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An Interview with Hartmut Rosa on Resonance and Alienation

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Beyond the Echo-chamber: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa on Resonance and Alienation

Thijs Lijster & Robin Celikates

“If acceleration is the problem, then resonance might be the solution.” This is the shortest possible summary provided in the first line of the 800-page book *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (2016). The book is the latest stage and logical next step in the analysis and critique of modernity by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, which started with the equally ambitious and encompassing book *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (2005).¹ There, Rosa dissects modernity as a process of acceleration, comprising the three dimensions of technical acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of the pace of life. Although his analysis is largely in line with Paul Virilio’s “dromology” and David Harvey’s analysis of modernity as “time-space compression”, the underlying question and concern of Rosa is somewhat different. While Virilio seems to aim mainly at a cultural critique, and Harvey at an analysis of capitalism as a system, Rosa is first and foremost interested in the question of the good life. Like the earlier generations of the Frankfurt school, Horkheimer and Adorno and, with qualifications, Habermas, he considers modernity in terms of a broken promise: the very technology and social revolutions that were supposed to lead to an increase in autonomy are now becoming increasingly oppressive. In *Alienation and Acceleration* (2010) he even calls acceleration a totalitarian process, because it entails all aspects of our personal and social lives, and is almost impossible to resist, escape

or criticize. Rosa writes: “The powers of acceleration no longer are experienced as a liberating force, but as an actually enslaving pressure instead” (Rosa 2010, 80). As the book’s title already suggests, Rosa considers acceleration as the primary contemporary source of alienation, along the three axes famously described by Marx in the fragment on “Estranged Labour”: alienation of people from themselves, from their fellow human beings, and from the world of things. While we feel the constant pressure of having to do *more* in *less* time, there also seems to be a shared feeling of a loss of control over our own life and the world, and therefore of losing contact with it.

Rosa’s latest book continues on the path of *Alienation and Acceleration*. For the concept of “alienation”, which has a long tradition in modern philosophy and was recently taken up again by Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi (2016), is an inherently problematic category. The concept implies that you are alienated *from* something, where this something has often been associated with a conception of “true” humanity or authentic life, be it Rousseau’s noble savage, early Marx’s “species being”, or Heidegger’s *Eigentlichkeit*. Such conceptions of authenticity can easily become arbitrary or oppressive even, for who is the philosopher or critical theorist to decide whose life is “authentic” and whose isn’t? Then again, Rosa argues, if we drop the conception of the good life altogether, the concept of alienation also becomes empty; it then risks becoming a mere label for things we don’t like.

This is why in *Resonanz* Rosa sets out to analyse “resonance” as alienation’s opposite, thus also aiming at a better understanding of alienation as well as a conceptual tool with which to criticize it. Though not so much itself a conception of the good life, resonance according to Rosa lies at the basis of all conceptions of the good life. It refers to a relation between subject and world (*Weltbeziehung*) characterized by reciprocity and mutual transformation: the subject’s experience of some other calling upon it which requires understanding or answering, but that also has the ability to change the subject. Resonance, as Rosa is quick to add, is not a mere (subjective) experience belonging to the subject; he emphatically refers to the *relation between* subject and world, be it a relation between subjects, between the subject and object, or even of the subject to its own body. Not surprisingly, and in

line with the first generation of the Frankfurt School, art is for Rosa an exemplary place for, and medium of, such relations (although religion and nature are also important examples), and indeed functions as a vestige as world-relations become increasingly alienated. Alienation, then, is precisely the impossibility or inability to enter into a relation with the other. Indeed, all problems or “social pathologies” of modernity according to Rosa come down to this: that we are unable to form a meaningful relationship of mutual understanding and interaction, either with our material surroundings (e.g. in the case of labour) or with fellow human beings.

For Rosa, as a critical theorist, the concept of resonance functions on three levels. In the first place there seems to be an anthropological undercurrent, in which resonance describes what makes us human; the first chapters of his study deal with such basic animal and human behaviours as breathing, eating and drinking, speaking and glancing, laughing, crying and love-making, all of which entail relationships of resonance. Secondly, resonance functions as a theory of modernization. In line with Charles Taylor, Rosa argues that modernity is a process in which the “self” becomes less *porous*, hence increasingly closed off from the world. At the same time, however, Rosa also considers modernity as a historical period of increased “sensibility for resonance” (*Resonanzsensibilität*): since resonance is not an “echo chamber” but a relation of questioning and answering, the subject needs relative autonomy in order to enter into meaningful relationships with the other. The promise of modernity was precisely this, “that we could move out into the world to find a place that speaks and alludes to us, where we can feel at home and that we would be able make our own” (Rosa 2016, 599). Finally, the concept of resonance is, as we already noted, a critical tool, providing a framework for criticizing both capitalist competition as a source of alienation, as well as false solutions and claims to authenticity, be it some fully individualized attempt at *mindfulness*, or populist discourses of social and cultural homogenization.

In January this year Rosa visited Utrecht for a seminar dedicated to his book, titled *How to Slow Down Life without Stagnating Society. Resonance in an Accelerating World*, organized by the University of Humanistic Studies (UvH). In advance of this seminar, *Krisis* talked to Rosa about social acceleration, alienation and

resonance, and the role of art in an accelerating world.²

1. Acceleration

Thijs Lijster/Robin Celikates: You have written extensively about social acceleration, and you convincingly link technological innovation, social change and the acceleration of personal/individual tempo. With regard to the latter, however, we are wondering to what extent the kinds of problems or “pathologies” you are describing are happening on a global scale, and to what extent they are specific issues of the West or, to put it somewhat more bluntly, “first world problems”. Capitalism, to be sure, affects people all over the globe, but it doesn’t affect all of them in the same way, does it? What space does your theory allow for what is often called “die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen” (the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous)?

Hartmut Rosa: It is interesting that you mention “die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen”, which is a phrase made famous by Koselleck, for this phrase already suggests a kind of direction of history: it assumes you have things that belong to an earlier age and things that belong to a later age. What I’m trying to say is that we’ve reached the end of this idea of history moving forward, which means that you no longer have the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, but you just have differences. So, some people are under a lot of time pressure while others are not.

Your question has many layers. One has to do with class: people always ask whether the speeding up of life – the increase in the pace of life – is the same for all layers of society. And the other question is, of course, on the global scale: is it the same for all parts of the world? To the second question, I would actually say: yes, very much so, whenever you have processes of modernization. Acceleration basically is at the heart of modernization. For example, I just spent a longer time in China and there you see it almost like crazy. You have this logic of competition and of speeding up, so the people there know immediately what I am talking about. And it is not just on the scale of a small elite; it is very comprehensive. And indeed, it is the

same in Korea, Japan, Brazil and other places in Latin America. Of course, there are some places, one would think of some regions in Africa, where this change in temporal structures is not very widespread, and which I therefore call “oases”, where these forces of acceleration are not yet taking hold. So I would say acceleration is a global phenomenon: wherever you have these processes of globalization or modernization you find acceleration. You will not always find individualization, divisions of labour, or democratization, and sometimes these processes are not even clearly capitalist, but the change in temporal structures is modernity’s most widespread feature.

Of course, there are always segments of the population- and this varies in different countries – which do not really struggle with the shortage of time. My claim is that when you look at the social strata, you find three different layers. The first, which you could call the elites but which is actually the middle class, has completely internalized this logic of speeding up. So: saving time is saving money. It is the logic of competition, in particular, that they have internalized, and competition is always related to temporality: “time is scarce, don’t waste it”. For the second layer, further down the social ladder, time pressure is not so much internalized, but coming from the outside. Of course, that is true for most conditions of labour: shop floors in companies, construction sites, care industries, etc. The people working there are always short on time but usually it is someone else – the boss or the clock – who creates the pressure, and it is not so much coming from the inside.

TL/RC: People have to do more in less time?

HR: Yes, always, and this is really true almost everywhere. Recently I looked into truck drivers. They are told: “you have to deliver your load in a certain time, we don’t care how you do it.” So, you either go too fast and you have to pay for the speeding ticket or you take the Autobahn but then you have to pay for the tolls, or you ignore the mandatory resting periods, otherwise it is a totally impossible task. It makes me angry when colleagues claim: “Rosa is only describing the academic elites.” I think someone who says that has no idea about empirical reality and I would actually claim that it is indeed almost the same all over the world.

Nevertheless, then you have a third segment of the population, I call them “forcefully excluded” or “forcefully decelerated”. If you are unemployed or so, then you might have a lot of time on your hands, but even that is not always true. It will depend on what you do for a living, whether you’re sick or if you’re depressed, etc. But this kind of forceful or enforced deceleration is a kind of devaluation of the time you have then. The time you have is without any value and the problem is that even then you feel the pressure of acceleration, because you feel like you are lagging behind more and more, and that it is impossible to catch up. So this is why I claim that acceleration is an almost totalitarian force, you feel the pressure wherever you are.

The distinction I’ve discussed, between the internalization of time pressure and time pressure as a force from the outside also raises interesting questions as to who has more resources to resist. Probably, you will find more possibilities and power to resist if the pressure comes from the outside. Once it is completely internalized you are lost.

TL/RC: What is your take on the more positive accounts of acceleration that have been put forward, for instance, by Deleuze and Guattari, who propose that we should accelerate even more, and enjoy acceleration. Or the *#Accelerate* manifesto, by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, who argue that we should accelerate further in order to let capitalism crash against its own limits. In any case, acceleration in social and cultural theory has always had a rather ambiguous sense, of both alienating and liberating. Is there any “jouissance” of acceleration possible in your view?

HR: In my main book on social acceleration I first of all wanted to identify the change in temporal structure that accompanied modernity. There wasn’t really a systematic account of it. What I wanted to do was to analyze what is accelerating and what is not, and what might be the consequences of it. Looking to these consequences, I was not so optimistic about them. Nevertheless, I did not say that speed per se is bad, and I didn’t say that slowness is good; certainly not the latter. I do share with the accelerationists the idea that just being nostalgic about the past would be a mistake, because this leads you very quickly to the idea that the past

was much better and that's of course not the case. Today you sometimes find a nostalgia for the Fordist period, while this period was of course the most alienated age ever. So I agree that speed per se is not the problem.

TL/RC: Are you thinking of Richard Sennett, or would you rather not mention names?

HR: Yes, I was thinking about Richard Sennett, though I like his work very much. I very much liked the book on craftsmanship, for instance, because I think he has a very strong sense there of resonance with regard to work. Nevertheless, when you read people like Sennett or Zygmunt Bauman (and there are a lot of German sociologists too) and their critique of the postmodern condition, it all of a sudden sounds like the past was a great time.

I don't think speed per se is the problem, but I also don't want to just turn it around and say: well if you cannot do anything against it then let's embrace it. That is not a sensible stance for me. What I dislike about the accelerationists is that they seem to give in and they say: "since we cannot do anything about it let's just get on top of the movement". They always claim that something good can come out of it, but I think that they are totally lacking the yardsticks of how to judge the consequences. Turning the perspective around doesn't solve anything. In my book I basically say: indeed, speed is not per se bad, but it is bad when it leads to alienation. So, the question for me would be: what do the accelerationists do with this?

TL/RC: Perhaps some forms of alienation might not be bad. In *Inventing the Future* Srnicek and Williams argue in favour of total automation; this would in some sense be alienation, because it puts us even further from daily activities of the reproduction of life, but it also allows a lot of freedom to do other things.

HR: But this has always been the promise of modernization and acceleration, that it will eventually give us freedom, but there has been a betrayal on both ends. On the one hand, it didn't give us freedom: you can see the exact opposite. I really insist on that. What I try to work out is a certain temporal logic, one that has a

lot to do with the logic of competition, and that I call "dynamic stabilization". That is really the core of my analysis of modernity. We can only keep what we have – both on an individual and collective level – if we increase speed and productivity and so on. And this increase does not fall from the sky: we have to do it ourselves. Every year we have to run a bit faster to keep what we have. So, the idea that this will eventually give us freedom is just wrong under the present conditions. If one does not see that then it means being blind to what happened the last 200 years.

It's not that we're just enslaved. I do think the liberating potential is there, but in this logic of dynamic stabilization there is a shift in the balance between the liberating aspects and the enslaving aspects. The promise of modernity has always been progress: let's increase production, let's come up with new innovative technologies, let's speed up and so on, in order to reach some kind of Golden Age. But today most people no longer perceive this acceleration as progress: you have to run faster, but not to get somewhere, but to keep what you have. I think this horizon has become more and more pale; now the impression is that we have to speed up otherwise we will have much more unemployment.

TL/RC: Wasn't it the case that up until a certain point in time, at least in the Western world, we were working less and less?

HR: You're right, and that is basically also what I write. But now the increase in freedom, also what you could call progress, in the end will be sucked up again. I argue that we have to invest more and more psychological energy, political energy and material energy (resources) into the logic of mobilizing the world.

You see this very clearly with our young people. In the age that you were referring to, when freedom was increasing, so up until the 1970s, when you asked young people: "what do you want to do?" they would talk about their dreams, or their aspirations, or their ideas. Now this has turned around. They ask: "what can I do in order to successfully compete?" It is no longer about developing your own perspective but it is about fitting in.

I've noticed this myself too. For some years I've worked with young people, just before their *matura* [secondary school exit exam, TL & RC], and each year we are talking about what they are going to do next. I think there has been a shift from about 20 years ago, where they would say "I want to do philosophy" or so, and now they come and ask: "what could I do if I study philosophy?" All our capacities, all our energies, all our dreams are fitted into the logic of increasing productivity. As long as the accelerationists do not see that, I find that really bad.

On one other point I would agree with them, namely that I think we are not at the end of the logic of acceleration, not in the least. Paul Virilio has said this a long time ago, and was really visionary in this respect, that we are on the verge of a fusion between computer technologies and bodies – biotechnology and computer technologies. With this, we can speed up our brains and our interactions probably much more. What I think we definitely need is an idea of "the good life", and that is what I try to provide.

TL/RC: Coming back to what you said earlier, about modernity's promise of progress, we were wondering what the implications would be of your theory for what we traditionally consider leftist politics? After all, we traditionally make the distinction between the "progressive" left and the "conservative" right. But what does "progressive" mean once progress itself is experienced as catastrophe, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin? And how would you see the contemporary crisis of the left, or of "progressive politics" in general in this light?

HR: The problem is that "progressive" has always been a very ambivalent term, covering a lot of things. On the one hand, of course, it has referred to technological development: progress in science and technology and so on. On the other, it refers to the emancipatory power, or the emancipatory ideals, which are probably more important when you think of the political left. The idea of progress in the latter sense was really about giving or having more autonomy: emancipating individuals so that they are liberated from traditional powers which have been repressive, like the Church, like the patriarchal system, but also clear exploitative systems. There has been progress historically right up to probably our present age in many aspects,

but I think there are two problems with this idea.

The one thing is that this kind of formal autonomy has been counterbalanced by the logic of competition, which we were just describing. So, there is a loss as well: that people gain autonomy on the one hand, but that they lose it, on the other hand, because of the logic of capitalist competition. The other problem, and you see this also in the contemporary political crisis, is that there is a longing for something *other* than autonomy, for a kind of reconnection. That is why I came up with this idea of resonance: being connected to the world in a certain sense does not just mean: I want to decide for myself. Even progressive leftists define autonomy as living according to self-given rules and principles, and of course they have a sense that these self-given rules and principles should be intersubjectively discussed and so on, but nevertheless it is principles and rules. But I think that the good life does not mean that I live according to my principles; people feel the least alienated when they are overwhelmed by something. Adorno had a very strong sense of this, or think of Latour who's talking about the feeling that you are called upon, and you answer. This kind of connection has to do with being affected and feeling self-efficacious, i.e. experiencing one's ability to achieve things. This is more than just autonomy.

I believe we have a kind of crisis of autonomy, particularly when it concerns consumer autonomy. So, one problem is that the formal or political autonomy, which we did historically realize, is sucked up by the logic of speed and competition. The other problem is that autonomy is not sufficient; it is only one side of a good life. There is a double crisis on the left, which is very problematic. Whenever you raise leftist ideas, it is still the case that people ask you: "what, do you want to go back to the kind of state socialism which we had in the past?" and if you then of course say "no" and then that's it, right? What the left is lacking is a vision of what the world could be like.

TL/RC: So, the concept of resonance for you is also a political category?

HR: It is definitely a political category and I cannot emphasize this enough because

it is often misread as an individualistic notion. The book is probably too long, but what I try to say repeatedly is that resonance is not just about a subjective stance towards the world, that is why it is different from the *Achtsamkeit* or the mindfulness movement and so on. I'm not saying that if you are in the right mindset, that everything is fine. Resonance is a two-way relationship, so it depends on what you relate to, a mode of being in the world. And this is not up to individuals to decide. So, I really want to turn it into a political category and also an almost institutional yardstick: how should institutions be established?

My take – which I share with Adorno and Horkheimer and the older critical theorists – is that our whole mode of being in the world, of relating to the world, is, I would almost say, screwed. We have a very instrumental relation to the world. Max Scheler, followed in this by Marcuse, called modernity the Promethean stance. The world becomes a point of aggression: I want to explore it scientifically, I want to control it technologically, I want to rule it by law and so on. It is relating to the world in order to make it *verfügbar* – I don't really have a good word for it in English – to make it controllable, predictable and so on. This has to change. But this way in which we relate to the world, the way we are set in the world, is not an individual issue, it is a deeply political category.

TL/RC: You are making a clear link between technological innovations on the one hand, and social acceleration. In the same way, since the nineteenth century, all kinds of artistic innovations have been linked to revolutionary politics. For certain moments in time, they even had this kind of alliance in which artistic and political vanguards together would attack the status quo. But do you think these are the same kinds of novelty or innovation? Is innovation in the arts the same as in revolutionary politics, or for that matter, in the succession of innovative commodities or technologies? And, related to that question, do you think notions such as “the new” (or related concepts such as creativity and so forth) are still of value in contemporary artistic discourses?

HR: There are two distinctions that to me seem important to make. One is that between technological and social progress. When you today talk with young people

about the future it is very interesting that they think of it in technological terms: artificial intelligence, what will become possible to do and so on. That has changed a lot in comparison to the 1970s or 80s, when young people thought about the future in more political terms: let's shape the future politically! So there has been a division in how we think about novelty, with a still unbroken belief in – and this is not only a belief but also a fact – the expansion of our technological capacities. We peer deeper into the universe with satellites and deeper into matter and we are more capable of controlling it, so innovation there can be clearly recognized, and there is progress.

What has been lost, however, is the promise it carried, namely that *through* these innovations in science and technology, life would become better. We would overcome scarcity, we would overcome ignorance and probably even suffering, we would finally know what the good life is and have the chance to lead it. No one believes that anymore, right? No one believes that we will overcome scarcity; it is rather the opposite, we believe competition will result in even more scarcity, so that in the future we will have to work even harder. No one believes that with faster technologies we will solve the problem of time pressure and we know that we won't overcome ignorance. Precisely because of all the progress in science and technology, we now don't know what to eat, we don't know how to give birth – we don't know anything. This promise that anything will get better has been lost. It seems that art is kind of in between these two notions of progress, although it has always leaned more to the political and philosophical idea of progress: liberating human potentialities for the sake of human life.

When you look towards the non-technological side (and that is true for art, but for science too), there has been a shift from “progress” to “progression.” Progress for me is the idea of moving forward; there is some element of increase, growth or improvement. In art, as well as in science, at least the social sciences, we have given up on this idea. You see it in many spheres, but most clearly you see it in science. In science progress meant moving towards the truth. Max Planck once said: “you shouldn't study physics, because very soon we will know everything.” The idea is that we will move forward and forward, and even if we will move forward forever,

we will get closer to the truth. Progression means something else. I expect that if you today ask students, at least in the social sciences, why they want to be a social scientist, and what they are going to do when they are social scientists, they will say: “I want to come up with new ideas, and new questions, and new principles and new perspectives.” There is still innovation, but just as progression, in the sense of new ideas, but no longer moving towards the truth of the good society or whatever it is. This is also what I mean with the phrase *rasender Stillstand*: you move very quickly, you have to be innovative and creative, original and so on, but you’ve lost the idea of where you’re moving to.

When it comes to the arts, this is why I am now so preoccupied with this idea of resonance. Art is not my expertise, and although I like it very much I do not consider myself as a philosopher of art. With regard to the creation of art, the emphasis has always been on the creativity of the subject. You have to be creative and come up with something new and so on. But I believe that even in art there has to be what I call this resonance: there is something out there that you need to connect to. It is not just the subject in itself.

TL/RC: Does this shift from progress to progression also make, in a way, superfluous or irrelevant the very notion of an avant-garde?

HR: Actually, I would not give up on this idea completely. I think art is still a vitally important sphere of society because it is the one sphere, perhaps next to religion, that is least dominated by this logic of dynamic stabilization. That means that art is one sphere where we can explore different ways of being in the world and of relating to the world and I think really that this is what art is about, no matter whether we are talking about dance, painting or literature. Exploring and experimenting with different modes of relating to the world, imagining, reconstructing or finding other forms of relating to things and to people, coming up with new ways and possibilities. This is still an important function of an avant-gardist art.

2. Alienation

TL/RC: In the tradition of critical theory, the critique of alienation – from Marx to Rahel Jaeggi – has tended to avoid making substantial claims about human nature or the good life. You seem less hesitant, especially with regard to claims about the good life. How do you think these can be justified under conditions of deep pluralism? And what is their scope, both historically and culturally?

HR: When you look at the history of it, alienation has been a very influential term, even up until the 1970s or 80s when sociologists strived to measure alienation in different contexts and with different methods. After that I think it disappeared in the background for some time, because we didn’t know what a non-alienated way of being in the world would be. Rahel Jaeggi puts it nicely, when she says: “alienation is a relationship of non-relationship”, so it is a wrong form of relating to the world. I think alienation is only a powerful philosophical and sociological term if we keep the sensation, the feeling, that something is wrong here. But if you then completely refuse to think about what would be the *right* way of relating, then you are kind of lost, and that is why the concept has lost all power. Richard Schacht has also written about it, and he said that in the end alienation was used for everything people disliked. At that point it is not a useful concept anymore, and you might as well give up on it.

What I am trying to do is think about what would be a non-alienated way of relating to people, to things, to yourself, and so on. I try to reconstruct this by looking at the tradition of critical theory. All early critical theorists had a strong sense of alienation; and even if they didn’t always use the exact term, they would have an equivalent like “reification” or “instrumental rationality”. And they all had a kind of counter-sense, of a different way of relating to the world, like “mimesis” in Adorno, or even “aura” in Walter Benjamin’s work. Aura is a very ambivalent concept, but he basically meant that even with things or with nature, or with a landscape, there could be different ways of relating: it is looking back at you, it is speaking to you, it is somehow getting through. The concept of alienation only gains its strength when you really make the effort to think of the opposite.

Now there you have the problem you mention that you have total pluralism in the ways that we relate to the world. That is why I am very confident about the concept of resonance because it describes the nature of a relationship, but it doesn't describe or prescribe the substance: it leaves open what you relate to.

TL/RC: Is it a formal category?

HR: You could say it is a formal category, although the question of form or substance in this context is actually totally confusing. It's a kind of *Vexierbild*; it shifts. I think it is substantive in terms of the quality of the relationship, but it is formal in terms of what is at the end. I am inclined towards a relational ontology, saying that the subject and the world are actually created out of the relationship. So, I can say something about the nature of relationships, and that would be the way to reconcile the idea of resonance as an idea of the good life with ethical and conceptual pluralism or cultural pluralism.

We try to study this at the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt. We now have a long-term project, studying *Weltbeziehung*. This is actually a difficult term to translate into English because I would have to already introduce the subject – subject-world relationships – while I am not sure whether “subject” and “world” are not already secondary terms. Anyway, it is about these relationships in different cultural settings. In my book I say that resonance has three axes: social, material and vertical, and the way they are spread out is different for every culture. For example, in the vertical sphere it will depend on whether there is a god, or if there are many gods, or whether there are Daoist entities or whatever it is. It is the same in the inter-subjective realm: what kinds of relationships are made resonant, to whom and for whom? It is very different in all cultures and it is the same certainly with things. I think all cultures somehow have the idea that certain places or spaces are resonant, or certain entities like the forest, or the sacred stone or whatever it is. But I would even go one step further and say that maybe even those three axes are culturally dependent because to distinguish between the social and the objective, the artifact, and so on, is already perhaps not necessary.

TL/RC: Or between artifacts and spirits?

HR: Yes, exactly. In animistic societies you always find axes of resonance, although they might be ordered very differently. But this is still reconcilable with the idea of resonance. I would have still one question though, and that is that I do not know whether the very idea of resonance requires a closed subject, that is whether the subject and the world maybe have to be somehow closed in order to become resonant bodies. It is the same with physical bodies: if you have a musical instrument, let's say a violin, it will only make its sound – that is resonate – if it is closed enough to have its own voice. So, it needs to be closed and it needs to be open in order to be affected. It is a very specific form of being closed and open. This is why I am a bit hesitant about whether on some level maybe other cultures cannot so easily be described in terms of resonance, because the relationships between subject and world may sometimes be more porous. This might be one level where maybe we have to adjust the concept in cultural terms, but on a basic level I believe that it is really true that all human beings, wherever they are born, only become an individual, a self or a subject, or however you call it, through processes of resonance.

TL/RC: Of course, your theory is also in that sense meant as a response to, and a theory about, modernity, right? In that sense it already is at least historically located.

HR: Yes, the main emphasis of my whole book was about how did this develop in modernity. What sensibilities for resonance, what axes for resonance and what obstacles, so to speak, emerge in modernity, and what is the modern way of relating to the world? But I did have this assumption that resonance is a kind of pre-modern capacity, so there is an anthropological element there.

TL/RC: To follow up on that, you say that at a certain point humans have a basic need for resonance just as they have a basic need for food. That seems like a strong claim which, if you look at it from a critical theory perspective, might raise some problems with regard to the historical and cultural variability of needs.

HR: Do you not think it is a plausible claim?

TL/RC: It might sound quite plausible, especially in the context of your book, but all the while there has been this debate in critical theory – for instance if you look at feminist scholars like Nancy Fraser, who articulate a critique of need interpretation and ascriptions in a meta-historical or meta-cultural sense. So, either it is a strong claim, or it is a conceptual overstretch or a truism, in which a large range of different activities or relations all fall under the heading of resonance. Then it becomes more a way of constructing a theory.

HR: There are two problems or misconceptions with the concept of resonance generally. The first is to think of resonance as just being harmony, as if I'm saying that it would be great when everything is harmonious or consonant. But I always say that total harmony or total consonance is not resonance at all, because for resonance there have to be different voices. The second is the conceptual overstretch, the idea that all relationships are interpreted as resonance. For example, if I punch you and you punch me back and we say: "well, that's resonance". I always emphasize that this is not resonance: resonance is tied to an openness, of wanting to be affected and answering, so it is a very specific form of relationship.

Thus far I am convinced that there is good evidence on all levels that human beings – and maybe this even goes for all mammals – are forced, by everything they are, to develop such relationships. As Merleau-Ponty writes: I start with the sense that something is there, something is present. This is the first element of awareness and you can actually notice this when you wake up from very deep sleep or from being unconscious. Before you know who you are and what the world is you have this sensation that there is something, right? I think it is totally inconceivable for a human being without this sense to develop relationships. So I would say yes, I am fully convinced that this is the basic category.

It is similar to what Axel Honneth writes with regard to recognition: human beings need recognition of some sort. Or what people talk about with regard to the language capacity of human beings. These conceptions have a similar structure to what

I want to say about resonance. On a basic level, getting into resonance, developing a sense of who you are and what the world is out of moments, or processes, of resonance, is something everyone is engaged in. People need recognition and they need language, independent of the kind of recognition or the exact language they then speak. The latter is historically dependent.

So, there are two sides to what I want to say. There is an anthropological need or element of resonance, but then the specific form it takes, the specific need and the specific sensibilities you can only explain historically, which is what I try to do in the chapter on modernity, where I try to work out our modern conception of love, for example. I am not claiming that that particular conception is anthropological, not even the relationship to our children, art or nature. Whether you believe that there is a voice of nature, that is not anthropological, but a specification that developed out of this basic anthropological need. Again, I think it is the same as when you think about language; if you reflect upon our language then of course you would have to make a lot of historical qualifications depending on whether you are talking about Swahili or German, but you can still talk about a basic need or capacity for language. I can't really see why you couldn't do both, thereby avoiding the two pitfalls that you were rightfully pointing to.

TL/RC: On the one hand, it seems that you try to aim at developing a notion of alienation and resonance that is not reducible to a merely subjective experience. On the other hand, your notion of resonance is still experience-based – e.g. when you claim that alienation is overcome if the subjects in question make the experience that the (natural and social) world resonates with them. However, again from a critical theory perspective, one could imagine that such experiences of resonance are very much part and parcel of the most common forms of alienation. Do you end up having to claim that the neoliberal subjects who, say, really feel resonance when they go to their yoga class or have a break in Bali or go to the wine tasting in their local hipster bar (without having a purely instrumental relation to these activities) know deep inside themselves that this is not true but simulated (and thus alienation-enhancing) resonance. Your idea of simulated resonance is intriguing, but it seems that you then have to refer to objective criteria in order to

distinguish actual from merely simulated resonance.

HR: Those are tricky points. On the deepest level, there is really a very difficult question: Is resonance a psychological relation – something I experience – or is it an ontological relation – something that is really going on between us. If it is ontological, then it is somewhere out there; if it is psychological, then I feel if our conversation was resonant or not. I really want to say that it is more than psychological, it is a kind of “in between”. Charles Taylor has something similar in mind in his discussion of romantic philosophy in terms of the “inter space”. You could also think of Bruno Latour’s work. Resonance cannot just be understood along constructivist lines – as if we could construct or project it – it is a kind of “in between”. As for the neoliberal subject and stimulated resonance: the feeling is that there is something wrong with going to Bali or the yoga class, but the question is: what is wrong? Let’s take the example of an ideal neoliberal manager going to the yoga class and to Bali on holiday, about whom I think I can make two points. The first concerns the basic disposition, the disposition towards the world within which you operate and which is not just of your own choosing: in the case of the neoliberal, what he does for a living in the business sphere is characterized by a very instrumental stance towards the world and this is at odds with resonance. Why? Because getting into resonance involves a kind of not knowing when it happens, not knowing what the outcome will be. So, it requires a kind of openness, which is a different disposition from the instrumental, optimizing, efficiency-oriented rationalizing stance which you normally have to take. The basic stance you take towards the world as a neoliberal manager is one of reification and then you seek to counterbalance it through what I call an oasis of resonance, like a yoga class. So, what is wrong with the yoga class? The main problem concerns the difference between resonance and sentimentality. I use the German term *Rührung* and develop it out of the work of Helmuth Plessner. Another example would be watching Hollywood blockbusters like *Titanic*, which are very melodramatic. Let’s say I cry at the end and someone asks me: “Oh, that’s what you mean by resonance.” I would respond that this is not exactly what I mean by resonance, this is *Rührung*, which does not involve encountering some other which really has this also irritating difference, which calls on me to answer. *Rührung* is just about having a strong

sensation within myself and I only instrumentally use this other. It is not encountering an other, to which I then answer. What is also missing here is any sense of self-efficacy, this reaching out to the other and getting into contact with it and thereby being transformed. The vital element of resonance is tied to this encounter in which I experience a transformation of myself, I experience this other, which transforms me. And if I only have an oasis, e.g. if I meditate once in a while, then this feels totally empty, and this is not resonance. I call it an echo-chamber. Probably the same holds for the trip to Bali: It does not really involve getting into contact with something that truly transforms you, it is just for about forgetting the instrumental stance I am forced to take for a limited time.

TL/RC: So, it is also instrumental in that it allows you to momentarily get away from yourself?

HR: Yes, exactly, this is what I call the reification of resonance, the idea that you try to use these moments in order to be more successful, but the thing is that then your basic disposition towards the world, the way that you relate to it, remains instrumental, optimizing, speeding up. In this case you use remnants, or simulations or echo-chambers in order to be even more successful.

3. Resonance

TL/RC: Moving on to the theory of resonance, what struck us also as readers of Benjamin is that in your definition of resonance you speak of an instant, a “momentum”, an *Aufblitzen*, which could remind one of both the concept of aura and of now-time. Do you indeed consider this experience of resonance as so limited in time, and, if so, why? How do these instances relate to the more durable relations and axes of resonance that you refer to (do they give rise to them, keep them dynamic, undermine them)? And, following up on that, are these “instances” enough to counter (or answer) the problem of acceleration and the alienation that they somehow answer to?

HR: This is a very difficult question as well. In my book I do not really focus on the temporality of resonance, which is maybe surprising given my earlier work. It is true that I write that strong experiences of resonance are only momentary, and that this kind of dynamic cannot be put on a permanent basis. But we are speaking of *experiences* of resonance – and they are unpredictable. If you look at music, which has been a paradigm case for me, but also at religious experiences or love, I think there is empirical evidence for claiming that people who go to concerts a lot only one out of ten or even hundred times really have a strong experience, but it is strong enough to go back to it, to search for it again and again. So it is a momentary experience but you develop it along axes and axes are more stable, so if music is important to you, you keep going to concerts and you have at least memories, reminisces of resonance, which can permanently reassure your axes of resonance.

Rituals actually play a strong role in creating conditions for resonance. In religion this is very clear but also in rock concerts or in football stadiums there is a very clear ritualistic sense. This is something that we want to explore in Erfurt, in a research group called “Ritual and Resonance”. The idea is that this brings you into a certain disposition. I call these preconditions axes and these axes are developed over time because they also create the experience that resonance might happen and your sense of self-efficacy. The other very important element is the disposition. You can only get into these moments of resonance or relationships of resonance, if your disposition towards the world is resonant: being open to hearing the call, being affected, and you have to have the expectation that you can reach out. What I call self-efficacy is not exactly psychological. It concerns reaching out and making these moments possible, and this position is something that you can actually work on and that is more temporarily extended. So, you have axes of resonance, which are established over time and need a certain form of stability, and you have dispositions of resonance, and both involve long-term stability. In comparison, experiences of resonance are temporary. Still, I think it is wrong to assume that resonance means being completely in the here and now. When you really experience resonance, the temporal horizon rather widens, it extends; it is the co-presence of the past and the future. Once you are in resonance with something it is like the past speaks to you and through you into the future. It is this extending that makes it

feel as if time is running through you. This is different from the examples of the Bali vacation and the yoga class as in these cases one just wants to be in the here and now and block out what one did yesterday and what one will do tomorrow – this is not the temporal structure of resonance. In resonance the past and the present are meaningfully reconnected.

TL/RC: You make it very clear that “resonance” isn’t the same as harmony, and you clearly delineate resonance from concepts such as *Eigentlichkeit* or authenticity. At the same time, the very metaphor of resonance, the usual meaning of the term, might be seen as working against you. After all, something only “resonates” if it is of the same kind, think of musical tones – this could be seen as the fundamental problem of the allegory of the tuning forks you use to clarify your notion of resonance. What space does this leave for truly dissonant voices?

HR: For me at least the greatest insight to get out of the resonance conception is a way to overcome the aporetic dualism between authenticity and identity theories on the one hand, and post-structural difference theories on the other. Resonance is not about authenticity in the sense that I must be true to myself or that it confirms my authenticity, because it involves transformation: it is feeling called upon by something different that transforms me. In that sense it fits difference theories, but I would argue that it is not mere difference, because I have to develop my own voice and answer the call. So, I would say that it is exactly in between those two. There are elements of dissonance, or difference, which cannot be overcome. But I cannot enter into a relation of resonance if, for example, it is a thought, or an experience, that is so different that I cannot relate to it. Of course, there are also those moments of dissonance that are tied to what I call repulsion. In my view there is no negative resonance. There is a very clear distinction, and you can really feel it immediately or reproduce it phenomenologically, between repulsion and resonance.

Take the example of a discussion: if we all agree completely, there is no resonance; if the interlocutor always agrees, there is no resonance at all, it is just a monologue. Resonance is not consonance. With my best friends I always argue all the time

about everything; it involves hearing a voice that says something different and that makes me answer, a process whereby we both shift and transform into something else. The situation might turn if you say, for example, “You are just a racist idiot” – then closure occurs and I no longer want to be affected. That is a different stance towards the world and I want to conceptually distinguish these two elements: one is repulsion and the other is resonance. Resonance is not agreement; resonance is in between consonance and dissonance. Of course, there are moments of dissonance which are repulsion and that are not resonance at all, but in the hermeneutical tradition there is this thought – maybe first articulated by Gadamer, but you find it in Taylor as well – that an adequate answer to the claim “I don’t understand” could be “then change yourself in order to understand it”. Resonance is natural realization of this thought. It’s not so much “I have to change myself” but rather “let yourself be transformed by the other” by getting in touch with it. The more you already are in a resonant relationship with the world, the more your capacity widens to really get into contact with difference. Difference can become more different and it can increase if you have the expectation of entering into a resonant relationship, then you find it interesting to encounter a Muslim or a Buddhist or whatever it is. But if you have the feeling- and I read this in the political situation- if you feel non-resonantly connected to the world, if you feel alienated then your stance is “I do not want these Muslims here”, then you are closed to difference. I really think the political problem here might be tied to a lack of self-efficacy.

TL/RC: Doesn’t ideology also often work through resonance? Creating a group identity or a community can also be a way of creating resonance. So of course when you are afraid of the world, you might say “I do not want Muslims in my neighborhood” but it might also be that you have a tight community, e.g. in a small village, and when someone enters you cannot form this resonant relationship because of the kind of community you are in.

HR: Empirically this seems wrong to me. There is research that indicated that anti-immigration feelings are not strongest in tight knit, old communities like peasant villages, but in the commuter neighborhoods of the suburbs of big cities where people do not know each other, where they do not have a community- that

is exactly the point where they might feel that they don’t have a voice or collective self-efficacy and therefore they turn against strangers. If you have a well-functioning community, then taking in strangers is a rather welcome opportunity. If you have the fear of losing the community that means you have the fear of losing your own voice. In such a situation you cannot answer, then you are overwhelmed and you feel that you have to give in to the foreigners. That is exactly the anxiety that fuels anti-immigration feelings all over the world.

If you feel you have a strong community, a vibrant life, then you are not so concerned that you have to give in. Of course, there might be a point at which you lose your own voice, but this is far from the situation we’re in. If you have the experience of a resonant community then it is not a problem to take in foreigners. As for ideology, in my view political ideologies are only successful if they find an axis of resonance- they have to touch on this somehow. But of course, ideologies very soon become a kind of echo-chamber. Most ideologies live on resentment and resentment is the opposite of resonance. You even see this in the gestures, in the faces, you hear it in the voices: the whole attitude is repulsive towards the world. Therefore, I think that we can distinguish between a resonant attitude and an ideology which is not resonance, which is a kind of echo-chamber based on resentment.

TL/RC: You also describe resonance as a kind of emotive response. When discussing recognition you point out that resonance is closer to Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence, a kind of collective ecstasy in which members of the collective undergo a process of fusion which is largely beyond their cognitive and deliberative capacities and you also invoke Weber’s notion of charisma – turning to the politics of resonance, this does sound very familiar with regard to current right-wing populism and rather scary: How do you avoid the slide into an anti-rationalist collectivist politics which leaves little room for dissenting voices? Can the desire for resonance that you ascribe to citizens – including to the infamous *Wutbürger* – really be an emancipatory energy?

HR: This question has many layers. To start with, I think that in the case of the

Wutbürger there is a lack of resonance. The desire for resonance creates the Wutbürger and even right-wing populist movements. They feel that they are not heard and not seen: they are not resonantly connected with politics. That is why they say all the time that the politicians do not hear them, they do not speak to them or for them. This is a form of political alienation. Right-wing populists give the promise of resonance: “We hear you, we see you, we give you a voice.” This is the case with Brexit, Trump, the AfD in Germany. But there is a double fallacy of right-wing populism. The first fallacy is to say that alienation is created by immigrants. If you look at East Germany or Eastern Europe, for example, there are hardly any immigrants. To believe that your deep sentiment of alienation is caused by a tiny minority of Muslims is totally idiotic, it is not a rational explanation. The second fallacy is even worse and consists in the promise of a “resonance” that is not resonance, but fusion.

I like Erich Fromm’s theory because he saw that alienation is the deepest fear of modern individuals. There are two ways to overcome it. One is through fusion: I want to overcome my isolation and fuse with all the others who are like myself and that is what right-wing populism really promises. The idea is exactly the opposite of getting in touch with the other or some other. Right-wing populism lives off this idea of being against: Those who support it do not want to hear anyone else except for themselves and this is normally just one voice – the leader. This is an ideology of complete harmony, which is not resonance at all. It is a total echo-chamber based on repulsion. Jan-Werner Müller gets this right with his idea that the populists claim “we are the people and no one else.” “Whoever is not of our opinion, is not the people.” This is so blatantly non-resonant that I don’t think it makes any sense to claim that right-wing populists create resonance.

Resonance is a multilayered phenomenon and I insist that it is not just cognitive. In contrast to Habermas’s and Forst’s emphasis on reasons, and in line with William Connolly, there is a visceral and almost bodily quality to politics. So, resonance is something that is always embodied, it is emotional but it is not dissolved from the cognitive element. Resonant relationships therefore also create resonance between rationality and emotivity and the embodied side. So there has to be some

kind of rational control, and what I tried to develop in the book is that you can only be in resonance with something that is connected to a strong evaluation: something which you are convinced is truly important to even relate to, and therefore there is of course a kind of rational check. You cannot get into resonance with something you cannot rationally explain at least as potentially valuable.

TL/RC: To conclude, here are two more questions on art. First, you already mentioned the notion of “oases of resonance”, amidst an accelerating world, and in the book you also suggest that art might be a possible example. Would the early critical theorists agree? Think of Marcuse’s notion of the “affirmative character of culture”, which allows you to temporarily turn away from bourgeois society but therefore also affirms it and conditions it in a way, or of Adorno’s rejection of art as *Sonntagsvergnügen*. Should art offer an “oasis” and thereby affirm the existing order or should it not offer an “oasis” at all?

HR: This is a very interesting question. At least I have the intuition that I do not share Adorno’s opinion here; as I said there are moments of art that are more like Plessner’s *Rührung*, the sentimentality that I described above. It allows us to feel good for a moment. But I also think there is art that is neither “high” nor “low” culture and which is not about having fun or being entertained – I think of my heroes Pink Floyd – but where “something is going on” or “something comes across”. If it is only about having fun then it is like Plessner’s sentimentality... like the Hollywood blockbuster after which I want to cry, or feel good or sad. This is not about resonance. Art should insist on the transformative element of resonance. You see it even in rock music, where a lot of people say that after listening to a record or going to a concert they have become a different person. Of course, this is only a rhetorical way of speaking but there is some moment of truth here which points to the transformative effect that art needs to preserve. If it becomes only an “oasis” like the Hollywood blockbuster then we are lost.

If you really resonate with something then the result is unpredictable. It is not that you are better off on Monday. So even though you might go to the museum on Sunday, just as in in order to counterbalance the alienating experiences you have

in the rest of the week, there might be this one moment, this experience of touching that has a kind of excess meaning, which gives you a sense of a different way of relating to the world. If you don't have such experiences that reinvigorate your sense of the possibility of a different way of relating to the world, then you're really in a difficult situation.

In the book I claim that even on the everyday shop floor level work is an axis of resonance. People love to work and they feel self-efficacy in their work. Even in the industrial factory workers say they have a sense of doing good work or making things well, and then they feel the counter pressures of being fast, efficient, and cheap. It is exactly in this resonant experience of work that you develop a counterforce, even a bodily felt resistance. My colleagues in industrial sociology are really struck by this, that people on the factory level say that the problem is that they are not allowed to do their work properly, to do good work. Even under alienating conditions there is therefore this moment of resonance in art as well as in work.

TL/RC: You write that much art is an expression of alienation, and the *Winterreise* is one of the best examples you give for this. On the other hand, isn't this a somehow limited (romantic or early modernist) notion of art? How about conceptual art, pop-art, etc.? Is it necessarily the goal and/or responsibility of art to offer us "resonant" experiences? Aesthetically it seems a bit dubious to claim, as you do in the book, that atonal music, abstract art and fragmented literary narrative show how art can lose its force – how is that more than an expression of your own aesthetic preference? So in line with that, how does the concept of resonance here relate to other aesthetic concepts, such as the sublime, shock, the abject, and the like, because those can also be very strong aesthetic experiences, right? Perhaps an aesthetic experience doesn't need to be resonant.

HR: I disagree. I would say that the experiences of the sublime or shock moments are moments of resonance because you encounter something that is irreducible. Strong evaluation can arise out of the experience – there is something, even in the experience of shock, that gets through to me and even I don't understand it, it is a voice speaking that might have something to say. Someone will have to convince

me that in some contemporary art, like atonal music, there is still this element of experience. Overall, my reflections on art and aesthetic experience focus on the receptive side: how do we experience these works of art? In the moment of strong evaluation we do not just say that an artwork is innovative, or original, but that there is something there that is truly important in itself and that speaks to us. I have the feeling that this sense is lost in many forms of contemporary art.

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Notes

1] Translated in English as *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity* (2013). The only book available in Dutch by Rosa is *Leven in tijden van versnelling. Een pleidooi voor resonantie* (Boom 2016), which contains excerpts from *Alienation and Acceleration* (2010), as well as an epilogue based on *Resonanz*.

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