite differences in translation, the German is the same in Freud and Safranski, even though **Unbehagen** in Freud often is translated as “discontents”, and in Safranski’s Goethe book, as “unease.” See also Ehrenberg ([2010] 2012).

24. As Horkheimer (1947: 14) put it: “Spinoza, for example, thought that insight into the essence of reality, into the harmonious structure of the eternal universe, necessarily awakens love for this universe. For him, ethical conduct is entirely determined by such insight into nature, just as our devotion to a person may be determined by insight into his greatness or genius. Fears and petty passions, alien to the great love of the universe, which is logos itself, will vanish, according to Spinoza, once our understanding of reality is deep enough.” Taking Spinoza’s and Goethe’s stance vis-à-vis nature as the standard, the **ungodliness** of explicit public policies directed at destroying nature – as opposed to actions whose indirect (and potentially unintended) consequence is the same – is manifestly obvious, as currently is the case with the prospect of opening up the Alaska wilderness to logging, mining, etc., or the burning of the Amazon, especially in Brazil. Related ironies (to put it mildly) are heightened further when purported Christians, for instance, more or less actively (if not rabidly) support and promote politicians and parties whose disregard for nature in well-known, and a matter of public record.

25. Dollenmeyer’s translation of Safranski’s book has its flaws. E.g., especially in the **Faust** chapter (33, pp. 521-542), Safranski repeatedly employs **Moderne** to make key points, a concept that typically refers to an era and a quality, which is usually translated as **modernity**, while “modernism” – Dollenmeyer’s preferred (and incorrect, in this context) translation – refers to an art form.

26. See the passage in “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” where Marx (Marx [1844] 1978:102-4) relies on both Shakespeare’s **Timon of Athens** ([1623] 2006) and Goethe’s **Faust** to make a key point about money: “By possessing the property of buying everything, by possessing the **property** of appropriating all objects, **money** is ... the **object** of eminent possession. The universality of its **property** is the omnipotence of its being. It therefore functions as the almighty being. Money is the **pimp** between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates **my** life for me, also **mediates** the existence of other people **for me**. For me it is the **other person**” (p. 102).

27. There are proliferating signs of an intensifying urgency to revisit – and to finally translate! – Günther Anders related work; see Anders [1956] 1992, [1980] 1992, [1960/62] 2014; see especially Dawsey (2014) and Röhrlich (2014).

28. \*Mann ([1947] 1999), p. 256; in the original: “... **die Situation ist zu kritisch, als daß die Kritiklosigkeit ihr gewachsen wäre!**“ (Mann 1947, p. 371). The literal (as opposed to literary) translation of the statement

runs as follows: “...the situation is too critical for critiquelessness to be a match for it!“ The difference between the German original and the 1999 translation is subtle, but still significant insofar as in German, the exclamation made by the nameless visitor, presumably Mephistopheles, in the pivotal chapter XXV of the book, does not only apply in terms of an “uncritical mind” (which could imply an individualist perspective), but in the sense that without a critical mindset being present, prominent, encouraged, cultivated, and respected **in society or in civilization** – in social, political, and cultural public life -- it is not possible to confront constructively social, societal, or civilizational challenges and crises. In the first, 1948 translation, statement ran “...the situation is too critical to be dealt with without critique.” – and ended with a period, not an exclamation point; Mann ([1947] 1948), p. 240. Interestingly, the observation might have come from Adorno – if not the formulation, considering that in his “novel of the novel”, Mann (1949, pp. 42-3) almost literally incorporated parts of the short biography Adorno had supplied in a letter dated July 5, 1948 (see Adorno/Mann 2003, pp. 33-35), to acknowledge his reliance on Adorno’s expertise while working on **Doctor Faustus**; Mann admitted to making copious notes during his conversations with Adorno, especially with regard to the theory of music that informed **Doctor Faustus**, and to reading Adorno’s work, especially **Philosophy of New Music** (1948] 2006), which its author called (p. 5) a “detailed excursus to **Dialectic of Enlightenment**” (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002). Note also that the devil, who changes his appearance twice during the conversation with the composer at the heart of the novel, makes the above exclamation in an appearance that evidently was modeled on Adorno: “an intellectualist, who writes of art, of music, for vulgar newspapers, a theorist and critic, who is himself a composer, in so far as thinking allows” (Mann [1947] 1999, p. 253). Mann’s **Doctor Faustus** is one of the major works of (German) literature in the twentieth century.

29. Jouet (2017) frequently cites this phrase in his analysis demonstrating how American society really consists of two societies that are at loggerheads with each other, with one large segment of the population preferring to adopt a European-style social welfare state model, and another rabidly being opposed to any such prospect. See also Levine (2004) and Marietta (2011).

30. I am currently in the process of compiling a set of essays by current former graduate students who have examined the bearing their social upbringing in specific social environments, in different countries and/or different parts of the U.S. has had on their interests as social scientists, in order to engender the kind of reflexivity without which social research is in danger of replicating the social, political, economic, organizational, and cultural patterns it is meant to illuminate; see Dahms (in preparation).

31. For my treatment of Brexit, see Dahms (2017a),

as well as the collection in which this essay is included (Outhwaite 2017), with other essays by Craig Calhoun, Gurinder Bhambra, Colin Crouch and others. For the U.S., see Jouet (2017).

32. See the forthcoming volume of Current Perspectives in Social Theory, entitled The Challenge of Progress: Theory between Critique and Ideology (Dahms 2019), especially the main section on Amy Allen's The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory (2016) with review essays by George Steinmetz, Kevin Olson, Karen Ng, and Reha Kadakal, as well as a "reply to critics" from Allen; but also essays by Robert Antonio, Timothy Luke, Lawrence Hazelrigg, and others.

33. See also Adorno ([1967] 2019); other countries include Brazil, the Philippines, and Turkey.

34. Mainstream in this sense is neither a positive nor a positively identifiable quality, but an absence of comparative and historical reflexivity regarding the gravity concrete socio-historical circumstances exert on the process of illuminating those circumstances – i.e., on social research and social theory. See Dahms (2008) on how this is a central theme of the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School.

35. With regard to the United States, Daniel Immerwahr's (2019) recent book sheds light on such a key discrepancy, in his case between the official history "of the United States as a republic" (p. 19) and as an "[e]mpire [that] lives on" (p. 400).

36. Regarding the link between critical theory and the critique of what appears to be "natural" and "normal," but is everything but, see Dahmer (1994); regarding the production of the American self, see Block (2002, 2012), and Langman and Lundskow (2016).

37. See, e.g., Hedstrom and Swedberg (1998).

38. Goethe ([1808] 1988), pp. 114-115; in the original: "Verachte nur Vernunft und Wissenschaft, des Menschen allerhöchste Kraft, laß nur in Blend- und Zauberwerken dich von dem Lügengeist bestärken, so hab' ich dich schon unbedingt—" (ibid.). This edition includes both the German original and translation into English.

39. Hauke Brunkhorst's ([2002] 2005) probing inquiry regarding prospects for enhancing and strengthening solidarity in the twenty-first century, which was not exactly an exercise in eager optimism, in retrospect appears to have been more optimistic than justified. For a more recent assessment of the state of solidarity in America, see McCarthy (2017).

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