Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa.

Interviewed by Bjørn Schiermer

Introduction

Until now, Hartmut Rosa's work has chiefly been popular among Scandinavian sociologists working along the lines of Axel Honneth, Rosa's *Doktorvater*. However, not only has Rosa's proper work been obligatory reading in the field of social pathologies for some time now, but Rosa is also gaining increasing acclaim in the wider sociological community. His work on a comprehensive sociology of acceleration and on modern temporal culture altogether has established him as a weighty contemporary figure in the critical tradition. Rosa's ambitious new book, the 800 page *Resonanz* (2016), will no doubt further secure this position. It aims at nothing short of providing critical theory with a whole new theoretical foundation; a foundation centered on the concepts of 'resonance' and 'world relation'.

The interview progresses from the earlier work on pathologies and acceleration to the recent book on resonance. It touches on the concepts central to the new work, on its relations to the critical tradition and to the wider contemporary theoretical landscape.

HR: Hartmut Rosa
BS: Bjørn Schiermer

BS: In the Scandinavian context – probably it is the same in Germany – you are still first and foremost known to the broader audience for your work on acceleration. I know that, in the Nordic countries especially, the research field of the so-called social pathologies, formerly inspired by Axel Honneth, is now increasingly inspired by your work. So let us start in this area.

Axel Honneth was your *Doktorvater* – your PhD supervisor – and in some aspects your early work is close to Honneth's, or at least situates itself within this critical lineage. The concept of pathology is important to you both. So how are you inspired by Honneth and how do you move beyond him? Could you tell us something about how your view of contemporary society differs from Honneth's, how your use of the concept of pathology differs from his, and maybe also a few words about what role the concept of acceleration plays here?

HR: Well, obviously Honneth is a strong influence on me, and a source of inspiration for me, in many respects. I actually came to Honneth as a young doctoral student because I wanted to write my dissertation on the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, and Honneth was the one who had introduced Taylor into a German context. So it was through Honneth that I became socialised into the tradition of critical theory in the first place.

Honneth's theory of social recognition impressed me a lot – my own recent attempt to introduce a theory of resonance in a way is a reaction to the theory of recognition. Maybe I can expand on this later, but resonance, in one sense, is a modification and extension of the concept of recognition. So you are quite right to suggest that my conception of, and my interest in social pathologies, is greatly indebted to Honneth. Besides, and here also I agree with Honneth, I am in search of 'holistic' social theory and 'monistic' moral philosophy. For me as for him, society is not just the sum of millions of independent processes and institutions, but a totality in the sense of a social formation, the parts of which are inherently connected to each other, and we are both looking for a normative principle or idea that

can be used to approach the question of the good life inside this 'whole'. Certainly, what connects Taylor, Honneth and myself is a certain Hegelian heritage.

However, there are also a number of significant differences. Contrary to Honneth, I am much more skeptical of the social formation of modernity as such. For me, there are pathologies *built into* the social fabric of modern society itself, whereas for Honneth, modernity can and should be *saved* from pathologies. Here, I think, I am much closer to the older tradition of critical theory, to authors like Adorno or Marcuse. In my approach, the analysis of time and temporal structures is precisely the way to get at the heart of these pathologies: if it is true that social, institutional and material structures change at a pace which has become too fast for thorough analysis, for understanding and planning and that we need to analyse the nature of this speeding-up itself. Then we find that pathologies of desynchronisation, but also of alienation, are intrinsic to the very fabric of modern society. Finally, there are also some political differences between me and Honneth. I am much more skeptical about the social and ethical consequences of competition than he is, for example.

BS: You mention the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Maybe we should just touch a bit on your relation to him. You wrote your *Doktorarbeit* – your PhD – on Taylor, and you have later published, I think, a monograph on his philosophy (Rosa, 1998). He also surfaces quite often in your recent book. So Taylor remains, this is my impression, important for you. Yet he is, in the opinion of many, not a 'critical' philosopher – but rather a so-called 'communitarian'. How is Taylor's work to be integrated into a critical sociological framework? How is he integrated into your work?

HR: Well, to make one point very clear from the start: I never wanted to be a 'true' adherent to a discipline or what one may call a 'school of thought' or something like this. I am actually never concerned about whether a topic I am interested in – such as social acceleration or resonance or alienation – is sociological, or psychological, or political, or philosophical. I think the strength of critical theory lies precisely in the fact that it tries to overcome disciplinary boundaries of this kind in its analyses. The same goes for my relationship to schools of thought: I don't care whether a concept or an idea or a research question stems from critical theory, or from poststructuralist traditions, or from communitarian thinkers or postcolonial authors.

Nevertheless, I will answer your question by saying that Taylor, in fact, always has been close to Frankfurt. As we can see in his debates with Habermas and others, he was strongly influenced by Hegel and Marx – after all, he started out as a communist revolutionary – and he took inspiration from Honneth for his own conception of a politics of recognition (and multiculturalism), just as Honneth took up ideas on Hegel and on positive freedom from Taylor. Furthermore, like Habermas or Honneth – or like Foucault, for that matter – Taylor seeks to combine social analysis and political philosophy with an interest in subject formation. His strength, for me, lies in his insistence that we need to understand a social formation's inherent conception of the good, its – sometimes contradictory – 'strong evaluations' or moral maps, in order to understand this social formation's driving motivational forces and cultural underpinnings. It is this culturalist dimension that is missing in much of critical theory in a stricter sense, particularly in newer versions of it. Apart from that, of course, Taylor's phenomenological approach to social life, deriving mainly from Merleau-Ponty, has inspired me a lot.

BS: Thank you. In Germany you have recently published an 800 page book titled *Resonanz* – I presume the English title will be *Resonance* – in which you develop an impressive theoretical framework around the concepts of 'resonance' and 'world relation' [*Weltbeziehung*]. But you also give the concept of alienation a renaissance. Maybe, we should start with the positive concepts. Could you say a little bit about the concept of resonance and the concept of world relation and the connection between them?

HR: Oh, it's not so easy to say 'a bit' about something you just wrote 800 pages on! One way of getting at it comes through the conception of recognition we just discussed. Like Honneth or Taylor, I am very much interested in understanding what really motivates people and what makes a good life for them. Coming from my work on social acceleration, I arrived at a new definition of modernity: so, in my view,

society is modern if its mode of stabilisation is dynamic, that is, if it needs progressive growth, acceleration and innovation just to reproduce its social structure and to maintain its *status quo*. We see this most easily with respect to the need for economic growth – which inevitably is connected to acceleration and innovation. Now, on an individual level, where does the motivational energy come from to keep the engines of growth, acceleration and innovation going? Surely, to a significant extent, we are driven by fear: we are afraid of losing out in social competition, of being excluded. But there must also be some positive force, some attractive power. Adam Smith supposed that this power was the desire for social recognition, and Honneth turned this into a complete theory: we are driven by the desire to be loved, respected and esteemed.

For my part, I found that this is true to a large extent, but it is not enough to explain what modernity is all about. Modernity, in my understanding, is driven by what I call the 'Triple A Approach' to the world: we implicitly believe that the good life consists in making more of the world *available*, *attainable* and *accessible*. Take, for example, the lure of technology: with the help of a bike – this I learned as a child – I increased the horizon of my world to the end of the village or town and beyond. When we turn 18 and get a car, the horizon of availability and accessibility increases again: we can go to the discos and cinemas in the big city some hundred kilometers away from where we live, and so on. The airplane then brings other continents within reach. The same goes for the smartphone: with this tool, I have all of my friends and all the information I need from all parts of the world in my pocket. Or take the lure of money: money is the magic wand with which we make the world available, accessible and attainable. In fact, our wealth indicates the scope or reach of our horizon of the available, accessible and attainable.

However, the problem is that this very process of enlarging our reach or scope, the process of incessant acceleration and growth, has begun to show its ugly flip side. Thus, on the collective level, it seems like we destroy the world we want to make available: the destruction of our natural environment is the opposite of what we dreamt of, and in turn, nature becomes a threat to us. On the individual level, there is the danger of the world going mute, deaf and silent for us subjects. When we look at cultural history, it has always been modernity's great fear that the world we live in somehow dies for us; that it starts to seem disenchanted, cold, indifferent, maybe hostile, as Albert Camus realises; that we are deeply alienated from it. We increase our grasp and hold over nature, life and world, but these realms then change their character in this very process. Self and world turn pale, cold and indifferent. This, of course, is the state of 'burnout'. So my question was: what is the opposite of burnout? What is an alternative way of relating to the world, of being in the world?

And my answer is the concept of *resonance*. The alternative to the mode of dynamic stabilisation is a mode of resonance. Resonance is a way of encountering the world, that is, people, things, matter, history, nature and life as such. It is characterised by four crucial qualities. First, af←fection: we feel truly touched or moved by someone or something we encounter. [In his book HR uses arrows to show the direction of affection (BS).] Affection has an emotional, but also a cognitive and certainly a bodily element. Second, e→motion: we feel that we answer this 'call', we react to it with body and mind, we reach out and touch the other side as well – in a word, we experience self-efficacy in this encounter. Third, in this process of being touched and affected by something and of reacting and answering to it, we are transformed – or we transform ourselves in the sense of a co-production. Whenever someone has an experience of resonance – with a person, a book, an idea, a melody, a landscape etcetera – he or she comes out as a different person. And the other side is transformed as well. However, and this is the fourth element, resonance is always characterised by an element of elusiveness. No matter how hard we try, we can never make sure or guarantee that we will get into a mode of resonance with someone or something: you might buy the most expensive tickets for your favourite piece of music, and yet you might still feel untouched by the performance. And what's more, this elusiveness also means that it is impossible to predict or control what the result of an experience of resonance will be, what the process of transformation will result in.

In any case, my claim is that such processes of resonance are essential for what we are as human beings, and that it is essential for sociologists to take them into account in order to understand human behaviour. When you read a book, or listen to or play music, or help a friend, or walk in the forest, for

example, you are not only, and not even predominantly, after recognition – you are trying to get in touch with the world in the sense of resonance.

BS: Let's stay with the concept of resonance for a while. Am I wrong when I discern two different layers or levels of resonance in your book? The first level is somewhat ontological. Here we find inspiration from an abundance of different sources – from mirror neuron research, via Peter Sloterdijk's depiction of the symbiotic relationship between mother and baby, to Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenology of the body. At this level, resonance is synonymous with a basic entanglement in the world. We are in a certain sense closer to others, to other bodies and to the objects around us than to ourselves as self-identical and demarcated subjects.

The other level is the normative one. It is a necessary element of a definition of the good life, that I am capable of entering into world relations which are not instrumental but which permit the world – or the person, the object or the activity in which I am engaged – to move me, to make me vibrate on its own terms, as it were. Could you say something about the relation between these two levels, if I am right in making this distinction?

HR: Your observation is absolutely correct. And this dual aspect of resonance, by the way, is another thing that connects me with Honneth. Then, just as he claims that we ontologically need recognition to become subjects, I claim that resonance is the very process through which we are formed as subjects and through which the world we encounter and experience is constituted. And just as he claims that we seek recognition and need recognition in order to experience our life as a good life, I believe that we seek and need resonance, connections and experiences of resonance to have a good life. I distinguish three dimensions. The first of these three dimensions – I call them *axes* in my book – is the *horizontal* axis of resonance that connects us to other people in the mode of love and friendship, but also in the form of democratic politics. The second one is the *diagonal* (or material) axis of resonance that connects us to material things, objects or artefacts in the mode of work, sports, education or consumption. Finally, the third or *vertical* axis of resonance gives us a sense of how we are connected to the world, or nature, or life, or some such ultimate reality as a whole. In modernity, vertical axes of resonance are established through the practices and conceptions of religion, nature, art or history.

Through these different axes, I want to firmly establish resonance as the normative yardstick for quality of life. I believe such a conception can work, because on one level, as you suggest, all human beings are 'resonant beings'; we do not need to learn to resonate, even though we might dis-learn it or lose our capacity to enter into resonant relations. But on another, 'higher' level, the concrete axes of resonance, in the sense I just described, always form in social and historical contexts, and therefore, whether or not we have access to vibrant axes of resonance, and whether or not we dispositionally approach the world in a resonant mode (or habitus) or in a 'silent', instrumental mode, depends on the social contexts we operate in. A capitalist society which forces us into a mode of competition, optimisation and speed, for example, and which creates permanent time-pressure and stress, enforces a non-resonant, instrumental, reified mode of approaching the world.

BS: This brings us to the concept of alienation. Resonance, then, in this normative sense – as something we long for and want to obtain, since we all have had fundamental experiences with resonance in our lives – *presupposes*, you write, *alienation*. How is this to be understood?

HR: The relationship between resonance and alienation, in fact, is a very complex one. At first, I just took the two concepts to be opposites. I tried to establish resonance as alienation's other, or put differently, I saw alienation as a loss of resonance. But then I realised that this is too easy: only something that is and remains utterly *different* can actually speak to us in its own voice. Resonance is not consonance, it requires the active presence of something that is beyond my grasp, elusive, and in this sense remains alien. The attempt to turn the world into a sphere of encompassing resonance would not only lead to totalitarian politics, it would actually destroy the possibility of hearing the voice of the other – and therefore, in the end, of discerning one's own voice. The biographical phase of puberty and

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adolescence illustrates the dialectical relationship between alienation and resonance quite beautifully: in puberty, the youngster becomes alienated from almost everything that once resonated with him or her – his or her parents, siblings, teachers, even his or her own body. But this process of alienation is absolutely inevitable for the young person in developing his or her own individual voice and finding out which his or her 'true' axes of resonance are. If puberty is a phase of alienation, it stands in a truly dialectical relationship with resonance.

BS: This renaissance of the concept of alienation in your work is interesting in itself, I think. The concept had a prominent place in early critical theory and in Marx, yet became unpopular, not least due to its essentialist overtones. Why revive it?

HR: Ever since I wrote my book on Charles Taylor, and certainly after my studies on social acceleration, I have been strongly convinced that conceptions of justice, let alone distributional justice, are insufficient as normative concepts for the endeavour of critical theory.

To the contrary in fact, together with Marx, I am convinced that modern capitalist society is haunted by two terrible flaws. One is that the distribution of the means, products and profits of production is utterly unfair – that is, that exploitation is an essential problem. The other is that even for the 'winners' and profiting classes, the ensuing life is not a good life: it is based on a wrong mode of existence, on a wrong mode of being in the world, on a wrong mode of relating to the world. Writers like Benjamin, Adorno or Marcuse, and also Erich Fromm, diagnosed this very sharply. You can call this the 'artists' critique' of capitalist society (*Künstlerkritik*), but I find this term quite misleading, for alienation, as I call it, is not a luxury-problem, which we can address once we have brought an end to all economic injustice. Quite to the contrary: the wrong mode of being is responsible for the possibility of exploitation and injustice. Therefore, in my view, we *first* need to overcome alienation in order – *second* – to remedy the absurd distributional flaws in our world as well.

Now, in older critical theory, this was a quite common thought. But then the concept of alienation was gradually discarded or forgotten, precisely because we could not say what a non-alienated mode of life would look like: we did not have a workable conception of *alienation's other* – resonance – given that essentialist or paternalist conceptions are not viable. In my former books I thought that authenticity in concert with autonomy could perhaps be alienation's other, but now I think resonance is a much better concept: since resonance necessarily involves difference and transformation, it bridges the gap between identity and difference and has no reifying implications.

BS: Okay. Permit me a last question about the concept of resonance. To be sure, the concept resonates with inspirations from earlier critical theory, but you are also, it seems to me from some of our discussions at the Max Weber Kolleg, becoming increasingly interested in recent developments in sociology and the sociology of science: I mean, this idea of renouncing control and mastery, of entering into relations which are not defined by 'me', by the subject alone, but which also, at least to a certain extent, let the object 'act on me', as it were, on its own terms. I see here a link back to Adorno's idea of mimesis, but I also feel the presence of impulses coming from Bruno Latour and his idea of action as being always, to a certain extent, 'overtaken'; that we are always surprised by our actions, that we should treat the artefacts and objects with which we are entangled in terms of 'mediators' instead of 'intermediaries'. Could you say something about these inspirations?

HR: You are absolutely right here on both counts. Following the lines of Adorno and Latour, we realise that 'autonomy' cannot be the master concept, or the opposite of alienation, either. For experiences of resonance – or of 'true experience' in Adorno's sense – always involve a moment of being overwhelmed, of losing control, of being *unexpectedly* and *unpredictably* touched and *transformed* by another. Resonance means becoming vulnerable and losing control. So resonance is not self-determination; it is not *autos*, for the self is transformed in the process, and it is not *nomos*, for it does not imply that one should 'follow rules or principles' that one has – autonomously – decided upon oneself. Resonance is

something that happens in the inter-space, between 'actors' in Bruno Latour's sense; we can also call it 'intra-action' in Karen Barad's sense.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, if we instead understand autonomy as *emancipation*, I clearly want to preserve it as an important element in the conception of resonance. It then means that subjects need to be able to discern and develop their own voices. If, for example, women are not allowed to vote or to work, or if gays or lesbians are not allowed to develop their sexuality, then this is a clear target for any social critique of the conditions of resonance.

BS: Before we end, let us briefly return to the Scandinavian context. I think many Nordic readers familiar with your earlier work would love to hear a little more about the relation between this new mammoth book of yours and your earlier work on time and acceleration. So, to what extent does the new focus on resonance signify a rupture, a new interest or, at least, a somewhat theoretical reorientation of your work, a movement away from the more Zeit-diagnostic' – also meant in a very literal sense – earlier work? I have a feeling that you would like to emphasise continuity?

HR: Oh yes, I would almost say resonance developed 'organically' out of my acceleration studies. You see, after acceleration, the public and the press everywhere constantly claimed that Rosa was an 'advocate of slowness'. I was sold as the guru and the pope and the prophet of *de*celeration. But if you look for it, you find that the concept of deceleration figures only in a very cursory way in my work. This is for two, or, in fact, three reasons. First, slowing things down would certainly not be enough. Moreover, to just slow things down and leave everything else as it is, is virtually impossible – it is the dream of the politicians: let's have sustained growth, competition and more innovation, but let's introduce a 'politics of time' that gives people more time in their everyday chores. This is impossible. The dominant institutional mode of social reproduction requires that we have to run faster and faster each year just to stay in place. But second, even if it *were* possible, in my view, slowness cannot be an end in itself. Nothing is gained if the fire engine simply slows down. A slow internet connection is just a nuisance, and a slow roller-coaster is not exciting at all. Thus, when people dream of deceleration, what they in fact *mean* is a different mode of being in the world and relating to the world. What they really *want* is the chance to get into resonance with people, things and places. They do not want deceleration. Speed is only 'bad' when it leads to alienation, that is, to the loss of our capacity to truly 'appropriate' the world. It somehow scratches in my ears when I say the word 'appropriation'. I would use the German word *anverwandeln* – rather than *aneignen* – if I could. Then, *Anverwandeln* entails self-transformation while *aneignen* is merely instrumental. Anyway, third, I realised that we need to move beyond the simple dichotomy of bad speed versus good slowness, altogether. I reframed the problem as alienation caused by the mode of dynamic stabilisation and started to argue that what we are after, positively, when criticising acceleration is not slowness, but resonance. All I needed from there on was a theory of resonance – a theory which I now, I hope, have delivered.

BS: One must indeed say so. I have a last question if we still have time? What direction do you see critical sociology or critical theory taking in the future?

HR: I really think that critical social theory currently is in a very ambivalent position. On the one hand, there clearly is a strong social need for a thorough analysis and critique of modern society: for an approach which is capable of integrating political, psychological, philosophical and sociological perspectives into a powerful critique of what has gone wrong in our world. You can see it from the unrest and desire among the students at our universities, on the streets or even in high school: their interest in Marx and Adorno and the like is clearly increasing; they are looking for inspiration.

But our professional, academic versions of critical theory have two flaws, I believe. One is that, all too often, authors do not address the daily experiences of social actors at all. Too much of the discussion is purely meta-theoretical. You find book after book after book about the conditions of the 'possibility of critique', of the merits and pitfalls of 'immanent' versus 'transcendent', or of 'local' versus 'universal' critique, etcetera. These debates never come to a convincing end. They have become

increasingly sterile and, in the end, irrelevant. And it does not get much better if debates shift back to very abstract discussions about, say, the self-validation of capital. What we need, I believe, are approaches that flesh out theory in accordance with what really goes on in our social lives and our societies here and now; and which address our actual experiences.

The other problem is that many adherents of critical theory believe that critique should be purely negative: that it is most valuable if it totally rejects the reality given. Again, I think this is wrong. It is very easy to be critical and cynical and desperate about the current state of social affairs. A vital critical theory needs to do more than this. From Marx through Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer and from Fromm to Marcuse, critical theorists have been convinced that a different mode of existence, another way of being in the world, is a social possibility. Their greatest fear was that we might lose this sense of the true possibility of a different form of life and a better world; that we might become 'one-dimensional' men and women. But in order to keep this sense for true and fundamental change alive, we must at least try to spell out what this better world could look like. Even though they were extremely skeptical, we find some hints in the works of the just mentioned protagonists of early critical theory: Benjamin's concept of *aura*, Adorno's conception of *mimesis*, Marcuse's conception of *eros*, or Fromm's idea of *love* serve precisely the function of a placeholder for this different mode of being. I wrote *Resonance* as an attempt to spell out what an auratic, mimetic, erotic mode of life might look like.

BS: Thank you very much.

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