

REVIEW

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The moral and political challenges of Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance

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Abstract

This paper explores a series of challenges presented by Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance viewed in the context of the normative and political dimensions of critical theory, a tradition in which he explicitly places his work (even as he draws on a wide range of other scholarly fields and domains). First, a tension between the anthropological and sociocultural aspects of his project raises questions about whether the avowed political commitments of the project can be incorporated into its theoretical framework. Second, the variability with which resonance can present, and its fundamentally pathic nature, makes it difficult to imagine how it might serve an emancipatory interest. Beyond this, the critical diagnosis of forms of impaired or deficient resonance introduces methodological questions with moral consequences. Despite these challenges, Rosa's project importantly calls for a renewed relation to the world, one that shares affinities with parallel developments within the humanities.

Keywords: Modernity, Acceleration, Resonance, Critical theory, Environmentalism, Disability, Capitalism, Psychology, Democracy, Humanities

Introduction

In *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*, Hartmut Rosa reframes debates over the normative dimensions of modernity as they have been developed in several thought lineages, including, most prominently, the tradition of critical theory reaching from Marx to the Frankfurt School up through the theories of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth (Rosa 2019). Beyond this key orienting genealogy, Rosa also proposes a distinctive reorientation for sociology itself, which is given pride of place in the book's title and in key moments of methodological and theoretical reflection. Indeed, Rosa's work speaks to and encompasses fields of knowledge and forms of cultural production stretching from the sciences (medicine and neuroscience, in particular) to the human sciences (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology) and the arts (narrative, poetry, and music). *Resonance* builds on Rosa's earlier work on acceleration, arguing that insofar as the escalatory logic of capitalist modernity has produced crises in the environmental, political, and psychological spheres, then the countervalue to be acknowledged and promoted is resonance (Rosa 2013). As he pithily puts it in the first sentence of the book, "If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution" (Rosa

2019, 1). While the normative valences of resonance can change in different contexts, overall it serves as the orienting value within an account of the world that seeks to balance diagnostic critique of the negative effects of modernity against an acknowledgment of its positive achievements and an affirmation of the reparative potential of a world in which experiences of resonance become widely available and actively pursued.

Despite the distinctiveness of its core concept, Rosa's account shares certain features with other major frameworks within critical theory, features that Rosa reflects on at key moments in the text. Yet two key issues raise seriously the question of just how far we can place Rosa into that tradition. First, a tension between the sociocultural and the anthropological dimensions of Rosa's account, the latter of which is related to its underlying psychological framework, raises significant questions about whether the avowed political commitments of the project can truly be served by, or ever effectively incorporated into, its theoretical framework. Second, and relatedly, it is unclear, and of utmost interest, whether and how the concept of resonance, despite its frame-shifting power and normative richness, can function as an emancipatory interest. Beyond this, there are ethical and political problems raised in the very method itself, particularly when the critical analysis is used to make objective or diagnostic claims about forms of experience. Rosa's account is synchronous with other current intellectual formations—notably within the humanities—which seek to move from the bleakness of a systems view to a more affirmative avowal of forms of personal and collective experiences and practices that can serve a redemptive or transformative role. I will return to some of these parallels and their implications at the end of this essay. It is important to acknowledge upfront that there is nothing inherently wrong with this duality, which characterizes much modern critical thought. But there is a potentially troubling issue at play in moments where the critical perspective plays an objectivizing and evaluative role in the discussion of forms of experience judged to be symptomatic of failed, diminished, or destroyed resonance.

Resonance in the context of critical theory

What precisely is resonance and why is it the counter-term to acceleration? First, it is important to acknowledge a certain asymmetry in Rosa's opposing terms. One of the terms describes a systemic condition, whereas the other describes a form of experience. Acceleration describes a cultural, sociological, and economic dynamic: an endless drive for accumulation that functions through increases not only in growth but in tempo and momentum. Because they are swept up into and affected by these forces, humans lose the capacity for meaningful experiences in which they feel connected to others and to the world. Resonance is defined by moments in which one dwells in, feels present with, an absorbing experience—whether it be social, aesthetic, religious, bodily, or environmental. Insofar as modern life, in Rosa's account, promotes feelings of alienation in which one's relation to the world feels mute or even repulsive, primary and sustaining aspects of human existence become harder to achieve. Any response to this situation must begin with a comprehensive account of the histories and contexts—cultural, political, and institutional—that have created this diminished and damaging form of experiencing the world. While Rosa believes that ideally societies should work to create the conditions in which resonance can be pluralistically promoted and sustained, he also

cautions that as it stands his project can only serve as an invitation or threshold to the larger project of societal transformation.

Rosa characterizes the tradition of critical theory as itself registering both the diagnostic attitude toward capitalist acceleration and the normative aspiration toward resonance that he seeks to unfold and amplify: “the opposition between a dominant, alienating, and reifying capitalist present and a longed-for resonance-engendering alternative social order forms a connective link in the chain of critical thinkers from Marx via Lukàcs, Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse to Habermas and Honneth” (Rosa 2019, 336). Beginning with the early humanist Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* and ending with the reconstructive emphases of Habermas and Honneth, Rosa places special emphasis on the normative ideals that undergird the critique of modernity throughout the history of Western Marxism: in his view, they indicate a longing for resonance even if they do not name it as such or elaborate it as fully as he will. Rosa particularly considers himself to belong within the line of thinkers who acknowledge a dual aspect to modernity. As he makes clear across two successive chapter titles in the third part of the book, modernity should be understood on the one hand as “the history of a catastrophe of resonance” and on the other as “the history of increasing sensitivity to resonance” (Rosa 2019, 307, 357). In this way, Rosa echoes approaches we see in Habermas and Honneth, where a sense of progressive aspiration is linked to positive elements within modernity, including the critical dismantling of unquestioned tradition and authority, the emergence of democratic practices and institutions, and the forms of self-actualization made possible by these developments.

Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the book is the manner in which Rosa affiliates with, and yet differentiates himself from, both Habermas and Honneth. This back-and-forth movement stems from the need to distinguish the profound shift entailed by the concept of resonance. Rosa draws on core elements from both thinkers, emphasizing that Honneth’s theory of recognition is utterly crucial to his project insofar as it helps to illuminate our need to “develop and maintain resonant relationships to the world” (Rosa 2019, 200). Intersubjective relations and the forms of recognition, disregard, and disrespect that characterize them are key to understanding the ways in which resonance is thwarted and enabled. Similarly, Habermas’s theory of communicative action, with its orientation toward mutual understanding, is seen to capture a key form of resonant experience, while his account of the ways in which fundamental communicative practices provide the basis upon which democratic practices and institutions are built informs Rosa’s own emphasis on democratic politics as “a sphere of resonance” that promotes “a relation of response between [democratic] institutions and citizens” (Rosa 2019, 350). Habermas is also credited with recognizing some of the central threats to resonance in modern society. His emphasis on the ways in which the accelerated growth of the economy and the state result in what he calls a “colonization of the lifeworld” is for Rosa an insight into the ways in which acceleration has resulted in a “catastrophe of resonance” in its destruction of opportunities of mutual understanding across many social practices (Rosa 2019, 350). At the same time, however, limitations are identified in both thinkers. Both are seen to focus too exclusively on intersubjective relations, which for Rosa are only a part of the manifold ways in which we relate to ourselves, others, and the world. Honneth fails to attend to the ways in which the escalatory logic of capitalism

produces greater and greater need for recognition, which is at the same time felt to be always insufficient and precarious. And Habermas is faulted for over-emphasizing cognitive dimensions of existence and thereby also missing the many spheres of resonance open to individuals and collectives. For Rosa, despite their powerful contributions to the understanding of modernity, a range of forms of relation are missing in these two thinkers, not only those that extend to experiences that involve the body, nature, and the world, but also modes of experience that can be described as “mimetic, charismatic, auratic, erotic or ‘organic’” (Rosa 2019, 356).

The psychology and politics of resonance

The moments of distancing from his more immediate theoretical forebears begin to illuminate what is so distinctive about Rosa’s new sociological critique, the challenging and provocative elements of his primary concept, resonance. In order to begin to see how his account shifts the framework and aspirations of critical theory, it is necessary to unfold the informing anthropological assumptions of his work, especially given its interdisciplinary pluralism. At the heart of Rosa’s account is a claim that human subjects are “anthropologically disposed to resonance” and, furthermore, motivated by two “fundamental driving forces”: desire for resonance and fear of alienation (Rosa 2019, 248, 114). Through the reference to “fundamental driving forces,” we see the integration of psychological language into the anthropological framework of Rosa’s project. It is not entirely clear how these orienting drives relate to the larger theory of development according to which subject and world “are first formed, shaped, and in fact constituted in and through their mutual relatedness” (Rosa 2019, 32). This larger question comes to mind due to the fact that the relation between drives and environment is a primary and contested issue in the history of psychoanalysis. Here is where a certain tension between the anthropological/psychological and the sociocultural perspectives begins to make itself felt. It is imperative, from Rosa’s point of view, that we acknowledge, diagnose, and ideally address the historical and cultural formations that inflect our experiences of alienation and resonance. In a summary statement, Rosa asserts a dynamic interconnection between the core drives, the subject’s active reflections, and the surrounding context: “As I have tried to make plain, fear and desire as elementary forms of our relationship to the world are initially ineluctably emotional states rooted in the phenomenal body that nevertheless change and overlap with a subject’s cognitive convictions and evaluative attitudes, which themselves are the outcome of cultural worldviews and social practices” (Rosa 2019, 120). Despite its theoretical nuance, such a statement leaves under-elaborated the precise nature of these elementary forms, and perhaps even more importantly, the way in which they might be seen to inform the larger political implications of the study.

Any anthropological or psychological claim, given its universalizing force, will carry significant weight within a broader critical or systems theory. Indeed, shifting one’s orienting anthropological or psychological framework can have a transformative effect on the larger theory. For example, in *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Honneth takes pains to situate his own work on the struggle for recognition in the tradition of D. W. Winnicott’s object-relations psychoanalysis, a theory which famously departs from Freudian drive theory (Honneth 1996). In doing so, he moves from the structural insistence within Freudian theory on an intrapsychic conflict

between the instincts and the ego toward a relational model of recognition that emerges from a complex set of interactions with one's primary caretaker. In philosophical terms, Honneth draws a line from Hegel to Winnicott, one which moves away from the intrapsychic emphases of both Kant and Freud. This theoretical perspective becomes critical to Honneth's move to build an ethics of self-esteem and an accompanying conception of rights on the importance of primary intersubjective relations as well as an open-ended process of development that does not have the tragic structure of the Freudian model. A similar parallel between informing psychology and larger systems theory can be seen at play in Habermas, where Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which traces the ways in which subjects learn over time to apply models of fairness and to critically examine embedded customs, chimes in key ways with Habermas's theory of communicative action, his principles of democratic proceduralism, and the notion of modernity as an ongoing and unfinished project.

It is worth exploring, given these models from his own avowed tradition, how Rosa's informing psychological frameworks relate to his larger sociological theory. To a significant extent, it does seem that something like a drive theory may inhabit his account, with interesting repercussions for the normative dimensions of his treatment of the guiding concept of resonance. Alternatively, the formulations he uses to signal the importance of his core concept—assertions that humans fundamentally desire resonance, or long for it when access to it is diminished through societal or other conditions—may simply be ways of asserting the concept's relevance and reach, especially insofar as it is a newly proposed concept in the field. Nonetheless, the repeated suggestion that it is a fundamental drive or desire raises the question of how to assess the concept's normative force, forms of actualization, and connection to aspirational ideals in the ethical and political realm.

A number of aspects of resonance immediately pose challenges when viewed in the light of such a question. We are told at several junctures that an unregulated or excessive desire for resonance can present negatively, as hostility or violence or, in the political arena, as a susceptibility to totalitarianism (Rosa 2019 39, 70, 172, 267, 449). And yet elsewhere we are reminded that resonance is a pluralistic concept, able to accommodate a wealth of content and contexts: "Resonance as the 'other' of alienation is a relational need that is open in terms of content; it does not stipulate what forms of work, love, faith, or coexistence are 'correct,' nor whether or not art, nature, or religion is necessary to lead a successful life. Rather it allows the possibility of resonant—or mute—relationships to the world for all manner of historically and culturally different kinds of subjects living in completely different social formations" (Rosa 2019, 182). Beyond this core evaluative asymmetry between firm judgment and capacious contextualism, there is a further question about how precisely to understand the value of resonance in relation to the normative force of the critique of acceleration. When presenting resonance, Rosa situates his argument in contrast to those who would posit autonomy rather than resonance as the counter-concept to alienation (Rosa 2019 20–22, 176–77). For Rosa, any overvaluing of autonomy plays into the very aspects of modern life that block us from resonant experience, insofar as it promotes individualism, maximization of resources, and a hyper-controlled orientation toward experience. In contrast, he emphasizes the importance of what he calls the

“pathic” side of experiences of resonance, its association with forms of patience rather than agency, its openness to moments of loss of control and being present in the moment. While one can see the value of forms of experience that fail or refuse to conform to the logic of acceleration, it is hard to see how such experiences are or could become part of a sustained and critically aware alternative to the present system. One could argue that they appear to function merely as forms of escapism—as pockets of shielded or alternative experience, as moments that create a pause in the midst of an overwhelming and unstoppable process, as fundamentally restorative rather than transformative. This aspect of resonance highlights an issue that Rosa himself returns to reflectively in the afterword to the book: the issue of power. A pathic conception of resonance, which is to say a conception of resonance as an experience that simply happens to one, works to occlude questions of power, particularly power conceived as something exercised by some people over others, or something inherent within institutions or states or societies. Rosa is clear that a proper sociological critique must specify the ways in which particular institutions and societies create conditions in which resonance is not accessible, or in which the possibilities for experiencing it are differentially distributed, as for example in school systems with vastly different resource levels depending on wealth. In this sense, the critique is trained on questions of power relating to access and resources. But resonance itself can seem to simply bracket the question of power.

In part, the political problem is a historical and sociological one. In contemporary society, according to Rosa, democracy is in crisis, unable to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of citizens. Its original promise and ongoing potential is, however, to be a sphere of resonance, one which ideally would balance unifying forms of association against dynamic engagements with plurality and difference. Ultimately, Rosa argues, any society which seeks to insure opportunities for resonance for all its members—to allow all citizens to “vibrate” as they wish—must necessarily be “liberal, democratic, and pluralistic” (Rosa 2019, 438). In this sense, resonance theory promotes an ongoing commitment to institutional and political revitalization.

As we have seen, however, Rosa does not imagine an easy path from critique to transformation, or from resonance to politics, and only sees his own project as a kind of threshold theory. And yet there are some intriguing characterizations of resonance that suggest otherwise. Moments of resonance associated with transformative aspirations contain a certain impetus and awareness that departs from the pathic forms that Rosa elsewhere emphasizes. Indeed, at key moments Rosa defines resonance as “a flash of hope for adaptive transformation and response in a silent world” (Rosa 2019, 187). In this formulation and the passages that unfold or recur to it, a higher reflective awareness is at play, one that is most often linked to aesthetic contexts, or to heightened experiences of self-efficacy or self-actualization. As Rosa writes with respect to the aesthetic sphere, “a central source of inspiration in art has appeared to lie in the painful experience of an ossified, frozen, and silent world, against which is juxtaposed a kind of poetic hope for resonance” (Rosa 2019, 310–11). It is worth noting that at a moment such as this, Rosa sounds closer to Adorno than to Habermas or Honneth. The form of reflective awareness that presumably characterizes an aspirational politics or the pursuit of a life plan—one linked to steady self-aware practice—is here

replaced with a romanticized tragic stance that seems dispositionally at odds with the frameworks undergirding Rosa's liberal democratic frameworks.

Interestingly, when discussing certain political forms that manifest a distorted or problematic form of resonance, and thereby in his view are not supportive of the pluralistic democratic forms that he favors, a tension between a preferred political disposition and a valorized aesthetic one becomes apparent. In a discussion that begins with the observation that many citizens experience diminished expectations of self-efficacy through normal political channels, Rosa goes on to characterize alternate forms of political engagement—such as the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring—as problematically directed against political conditions themselves rather than toward any positive collective transformation. Rosa writes, “In comparison to what I have sought to define as the sphere of genuine political resonance, this sort of swiftly escalating resonance of outrage is deficient in two respects. First it is in no way democratic, at least not per se. Many voices are drowned out by the rising noise, while others are never able to be heard in the first place....Moreover, there appears to be an inverse relationship between a political movement's intensity of outrage and its sensitivity to resonance (which demands contradiction)” (Rosa 2019, 224–25). One might pose several questions upon reading this, and especially when one sets it next to Rosa's statements about “adaptive transformation” in the sphere of art. Why is it not possible to see more radical forms of protest, even those that are fundamentally acts of opposition or refusal, as expressive, especially in their collective manifestation, of a “flash of hope” or a moment of political resonance? And if a properly democratic movement demands contradiction, why cannot the democratic left remain open to the tensions between its liberal and radical, its reformist and oppositional, elements?

A larger political question at play here, as I stated at the outset, is whether Rosa's theory of resonance houses an identifiable emancipatory interest. Insofar as Rosa advocates for transformations that would extend the opportunities for self-efficacy and resonance for all, and insofar as he aligns himself with the sub-tradition of critical theory that advances a positive program in the light of its negative critique, the question of emancipatory interest is key. This question arises in part because of an ongoing tension between his sociological descriptions and his normative aspirations. In many ways, and across many passages of the work, Rosa can be seen as simply wishing to describe a sociohistorical condition defined by an accelerative process, and point to a form of experience that can be identified as a countervalue. Yet the normative commitments and rhetoric of the text repeatedly point toward the need for transformation. For example, in the afterword he avers that the theory outlined in his book does remain true to the emancipatory demands of critical theory insofar as “the concept of resonance offers a path of escape from the danger, so darkly described by Horkheimer and Adorno, that modernity's pursuit of autonomy will ultimately lead to the annihilation of the conditions of possibility of successful life” (Rosa 2019, 456). The question is how precisely does it offer such a path? And is it merely an “escape” or does it lead somewhere?

There is no question that Rosa believes a liberal democratic society, with various resources properly distributed, will conduce to a world in which individuals and collectives have ample opportunities for experiences of resonance. But that is not the same thing as showing that the desire for resonance is sufficient to produce an emancipatory

interest that will lead to collective transformations that diminish or eliminate the escalatory logic of capitalist modernity. A contrastive example will help to elucidate this problem. In taking up the question of emancipatory interest in relation to his own critical framework, Honneth has made the claim that his theory provides a better account of how emancipatory interest operates in contemporary democratic societies than that offered by Habermas or the Marxist tradition (Honneth 2017). Honneth discusses a range of claims made in the history of Marxism and critical theory, including Marx's own sense that economic injustice would be a driver for class struggle, Max Horkheimer's basic assumption of a human tendency to resist domination, and Habermas's emphasis on an epistemic interest in emancipatory knowledge. The details of Honneth's argument are too complex to rehearse here, but his ultimate claim is for an understanding of emancipatory interest rooted in "a type of practical critique that yields a subversive re-interpretation of existing norms with the aim of expanding the reach of mutual recognition" (Honneth 2017, 915). Critiques of injustice and struggles for justice are built, according to Honneth, on a sense of the "plasticity of social norms" and the re-shaping of interpretive frameworks for the distribution of rights and forms of recognition (Honneth 2017, 917). Building on the Hegelian tradition, and departing from the Marxist assumption that economic struggle drives social and historical transformation, Honneth locates a fundamental emancipatory history in the struggle for recognition itself, which is linked to the interrogation and creative reworking of existing norms. There is a direct and compelling link between the fundamental account of human interaction and the emancipatory motive and vision.

Can we say the same for Rosa's concept of resonance? To begin with, as we have seen, the theory of resonance does include and comprehend Honneth's theory of recognition, whose foundation of mutual relatedness is a central component of the theory of resonance. But Rosa's concept of resonance comprises so many different forms of experience and interrelation that it is hard to know how an emancipatory interest would be defined. Specific problems arise too with the emphasis on resonance as a pathic experience, an escape, an oasis, or a form of experience in which one relinquishes control, lets go, or dwells in the moment. One might wish to have a world in which such experience were more commonly available and universally valued, but it is hard to see how such a desire would translate into active struggle based on political principles or goals. Further, the emphasis on forms of resonance linked to the tragic apprehension of an alienated condition, and other moments which hold up forms of alienated resonance or the productive dynamic between alienation and resonance, makes it hard to see how resonance would have any meaning or intensity in a world in which it did not contrast with bleak conditions. To the extent that resonance is characterized and valued in aesthetic or existential terms, it becomes very hard to know how to bridge the gap between the broad sociological critique and these moments of ethico-political aspiration.

Judging resonance: a problem of method

A separate issue raised by Rosa's theory has to do with the normative assumptions introduced within specific critical-diagnostic elements of the argument. Throughout the study, Rosa identifies symptomatic or pathological forms of resonance and alienation. We have already visited an example of this in the discussion of forms of political protest

that are seen to be stuck in oppositional or negative postures. An issue at once moral and methodological arises in such instances, which has to do with the implications of presuming upon, or judging, another person's disposition and especially their interior affective experience. In the *Principles of Psychology*, William James memorably states that there is no greater breach in nature than the breach between two consciousnesses (James [1890] 1950, I: 226). Something similar could be said about the fundamental inaccessibility of another's relation to resonance. At the very least, care must be taken about the act of reading the presence or quality of another's experience of resonance through external signs or manifestations, or by means of categories imposed extrinsically. Thus apart from other concerns raised earlier, to claim or imply that a certain form of radical protest has a diminished "sensitivity to resonance" seems problematic (Rosa 2019, 225). A similar issue arises with respect to diagnoses of pathological conditions in the realm of health or deprived conditions in the socioeconomic or global order. For example, Rosa states that if we move our attention away from a focus on "the middle classes in the more prosperous regions of this world," then we will see that "large parts of the population in other regions and in different situations have never achieved or long ago lost the 'luxury' of an orientation toward resonance, as they must struggle every day to survive both physically and socially" (Rosa 2019, 375). Elsewhere, he describes ways in which cultural taboos against homosexuality can obstruct resonant relationships for those who identify as homosexual. In the case of those who struggle to survive, it is certainly appropriate to note diminished opportunities for the various forms of resonance associated with wealth and cultural capital. And in the case of experiences of disregard and disrespect based on forms of identity, one can certainly acknowledge forms of harm and injury which might diminish experiences of well-being. But it is highly problematic to assume that socially disadvantaged individuals and groups do not experience resonance, or only experience it in a diminished form. Scholars within the tradition of cultural studies, the history of sexuality, and black studies, simply to take some striking examples, have established the manifold ways in which various groups seriously disadvantaged with respect to dominant structures of power nonetheless have vibrant cultures and forms of community (Williams 1989; Chauncey 1994; Warner 2002; Hartman 2019).

To be sure, Rosa takes pains to specify how different conditions can advance or prevent one's ability to cultivate a sensitivity to resonance, which is an important and persuasive element of his sociological theory. But given the highly subjective nature of resonance, an assumption about the existential experience of others with respect to resonance is morally troubling. A related issue arises with respect to illness and disability. Rosa makes many intriguing claims about various health-related conditions as indicative or symptomatic of impaired relations to the world. Early on, he highlights early twentieth-century medical practitioners who "saw loss of responsivity or capacity for resonance itself as the root of all disease, defining health as an organism's capacity to resonate with (or respond to) the world," noting as well more recent claims in neuropsychology that the brain characteristically functions as an "organ of resonance" (Rosa 2019, 75). With respect to individual conditions or ailments, some of Rosa's statements are marked as speculative, but they include: (1) the suggestion that "modern ailments of civilization such as asthma may be indicative of an impaired relation to the world" (Rosa 2019, 55); (2) the statement that "ever-increasing rates of

obesity in the modern world seem to obviously suggest a reified relationship to the world oriented toward increase, domination and conquest” and corollary readings of anorexia and bulimia as symptomatic of “loss of world” and “pathological acceleration,” respectively (Rosa 2019, 61); (3) the notion that sleep disorders are linked to an unwillingness to “let go of the world,” due to a lack of trust in the world’s reliability (Rosa 2019, 75); and (4) the claim that medications such as Ritalin and Prozac are “meant to make bearable an otherwise intolerable relation to the world” (Rosa 2019, 62).

In all of these examples, the narrowing of explanatory formula to two fundamental motives or triggers—loss of resonance or susceptibility to alienation—fails to capture the complex causality of suffering and, in other cases, plays into a problematic tendency to pathologize conditions better viewed, if a plural and capacious approach to resonance is the goal, as forms of difference, on the one hand, or indicative of structural problems, on the other. The use of the word “pathology” in sociological critique or critical theory of course forthrightly signals that there is an underlying normative framework. And indeed one of Rosa’s fundamental commitments is to elaborate and avow an idea of the good life, a task which he sees mainstream sociology as problematically avoiding in its “fixation on resources” and “confusion of quantity of resources with quality of life” (Rosa 2019, 23). And yet there is a difference between avowed normativity and implied normalcy: the suggestion that forms of mental or physical disability are expressive of deficient resonance risks failing to recognize and honor diverse forms of life as they are lived. To take an especially challenging example, it’s hard to know how the non-hearing community might view this book, given the centrality it gives to voice and music as privileged sites of resonance.

It might be the case that some of the speculative observations I have singled out reflect a certain level of abstraction or a more generalized sociological observation, as for example when we say that the culture in general promotes ADHD but then feel very differently about its causes and distinctive qualities when a loved one is diagnosed with it. For Rosa, ADHD is classed among the many indicators of the psychological crisis brought on by acceleration: imperatives of competition, growth, and optimization result in a series of stress and burnout-related disorders that should be “understood as a crisis of exhaustion in the game of escalation” (Rosa 2019, 427). But given Rosa’s commitment to moving beyond the objectivism and quantifying impulse of sociology, it seems imperative to retain an interpretive openness and curiosity toward the many forms of life in contemporary society, to hold off on precipitous judgments about what they might symbolize with respect to acceleration under capitalism. Additionally, forms of life that may present as non-normative, neurodiverse, or disabled can potentially teach us something about resonance, particularly with respect to experiences of time. As Ellen Samuels conveys in her influential essay on “crip time,” precisely because disability can prevent one from living within the expected rhythms of contemporary life, it forces one to open to “new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world” (Samuels 2017). In words that resonate with Rosa’s own value commitments, she writes: “[Crip time] insists that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits” (Samuels 2017).

If a more attuned approach seems required with respect to disability and neurodiversity, a more developed structural analysis seems needed, by contrast, in the passages devoted to obesity, asthma, and medications. These conditions require an analysis that takes into account such factors as socioeconomic standing, the food system, the welfare system, environmental factors, and the power of the pharmaceutical industry. While psychological factors can of course be involved in cases of obesity and in eating disorders more generally, obesity socio-economically speaking has to do with the availability and price of foods for any given individual or community, and the extraordinary influence of corporate actors in the food system, such as advertisers and corn producers in the US. To read a psychology off of a larger systemic force, in this case one of “increase, domination, and conquest,” is to compress a structural condition into a psychological one, through what we might call a socio-psychic fallacy. Again, given Rosa’s extraordinary sensitivity to experiential and psychological perspectives, this seems out of keeping with the value commitments motivating his work. In the case of Rosa’s discussions of medications such as Prozac and Ritalin, both experiential and larger systemic forces are also critically at play: big pharma has a lot to do with creating the sense the medication is needed to make the world tolerable. That view could therefore be seen as highly ideological rather than appropriately diagnostic. And yet from the side of those who use and need these medications, it is a scalar leap to imagine that their experiences have to do with a relationship to the conditions of modernity rather than a more immediately felt range of symptoms that may be complexly determined by environmental and biological factors.

Conclusion

Hartmut Rosa’s *Resonance* is a major contribution to critical theory, one that moreover joins with a number of other “turns” in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences. Given its breadth and transdisciplinary reach, it defies classification in key ways, since it combines such a broad range of methods and object domains. But with respect to its core concept of resonance, which is also something of an ideal, it shares affinities with movements in the humanities toward a revitalized relation to the world and to the methods by which we apprehend it. Examples would include the turn within political theory toward what is called the new vitalism or the new materialism (Bennett 2010), along with movements within literary studies toward newly conceived forms of attachment to the practice of reading and the texts we read (Felski 2020), as well as the emphasis in environmental humanities toward our relations not only with each other but with the more-than-human (Abram 1996). In some of these cases, there is an insistence that we acknowledge the limits of those modes of critique associated with the traditions of which Rosa is an avowed participant (Felski 2015; Anker and Felski 2017). But in practice, most of these approaches combine the critical and aspirational elements that characterize Rosa’s work, and they also seek to privilege the forms of pathic experience that he prizes. In this sense, Rosa’s work is very much of the moment and is perhaps most marked by the context of the environmental crisis which he addresses so forcefully. In this crisis most of all, one might say, we are at risk of losing our relation to the world. As Rosa persuasively argues, the urgent concern about the environment at the present time is “an expression of our desired resonant relation to nature and our anxiety about losing

it” (Rosa 2019, 277). And notably, those disciplines which have most centrally tracked the environmental crisis—particularly the natural sciences—“lack the conceptual means to apprehend and articulate this looming catastrophe of resonance” (Rosa 2019, 274).

In the other arenas which share this turn, we also see important moves to re-enchant the scholarly life by means of practices and modes of thought that infuse our relations to our objects of study with meaning and purpose, with higher degrees of resonance. The key question arising from Rosa’s larger project on acceleration and resonance is how we balance the affirmative orientation toward resonance with the critical and urgent political challenges of the day. If the longing for resonance can lead to dangerous forms of renewed nationalism, and if more positive forms of resonance exist only as “oases” or moments of recharge, how will we in fact use resonance to protect our fragile institutions and our threatened natural world? There seems to be some distance to travel from the practical forms of resonance available to us at present, and the forms of difficult struggle necessary to build a world in which everyone would have the freedom to pursue their own path of resonance.

Abbreviation

ADHD Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder

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