
„How human does a human being stay?“

Video Interview zur Eröffnung des „Transform Your Business“ Festivals,
Berlin, 13.09.2018. Die Fragen stellte Pauline Händel

What were the moments of change/transformation in your past?

I'm not quite sure if there is a difference between the terms „change“ and „transformation“ and to which area of life the question refers. Maybe “change” refers in general to the alteration of living conditions, which initially happens without the involvement of the individual and can be only be influenced and modified by conscious action, whereas transformation means a deliberate, controlled and comprehensive process of change. But you can certainly define both in a completely different way, and many people use both expressions as synonyms anyway.

In personal life, of course, the most radical change takes place at the beginning and the end - birth and death - but in between, we all have our very personal destiny. I for instance was born during the war and my father died as a soldier. And in the post war period, my mother and I still really suffered from hunger, today we hardly know what that means in Germany.

As a schoolboy it was a year in Michigan/USA that changed my view of the world. Then, of course, studying sociology at the university, choosing a career as a journalist, and at the same time getting married and starting a family are to be mentioned. All the ups and downs of life until now, meanwhile including the troubles usually associated with aging, are milestones of this personal change, each one being a challenge that demanded a very conscious reaction to unexperienced living conditions.

But all in all, my life has still been relatively continuous compared to what my parents' generation has experienced. Our generation was lucky because economic and social change in Western Germany and Europe has mainly led to a better living, and we have all benefited in different ways.

Was there a time that you would have liked to change, but didn't?
Why?

When I was about 45 years old, I found myself in a kind of professional midlife crisis. I was a journalist and presenter for a large German television station and I felt a little tired of only interpreting political events and problems and teaching people in a more or less subtle way what was right or wrong. I wanted to take responsibility and to decide and shape something by myself.

So I ran for a political party, the Christian Democrats, for a seat in the Rheingau-Taunus-District parliament. I was elected and then became a member of the executive board of the

parliamentary group of the party. However, my wife did not agree that I wanted to become a professional politician and said, in that case she would leave me. She thought I would soon be fed up with all those never ending meetings and conferences, and the family would suffer.

I loved politics, but here I loved much more, so my political career ended before it really began, and I remained a journalist. And looking back at that decision, I think my wife was right.

But later I changed my profession after all. I became a Broadcasting manager, namely the CEO of SWR, a large radio and TV station in southwest Germany. And even later, after I had retired, I became the first president of Quadriga University Berlin.

Were there times of transformation, that not only shaped your own life, but also society?

I already mentioned the war and post-war period, which certainly intervened in my life in extreme ways. Then, of course, there were the fundamental political decisions made in West Germany after the war - the founding of the Federal Republic, the introduction of a social - but not socialist - market economy, the forming of ties to the west in NATO as well as the development of the European Community. In the whole a transformation that also led to personal possibilities and decisions. If I had grown up just a few kilometers east of my home town Lübeck in the eastern part of Germany under Soviet domination, many things would have been completely different. Even though my mother and I did not live too well for some years, I was still able to start a comparatively self-determined life which offered me the chance to follow my own interests and develop my abilities and finally even make a successful career without having to bend myself to illegitimate, for example ideological constraints.

Next, the revolt of the left student movement after 1968 was the beginning of a cultural transformation of society that I could only partially approve and which made me very aware of the value of personal freedom, precisely because I rejected some aspects of the 68 movement as a severe misdevelopment.

Much later it was especially the reunification of Germany and Europe following 1989 which I accompanied intensively as a Journalist and which confirmed my basic convictions. Many German intellectuals already had abandoned the idea of a unified nation, and I had strongly opposed their appeasement policy towards the Eastern block. The German and European reunification has of course subjected our society to an ongoing change, since it was accompanied by the dissolution of the old East-West-conflict and the increasingly rapid development of globalisation.

What do you think are conditions that welcome transformation?

If the question is asked in such an abstract way, it is not easy to answer. It is often said that we have to be open to change. But I believe that's only half the truth. Open to change were the followers of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 as well as those of the National Socialists in Germany in 1933. So we need clear measures in order to estimate which changes we might welcome and support, or at least accept, and which we should reject, as far as we can

influence them at all. That, of course, requires a considerable amount of judgment. And ultimately, every scientific and pre-science education, besides the practical professionalisation it aims to achieve, applies to the formation and sharpening of this judgment.

As far as the question of criteria is concerned, we tend to take the freedom of the individual alone as a yardstick for assessing change. Only in the freedom of the other, it is said, the freedom of the individual should find its limit. And the community serves, so to speak, merely as an instrument to secure this limit. But why should I actually respect the freedom of my fellow man, as a selfish person for instance who in doubt would lie and cheat on others, not to talk about worse things, if I may also be able to get away with it?

In truth, we are already biologically designed from the outset for both, for the preservation of our own individual interest and for the well-being of the community. Democracy, according to a famous word of an important German professor of law, is based on conditions that it cannot create itself. It is based on a cultural heritage, not least in our language, which must be respected, nurtured and communicated.

As it seems to me, change and transformation are taking place on their own, so to speak, driven by scientific and technological development on a global scale. Controlling it positively or at least influencing it, but also resisting it, if necessary, is the task that is always new.

Digital transforms (not only) business now. What is next?

It would be nice if we could foresee that, wouldn't it? When graduated as a sociologist from the University of Göttingen half a century ago, many representatives of this science believed in an increasing predictability of all social conditions and thus in the "end of history", as about two decades later, after the upheaval of 1989, it was literally predicted by Francis Fukuyama. But, as we were to find out, contingency, which means chance, plays a leading role in the story, even if we don't like to admit it.

Today we are hopefully more sceptical in this respect. We know that digitization, resulting in the development of self-learning and self-programming systems - the so called "artificial intelligence" - in combination with the triumphant advance of robot and genetic engineering, will revolutionize our world and our lives, but we don't know what all this will sum up to in the end. And that's why we don't know "what this does to us", as a fashionable saying goes.

How human does a human being stay? Or will it eventually be abolished by the global intelligence machine? We don't know. And we don't know whether and to what extent we can do anything about it. Does man remain sovereign? Our grandchildren, if not our children, will probably know. I'm not sure, whether we should envy them for that experience today.