

# Toward a resonant society

## *An interview with Hartmut Rosa*

IN THIS INTERVIEW, the internationally renowned German sociologist Hartmut Rosa engages in a conversation about resonance, critical theory, politics, and sociology. As in the interview with Eva Illouz in this special issue, Rosa discusses populist politics and emotions, but he frames this discussion through his concept of resonance and its implications for politics and democracy.

The interview was made in connection with a public lecture Rosa held in Gothenburg in March 2023, titled *In search of the prime mover: Can there be a valid conception of social energy?* Questions were asked by Carl Cassegård and Karl Malmqvist, both sociologists from Gothenburg University, who introduce Rosa's work below, and Christian Ståhl, journal editor and sociologist from Linköping University.

Rosa is known above all for two works: *Beschleunigung: Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* from 2005 (published in English as *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*, 2013), and *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* from 2016 (in English as *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world*, 2019). Both are written in a relatively accessible style, testifying to the openness and readiness to engage in dialogue that he advocates. Theoretically as well, his thinking is characterized by openness. Continuities with older critical theory are evident in his thematization of alienation and his desire to bridge sociology and philosophy, but he is also happy to engage in dialogue with alternative currents of thought, such as Charles Taylor's moral philosophy or Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (e.g., Rosa *et al.* 2021). Like much of the critical theory developed in the wake of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, his focus is on diagnosing modernity rather than criticizing capitalism. Although he is more critical of modernity than these thinkers, he is also keen to distance himself from the negativity of early Frankfurt School thinkers such as Theodor Adorno. Through the concept of resonance, he seeks not only to overcome the narrow focus on language, recognition and the autonomy of the subject in recent critical theory but also to endow critical theory "with a *positive* concept that will allow it to move beyond critique" (Rosa 2019:444).

## Acceleration, alienation, and resonance

As already suggested, the notion of *acceleration* is central to Rosa's diagnosis of modernity. The term "acceleration" does not simply refer to the sociologically common-place perception that modernity is characterized by ever-increasing speed, but more specifically to "an increase in quantity per unit of time" (Rosa 2013:65), a formulation that encompasses not only speed but also, *escalation* or *growth*. Following this general definition, Rosa points to three internal dynamics of acceleration in modernity. First, *technical acceleration* involves an increasing speed of production, transport, and communication. Second, the *acceleration of social change* involves an increasing pace of change in foundational social institutions of production and reproduction (e.g., labor and family relations). This increase results in a "contraction of the present," i.e., "a decrease of the length of time for which there prevail secure expectations regarding the stability of the circumstances of action" (ibid.:113, emphasis removed). Third, the *acceleration of the pace of life* involves, on the one hand, an objective increase in the number of action and experience episodes per unit of time, and, on the other hand, a subjective sense of time pressure brought about by a fear of missing out on valuable things or experiences as well as by a compulsion to adapt to incessant social change.

These internal dynamics of acceleration – which together form a mutually reinforcing circle – are, in turn, driven by a threefold set of external "motors:" an *economic* one, consisting of capitalism's quest for increasing profit through time savings; a *cultural* one, consisting of a promise of having one's life enriched by a ceaseless flow of new experiences and possibilities as well as of a corresponding fear of missing out on such experiences and possibilities; and a *socio-structural* one, consisting of a growing systemic complexity through functional differentiation, which means that an incessantly growing number of possibilities that cannot be handled simultaneously pressures systems to reduce complexity through "temporalization." Together, these external motors and the previously described internal dynamics of acceleration push late modernity into a condition that Rosa metaphorically refers to as a *frenetic standstill*, "a condition where *nothing remains the same but nothing essentially changes*" (ibid.:314). This is reflected in late modern politics, which tends to lose its orientation toward shaping society in a specific historical direction and, instead, becomes *situational* in the sense of merely *reacting* to situations as they emerge. It is also reflected on the level of personal identity, which becomes situational as late modern subjects strive to keep all promising possibilities open at each moment and, therefore, lose sight of long-term life plans.

As a consequence of the escalatory dynamics of social acceleration, Rosa argues in his more recent book on resonance, the modern project becomes one of "expanding humanity's share of the world" (Rosa 2019:310, emphasis removed). However, because this way of relating to the world is ultimately instrumental, it tends to give rise to alienation. Rosa defines *alienation* as a relationship to the world characterized by either indifference (muteness) or hostility (repulsion; ibid.:184). The concept of *resonance*, which Rosa defines as a mode of relation where both subject and world are able to

“speak with their own voice” yet at the same time remain responsive or receptive to each other’s voices (ibid.:174), should be understood in relation to alienation in this sense.

In defining resonance, Rosa has a taste for musical metaphors. Thus, he traces the word’s etymological roots to the Latin “re-sonare,” which means to *resound* (ibid.:165). Resonance can then be said to involve *mutually resounding* relationships, whereas alienated relationships are *mute*. As such, however, resonance should neither be confused with an *echo* (ibid.:167) nor be mistaken for *consonance* or *harmony* (ibid.:185), as all of these phenomena preclude that both subject and world speak with their own voices. Thus, resonant relationships allow for – indeed, require – difference, otherness, contradiction, and inaccessibility, all of which can be metaphorically described in terms of *dissonance* or *disharmony*. This means that while resonance and alienation are antithetical, they dialectically presuppose each other. At the same time, however, Rosa chiefly thinks of resonant experiences as *positive* experiences. Thus, while crying when watching a touching movie may be a resonant (and pleasant) experience to the extent that it attunes us to the world, sadness, fear, or anger *in and of themselves* are not experiences of resonance but of alienation, since they are essentially experiences of muteness, repulsion, or hostility – i.e., of being “out of tune” (ibid.: 169, emphasis removed). In this sense, according to Rosa (ibid.:447f), *negative* resonance is ultimately impossible.

While resonant relationships may be interpersonal, the concept of resonance differs from other comparable concepts (e.g., social responsivity; see Ståhl 2020) by also being applicable to human subjects’ relations to material objects or to non-human beings, as well as to subjects’ relations to totalities such as nature or history. Indeed, according to Rosa, human subjects are basically driven by a desire for resonance and a fear of alienation. In being so driven, however, they do not only strive to experience resonance in the moment. They also seek to establish stable resonant relationships to the world, or *axes of resonance*, which may be either horizontal (family, friendship, politics), diagonal (work, education, sports, consumption), or vertical (art, nature, history). Yet, as already suggested, the escalatory dynamics of modernity and the social conditions these dynamics bring about tend to block these attempts to build resonant relationships and, instead, to lead to alienated relationships. Thus, to Rosa, the concept of resonance functions as a positive yardstick against which our contemporary late modern situation may be critically evaluated.

## Negative resonance, capitalism, democratic politics, and nature

In the interview, we address a few points where Rosa’s theory is disputed or, in our view, in need of clarification. The first concerns so-called negative resonance. As mentioned above, Rosa portrays resonance as positive and desirable, but is it not also possible for people to feel in tune with their environment in situations characterized by conflict, violence, or interactions where they inflict pain on each other? In such situations, their actions provoke a response from the outside world, which means that the latter is no longer fully mute. Rosa rejects the idea that such interactions are resonant.

Violence silences the other and creates fear that makes people close themselves to the other, thereby killing resonance (Rosa 2019:447f). At the same time, one may question whether all pain inhibits resonance. For example, Rosa himself seems to suggest that the longing for resonance can take the form of longing for pain, or even a longing for shocks and disasters (as when environmentalists long for “nature’s revenge” as a desperate countermeasure to the muteness that prevails in modern society’s relations to nature, *ibid.*:275). This suggests an openness to imagine at least certain types of violent relationships as resonant. Is it perhaps the subject’s receptivity and openness to transformative experiences that is decisive when judging whether a relationship is resonant, rather than the existence of violence or conflict *per se*?

A second contentious point concerns how resonance relates to capitalism. In his book on acceleration, Rosa points to capitalism as an important motor of acceleration, but in the book on resonance, capitalism largely recedes from view. Critical theorists have often described capitalist society as a reified second nature. One might wonder how Rosa’s examples of resonance relate to the overall muteness or alienation that characterizes such a second nature. Does not alienation in some measure persist even in resonant experiences such as going out into nature, partying with friends, or spending time with one’s family as long as there is a continued feeling of powerlessness regarding the overall structure of society? Do not these experiences get their luster (and perhaps also a compensatory function) precisely against the background of a society that otherwise kills resonance? Naturally one might imagine revolutionary moments – such as the Arab Spring perhaps – when the reified structures of society start to give way and respond to people’s actions. But Rosa devotes surprisingly little attention to such moments, perhaps because they are too marred by conflict and thus too close to negative resonance.

This leads over to a third potentially contentious point, which relates to resonance as a political concept. Rosa proposes a notion of democratic politics wherein democracy is neither reduced to the casting of votes nor understood merely in terms of rational deliberation among citizens, but rather conceived of “as a form of *music* or *song*” (*ibid.*:218). This is to say that Rosa understands democracy as a sphere of resonance, in which “subjects make themselves heard but also are touched and transformed by the ‘singing’ of others” (*ibid.*). In other words, democratic relationships should allow for subjects both to speak (or sing) with their own voice and to be receptive of the others’ voices. On the one hand, Rosa states clearly that democratic resonance does not preclude “resounding disagreement” (*ibid.*:219, emphasis removed) but presupposes it, since total resonance would amount to totalitarianism. On the other hand, however, Rosa apparently imagines certain limits with regard to what could count as resounding disagreement. Thus, he critically discusses a tendency toward political alienation in late modernity, in which “the voice of politics is more likely to be heard as either *laughter* or the desperate *shout of protest*” (*ibid.*:222). Describing protests such as those at Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 as manifestations of a repulsive political relationship where subjects do not feel their voices are heard, he argues that such actions (laughter and shouting) are “undemocratic or at least non-democratic forms of expression” (*ibid.*). Thus, Rosa appears skeptical of the uses of confrontation of anger in democratic politics since he

sees such actions and emotions as little more than manifestations of alienated muteness. This skepticism puts him somewhat at odds with other contemporary political thinkers, such as Jacques Rancière (1999), who emphasizes the centrality of confrontation in political subjectification, or Myisha Cherry (2021), who argues for certain types of anti-racist rage as a form of resistance against oppressive (and thus repulsive) systems.

A fourth point where Rosa is ambiguous concerns nature and environmental destruction. At first glance, his theory appears to dovetail eminently with environmentalist concerns through his embrace of a search for resonance in nature and his advocate of a post-growth society. Yet he is reluctant to acknowledge the fears of many environmentalists that humans are materially destroying the environment. The real environmental threat, he writes in his book on resonance, is not the destruction of nature through pollution or the exhaustion of resources, but the loss of resonance (Rosa 2019:42, 274). This is a rather startling contrast to the closing words of his book on acceleration, where he asks how the history of acceleration will unfold and answers that the “*most likely possibility*” is “the unbridled onward rush into an abyss” (Rosa 2013:322). Is this abyss merely a loss of resonance or does it also connote material, ecological destruction?

## Social energy

Finally, a word might be said about how Rosa is expanding his theory today through his exploration of what he calls social energy, an energy that arises through social contacts and encounters. What is this energy and what resources does sociology have to theorize it? Through discussions of older concepts such as libido and *élan vital* as well as newer ones such as Randall Collins’s “emotional energy”, Rosa seeks to theorize a specifically social type of ability to “get things done” that is neither physical nor rooted in the individual psyche, but rather relational. The acceleration of our society, he points out, requires not only physical forms of energy, but also social energy. And just as in the case of fossil fuels, we can also suffer from energy crises in terms of social energy. Thus, the previously described constant acceleration, he suggests, risks leading to a “burned-out society”.

\*\*\*

*Karl: I wanted to begin with a rather broad question, considering your analysis of acceleration and its resulting frenetic standstill and alienation, along with the concept of resonance as a potential solution. Could you provide a general perspective on today’s political landscape, particularly in light of the rise of right-wing populism and conservatism? How can we make sense of this?*

Hartmut: I do have an answer to that, or at least an idea. I claim that the different crises we are having, politically and societally, are connected. I claimed that the *Resonance* book was a sociology of our relationship to the world. It doesn’t sound as neat in

English as in German; I would say *Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*. The good thing about this description is that it doesn't have a subject. In English it's *our* relationship to the world, and you can always ask, who's the "we"? Apart from that, I claim that in modern society something is wrong in the way we are related to the world. We are moving *in* the world and moving *towards* the world, and this is the problem I tried to pinpoint with the word of *aggression*. We have taken a stance of aggression on three levels. It's at the macro level, as in the ecological crisis and the surrounding ecosystem; we're almost at war, right? You see it in the extractive industries, in pollution, the heating up of the atmosphere, and the extinction of species. On the meso level, on an intermediate level, we are in a state of aggression towards other human beings, particularly visible in the political crisis, and the crisis of democracy. When you look to the US, you see how republicans and liberals are almost at war with each other, and you have the same phenomenon in Brazil, and in England with Brexit. In Germany you could see it in conflicts between those for and against vaccination. The problem is not that we have different worldviews or opinions, but that the mode in which you approach the other is a mode of aggression. On the on the micro level, I claim that people are at war with themselves, and there is empirical data which seems to confirm what I call the burnout crisis. But there's also evidence which says that people feel discontent with the way they are: they don't feel at home in their own skins. So, we are in aggression with our bodies, with our psyches, with everything. It's the wrong way of being in the world, and this is how I would interpret the whole framework.

*Karl: This situation of aggression connects to the argument you make in Resonance, where you introduce a musical concept of democracy. On the one hand, you suggest that democracy based on resonance, or a resonant democracy, needs to make room for resounding disagreement. But then on the other hand you seem rather skeptical about how disagreement is expressed today. Am I wrong?*

Hartmut: No, disagreement is not a problem. Resonance is not dissonance, it's not the opposite of resonance. Dissonance is the opposite of consonance. And resonance is right in between. I believe that is important, you could not think of democracy as being in complete agreement or harmony. That's the danger of the resonance conception. It sounds like harmony, but that's not resonance at all. I use the concept of echo, where you only hear your own voice, it has nothing to do with neither resonance nor with democracy.

*Karl: But where does disagreement end, and alienation or repulsion begin?*

Hartmut: It's very hard to define it completely, but I don't think it's so difficult. In a dialogue, people might disagree strongly. For example, I have a friend, my best friend since my school days, and whenever we meet, we get into arguments about everything. About music, about which band is better, about soccer, or about politics. Sometimes we will yell at each other, and I would say, "no, you idiot, that's wrong!" You feel it

almost bodily. But we are still in resonance: I want to hear his voice, his opinions, and he is interested in mine. But where's the dividing line where this kind of disagreement turns into mere hostility? Where I just shout, "shut up", where I don't want to hear their voices and don't want to be affected by the others, and I have lost the hope of getting to them, intrinsically. It would be very interesting to do real social empirical research on this, because I think this is what has changed. There were always disagreements between different political opinions. But the idea was to listen and answer and argue. Now I find an overwhelming political culture and an increasing tendency to not want to listen, "I don't want to listen or speak to this idiot". You find it on both sides. I think this is the dividing line, that we don't want to be touched by what the others say.

*Carl: I'm still wondering about the dividing line where you say that repulsion starts. For instance, there's the problem of time. You can have extremely unpleasant repulsive encounters, which later develop into some form of transformation once you start to process them mentally. I think that this can be connected to how you relate to historical incidents in politics, for instance, revolutions or very violent eruptions, which retrospectively seem to be very important and also have a legitimate place, for instance in creating the political culture, even though they were not experienced as resonance at the time. So how would you view that kind of episode?*

Hartmut: A good question. Not all forms of social or political change are necessarily resonant. There are other forms of change, like a war which I would not describe as resonant. But afterwards there might be resonance; either new forms of resonance, starting with it, or even resonance to it. The French revolution might be an interesting case in point where it was first bewilderment and aggression, and then it becomes a strong center of resonance. I would agree with that description. But it is also a question of what you look at. You could say that even these kinds of revolutions do not come out of nowhere: they are a kind of collective resonance based on a conviction that something had to change or break. So, I would suggest a twofold answer. First, I would agree with you, there are moments, elements of conflict or aggression or revolution, which are not resonant in themselves, but which later on become points of resonance. In the arts, in philosophy, almost everything we do is related to the French revolution. Second, even the things which on the surface seem to be only conflict or violence can be resonant if you take a longer view of history, where even those epochal changes might resonate with each other.

*Carl: Near the end of your book, you mention the problem of or the possibility of negative resonance. We were discussing this in terms of different emotions, for instance, the desire for revenge, and whether this can be seen as a kind of resonant experience. You write in the book that this is a difficult conceptual problem. It could be connected also to other emotions, for instance, in incidents of bullying. It seems that we create situations suffused by hostility and which also create reactions of fear and humiliation, which would presumably, from your perspective, mean the end of resonance. But at the same time there is an interaction*

*going on, where emotions shift, and there is one party that perhaps feels pleasure because of the pain that is being inflicted. There is an asymmetrical interchange or interplay here which we were thinking perhaps also could be a form of resonance.*

Hartmut: No. No! As you say, I think this is a really interesting conceptual question, and I do have colleagues who think that there is both positive and negative resonance, and that indifference is alienation. If I simply don't react at all or if you're completely indifferent to me, then it's indifference. And then there can be positive forms of love or attraction, or negative forms of hatred, repulsion and so on. These two could then be called positive and negative resonance. I think that's a conceptual possibility, but that's not what I wanted to do, and that's not the way I do it, for a number of reasons. On the one hand I was really looking for the opposite. There are several ways in how I started to think of resonance. One is that I was looking for the opposite of alienation. Alienation is defined in philosophy, for example by Michael Theunissen or Rahel Jaeggi, as *Beziehung der Beziehungslosigkeit*, a relation without a true relation. So, I was asking myself, what then is a related relationship? A real relationship? And that's how I ended up with resonance. It's a *real* relationship, so to speak, a non-alienated form of relationship. And since I want to use alienation as a concept to criticize social conditions, obviously resonance has to serve as a kind of positive concept, or I could not use it as a concept to criticize society. On the other hand, it's an empirical question. What are people looking for? And don't I think people are looking for something they would experience as negative or qualify as negative. I think people are seeking resonant relationships. Sometimes you could ask someone coming out of a movie how they liked it, and they would say "it was a fantastic movie, I was crying all the time". This might seem very strange because crying is an expression of sadness, and therefore something negative. But the joy comes out of the resonance with the movie. So, I think resonance is always a positive experience, at least in my terms.

*Karl: That brings me to the question about pain. If you become aware of a situation of injustice for instance, and you feel resentful, you may come to feel a different connection to yourself. Could that not sometimes be a resonant experience?*

Hartmut: Resentment is a part of what I would call right-wing populist sentiments. They are living on resentment. It's the foreigners, it's the gays, it's, I don't know, the minorities. And I don't think this form of experience is something people experience as positive, not even among the followers. I always claim that you see it in the face, in the in the body shape, and you can hear it in the voice; it's not a positive experience. "I hate these people!" It might be a strong sentiment and it might do something to their psychological stability. But it's not a positive experience.

*Karl: Certainly, it isn't. But in a situation when you come to experience injustice and experience indignation, I think that's a situation where the world speaks back to you, and it could even be a situation where you come to connect to yourself in a new way.*

Hartmut: For me, the decisive point would be whether it leads to a closure in my relationship to the world or to an opening. If you live in a state of indifference, you feel like you're not seen, you're not heard, you don't make any difference, then repulsion or indignation is one step out of this form of alienation. I think this is one of the reasons for atrocities or hostilities where people are running amok, they make themselves heard. I'm faceless and voiceless in this world, so certainly it's one attempt to recreate resonant relationships. But I would not say it's a successful attempt. In the case of bullying, I think that's a confusion with the sense of self-efficacy: there are empirical studies which show that a sadistic person who is bullying or torturing you certainly feels self-efficacy. You shout and you cry when I want you to cry, right? But that's not a sense of resonance, because resonance is the voluntary response you get. If you enjoy bullying, you have lost or have never made the experience of where you speak not because I make you cry but because you want to answer me. You *want* to enter into this relationship, so I believe sadistic relationships are always dysfunctional or always a kind of pathological experience. A lot of those who has later on become intellectuals have been bullied in school. I have made the experience of a very hostile school environment. I discuss this in the book; in puberty you have to go through phases of intense alienation where I can no longer resonate with my friends, my teachers, or even with my own body. It's through periods and moments of alienation that you discover your own voice and your own frequency, and then you can enter into resonance again. But the mere experience of hatred or resentment or struggle, I don't think that is resonance. One interesting thing is boxing. I wrote in the book that you can only either resonate or compete with each other. And then people say, well, what about sports? And I'm pretty sure that in sports, the two antagonists can resonate with each other, even boxers, right? So, I think it's possible because underneath the competition lies the sense of play, there is this element of play in sports and play can be resonant.

*Carl: This leads back to the desire for revenge. But we're going to ask specifically about the revenge of nature. We would like you to comment on what we sense is two different directions in your text. On the one hand, we have the ending of your book on acceleration, where you talk about the most likely outcome of the accelerating society as being the headlong rush into the abyss, which you exemplify with the ecological crisis. On the other hand, in the chapter on nature in Resonance, you discuss this longing for resonance, and you say that this can take the expression of longing for nature's revenge. At least in this chapter, you tend to be rather dismissive of this, and a bit suspicious, saying that this can lead to a form of, let's say, exaggerated or wrong diagnosis of what the true problem is. In connection with this you also say that the root of the environmental crisis is not that we destroy nature and use up the resources. It's that we might lose a resonant relationship with nature. So, placing myself in the position of a devil's advocate, one might read this*

*as a stance of saying that it's OK to devastate the environment as long as we can preserve a resonant relationship to it.*

Hartmut: I would say that is impossible. I see what you're getting at, but my point is, if you want to solve the environmental crisis, which I do think is very important, we have to no longer think of nature as a resource. Not even as an object to preserve, but as a sphere of resonance. And as soon as you are in resonance with something, like nature, it automatically implies an ethics of sustainability, or I would even say care ethics. If you're in resonance with something or someone, you immediately want to protect it. Not in the paternalistic sense, because ecological action can be very paternalistic: "we have to preserve nature". Resonance implies a form of care ethics which wants to preserve the other *as* an other, and in itself. So, for me, if we recognize that we need nature as a sphere of resonance, and I particularly think that modern people need it, nature is the other which is in resonance with us. So, if you want to preserve it, then we have to – that's my hope – develop sustainable habits and routines. But currently I think we're in a state of "I would like to *use* nature, even destroy it, but I *should* not, it's a bad thing". If you love someone, you will not have this. If you're really in love with a person, you don't think "I would misuse it or abuse it, but I shouldn't". It's not moral. You're in love with it, you want to preserve it as the other. So, I think this stance would really help us. I think somehow modern people are aware of this. The whole idea of nature's revenge is the idea that nature has a voice and will speak back to us. It is an other that talks to us. But of course, revenge is not an expression of a resonant relationship, but of repulsion.

*Carl: So, there is still a legitimate place then for the desire for nature to speak back, even though it would be realized in the form of something catastrophic?*

Hartmut: Absolutely. Definitely, I would say so. There is a legitimate place, it's almost inevitable. What I would like to do is come up with a with a sounder relationship to the world where this would include a sense of nature as an independent reality speaking for itself, having a voice.

*Carl: Our next question has to do with the kind of critical theory that you are developing, where resonance and alienation function as a yardstick for critique. In what sense can critical theory connect with these two concepts? Here, the relationship to nature can be relevant, where it's possible to imagine material processes that do not really register in people's conscious relation to nature. It can be about the exhaustion of resources, the diffusion of plastics, and so on. Would you say that critical theory has the resources to criticize those material kinds of processes that seem to be connected to this abyss which you warn about at the end of Social acceleration, but which perhaps aren't very closely connected to experiences of resonance or alienation?*

Hartmut: I think I see what you mean, if alienation and resonance are human forms of experience, but there are forms of damage done environmentally which don't relate

to my experience. I just taught a class together with a younger colleague on care ethics. We've come to the insight that resonance is a disposition which includes attentiveness. As individuals, but also as societies, a resonant society is an attentive society. It's positionally resonant, which means that you hear the voices of those left out, of the animals you might harm, the oceans you might kill, the trees you might kill. Couldn't we be very resonant in Sweden and caring for each other, but not caring about people producing our T-shirts in Bangladesh, for example? I think it's impossible. If you say that you don't care about all those people in Bangladesh, then we have a dispositional closure which makes it impossible to be resonant also in Sweden. I've written an article called *The Listening Society*, I would hope that the listening society, which is a resonant society, is attentive and tries to find the damages done. And we have to enter human discourse and perception, otherwise you won't notice them. I don't know how to do it, but the critical theory I want to get at is developing, and for me, alienation is the critical concept. The critical theory which I grew into by Axel Honneth, Rainer Forst, and others, were focusing much more on justice, and for them exploitation is the main problem with alienation as a kind of side problem. Once we've overcome exploitation, we can deal with the experiential side. But for me it's the other way around. Exploitation is a very serious problem, or inequality and injustice, but I believe it's a consequence of a wrong form of being in the world and being with each other. Therefore, I think alienation is the core concept for a better world.

*Christian: I'm interested in the political implications of what you just said. We are living in a society that is unequal, based on a capitalist system where you produce T-shirts in Bangladesh, and in our part of the world we have welfare state retrenchment which indicate that we don't live in a just society. So, the political implications of a resonant society, what would they be?*

Hartmut: It has always been an old dream – I started as a communitarian, writing on Charles Taylor, and the idea then was always that when you have a village which is a resonant community, it is closed to the outside. But I don't think that's true, I think you will gradually develop a sense for the outside world. Even in a university, if you want to have a resonant culture, meaning that I care for the first term or the doctoral students, how they are, how they develop and how they interact with each other, then it becomes impossible not to care what's going on outside your door. If you walk through a city, in most cities in the world, you encounter homeless people who say, "please help me". And every time I say no and go away, you can almost *feel* the alienation, and you shut down: "I don't want you." And it's the same with the immigrants, they should stay away. It's their own problem, I have enough problems. Once you start to change and develop a culture of attentiveness, it doesn't even matter if it's at the university or in the city, you also start to care about what's going on at Europe's border. But right now, people say, "I know it's bad, but I really I have a lot of work to do". I think they're already dispositionally closed. But I think we could start at any point to redevelop and recreate our strength and resonant relationships. And that would have

consequences, in the long run, on how we deal with nature, how we deal with people in Bangladesh producing our clothes, or with people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. I'm convinced about this. If you say, "I don't care about them", you can really see it in your eyes, in your hands, in your voice, how you close.

*Carl: This relates to the possibility of resonance in today's political world. In Social acceleration, you end with a rather dark picture of the possibilities of the autonomy-oriented project of modernity. In that book you were saying that the forces of acceleration will tend to undermine the modern project once they pass a certain threshold. One of the things that's interesting with your book on resonance and with what you're saying now is that you seem to be indicating some form of possibility for democracy, even in a very accelerating form of society. At the same time, in the book on resonance, you're also saying that it's hard to point to stable conditions of resonance. They tend to be temporary and disappear quickly. So how would you see the chances of realizing a resonant form of democracy?*

Hartmut: I think the reason why our political culture seems to become less resonant, particularly when it comes to immigrants, is a loss of self-efficacy. The main problem we have is a lack of trust. Resonance requires trust even in life, and nowadays we can see distrust growing everywhere. Even in breathing, I'm not sure that I can breathe, I might get killed by Covid, or I might kill you. And you see this in the way we deal with the environment, and immigration. People say that if you accept all these Muslim refugees, then we will have minarets instead of churches. I find this quite telling because it implies a lack of self-efficacy. If we believed in our churches, we wouldn't think that we would give them up. Or we would say, "oh, that could be great, we could have a combination of churches and minarets". We have an answer, we transform our society in an active sense, we can *do* something. But people have the feeling they can't do anything; if something enters us, it will kill us, right? So, it's clearly a lack of self-efficacy. The acceleration book ends quite pessimistically, and then the resonance book is quite optimistic: another world is possible! I draw the hope from my claim that resonance is not something which we have to *learn*. It's the primordial human way of relating to the world, so people *know* what it is. A lot of the frustration and the aggression I was talking about is a result of anger in our societies. I find this really amazing; people are always angry. Some people are angry because we don't gender enough in our language, and others are angry because we do it all the time; some people are angry because we don't do enough for the environment, and others are angry because we permanently talk about the environment. So, there's always anger. And I claim this is because we don't get what we hoped for or what we were promised from life. We do have a sense of what a resonant relationship is, and this is the compass that might help us out of the situation. And a crisis might not be the worst thing. The modern society is geared towards control, controlling the world. And right now, we experience on a large scale that this was a futile hope. We don't control nature; we can't even control the political world. Certainly, we don't control the financial markets, or the technological environment.

So, we have two things: we have a built-in sense of what a resonant life is, and we have a manifest sense that this is the wrong way of doing it. So, what we need is to put this sense of resonance into use for redesigning institutions. And I think we have ideas for this. Resonance is not stable; it is always temporary and at short intervals. But I distinguish *experiences* or moments of resonance from *dispositional* resonance. And I think institutions can be those that allow for or even enable or require resonant relationships. You can design institutions where resonance is a bad thing. If you take a cash desk at the supermarket or at the toll collect point at the highway, resonance is dysfunctional. If people are getting resonant with the person there, then all those queuing up will be very upset. But it is frustrating in the care industries, in the hospitals: the burnout rates are highest in the care industries and in education, and I think that's not by chance. Whenever you interact with people, you do have this double pressure. You see into a pair of eyes; you hear a voice: there is this call for resonance. But you have institutional requirements and a lot of them are economic. So, we have this double pressure of efficiency, speed and economic growth, and of resonance. We do have a sense of what it is to have a resonant form of school, a resonant form of hospital, or a resonant form of farm, because we can be resonant with animals and with nature. Even workers in a factory where they produce cars tell you they have a strong sense of what good work is, a good working environment, producing good cars if they produce cars. It has something to do with material resonance. So, I think we can use this idea of resonance to reform our institutions in times of crisis, and that leads to a lot of optimism.

*Carl: I have one question which concerns critical theory. You relate a lot to the generation of Habermas and Honneth, but I'm wondering how you see the older generation? People like Adorno, Benjamin or Marcuse. Because reading them, I can sense that there are things there that seem to resonate with what you are writing. One could take, for instance, the concept of porosity in Benjamin, which is about giving and taking through porous borders, the mimetic impulses of Adorno, and so on. I think these are also ways of trying to express a form of non-alienated relationship to things which does not presume essentialism. And also, when it comes to the negative descriptions of society, there is for instance Benjamin's idea of a constant return of hell, which seem to have affinities with your idea of the frenetic standstill. So, how do you view this legacy of the first generation of critical theory, and is there anything useful there?*

Hartmut: Oh, definitely. I see myself as taking up the intuitions and even the concepts of the earlier generation of critical theory. Actually, my way into critical theory was quite a detour. I was interested in Charles Taylor's thinking, and it was Axel Honneth who had introduced Taylor in Germany, so this is how I got into contact with Honneth, and through him I studied critical theory, and I also read Marcuse, Adorno, Fromm and Benjamin, and that spoke to me from a different angle. I still think Honneth and Habermas are important thinkers, I admire them to a huge extent. Habermas has as a kind of complete sociological theory, and Honneth's concept of

recognition has a lot to do with resonance. I always thought he's right that we strive for recognition, but there is something else. When I need to listen to music, it's not about recognition. Or when I want to be in touch with nature. So, at first, I tried to extend and reformulate the recognition concept, but then I realized... I share with the first generation of critical theorists this sense that something is fundamentally wrong about modernity. For me, the difference between the first generation and Honneth and Habermas is that for Honneth and Habermas, modernity is essentially right, but it has some flaws. While for Marcuse, Fromm and Adorno there was something essentially wrong about modernity, and I've taken that up, it's the same in my view. So, I think I'm more critical of contemporary society than Honneth or Habermas. But I also wanted to go back to alienation. For me, all of the thinkers you mentioned, Fromm, Benjamin, Marcuse, and Adorno, at least, have the intuition and have tried to formulate that our mode of existence is flawed, and that alienation might be an interesting term there. And I would even say that they have, and you hinted at that, a counter-vision of how it could be different. For Adorno, it's particularly the mimesis concept. For Marcuse, whom I like a lot, it's in *Eros and civilization*. He talks about a Promethean stance towards the world and wants to replace it through an erotic form of being in the world. This is very close to what I want to do, which I would call the resonant form. Walter Benjamin's porosity is another interesting contender, and his concept of aura is very interesting; also, the loss of experience, of true experience, which is a loss of encounter. So, I think what I did in the *Resonance* book was to try to spell out and to theoretically and conceptually capture what a mimetic, erotic, auratic form of being in the world could be. So, I think if I have to decide, I'm probably closer to the first generation than to the second.

*Christian: But a little bit more optimistic?*

Hartmut: Yeah. I think Marcuse at least at times was optimistic too, and I would say even Adorno. And in my own thinking it goes back and forth, but I think I'm driven by the hope that a better world is possible. Even my doctoral students blame me for that, or even try to bash me. I have one doctoral student who was in love with resonance theory. And then he turned completely around! He's now following Adorno and says resonance is itself a capitalist product. It's just the flip side of the bad. I think that's perfectly OK, that's how theory evolves. But I guess I'm a little more optimistic, yeah. Let me add one thing, because I think this is important. If you are just negative, like Adorno, I think this is politically reactionary. I see a lot of this in Germany, it's like a ban, you're not allowed to think of anything positive. So, if anyone makes a suggestion, let's go for unconditional basic income, or let's allow for more immigrants, they will immediately say, "no, no, no, that's a kind of appeasement, that's the wrong form of positivism". You always have to be negative. If you do that, you make sure that nothing will ever change, right? So, I think if you want to go for change you somehow have to come up with a vision of how it could be different.

*Carl: What one can sense in Adorno that might be useful is an attempt to think what you should do when you have this mute environment which may prevent you from developing a resonant relationship. How then should you act? Even though you might want to have resonance...*

Hartmut: ...you can't have it, yes. Yeah, I don't want to say we should just seek private resonance in a bad world. I do think, and there's the difference, for me, I'm not completely dominated by capitalist repression. This sense of resonance is psychologically built in. So that's really a difference. The modern subjects are not completely determined or produced by the wrong thing, so that's where a certain hope comes from. But, of course, the solution is not therefore to find your individual good life. I mean, you know, the famous quote by Adorno, there is *kein richtiges Leben im falschen* ("Wrong life cannot be lived rightly", Adorno 2005:39). I would agree with this but also, I hope for a collective search for a society which would allow for resonance.

*Christian: This relates to the idea of protest, to organizing for a better world, and to conflict. We talked about revolution and whether it's possible to have a revolutionary uprising with a resonant foundation. How would this relate to your idea about democracy?*

Hartmut: I don't know. Something in my theory, or maybe it's in my personality, I'm very hesitant to go for struggle and conflict and fighting. I somehow think that's not the right way. Even a lot of people on the left who want to go for... I think it's this closure, "I don't want to be in resonance, I just want to destroy." I was always against fighting. But now I would say that there are conditions, people in Chile have taught me that, they say they are so non-resonant that it might be OK to use violence or force for some time to create conditions where it becomes possible to enter into democratic resonant relationships. And it's probably true that we are in a world, particularly due to economic reasons, where true resonant democracies become very unlikely and where these forms of protest might be needed.

*Christian: It seems to me when reading the Resonance book that there's a lot of relationships between your thinking and existential philosophy.*

Hartmut: Yeah, that's a personal feature and has clearly also come out of philosophical traditions. And as I said, I did my PhD on Charles Taylor, with Axel Honneth who is a philosopher. So, existentialism and phenomenology are very important for me. I've just written a book on the sociology of heavy metal with the title *When monsters roar and angels sing* (Rosa 2023), and it says that the existential questions don't go away just because we know that we don't have good answers, right? So, if we can't give the answers philosophically or religiously or otherwise, then maybe music is a realm where we negotiate them. But we should not and cannot give up on them.

*Karl: In your opinion, what is the current state of sociology and its future?*

Hartmut: I think the situation of current sociology, almost on a global scale, is that there is a dividing line. There are those who think of sociology as similar to a natural science, which should operate on data. They're always repeating the mantra of "methodologically controlled research". And then there are those who think of sociology more as a part of the humanities. I would definitely go for the second one. I was strongly inspired by Charles Taylor, but you could also say Max Weber: man is a self-interpreting animal. And the self-interpretation is always to some extent practical, but it's also intellectual. So, philosophy, but nowadays also sociology, is the realm where we negotiate ourselves, where we try to interpret who we are and where we are going and where we are coming from. And if sociologists say well, that's no longer our business, we just collect data, then there will be other people coming from psychology or economy or history who will explain who we are as a society. And I think that would really be a pity. I think what a responsible sociology does today is trying to draw on all the resources we have from the data and the empirical investigations in order to come up with a suggestion for a self-interpretation. And therefore, I find that there's something which I now can explain which I couldn't explain for a long time. Whenever people asked what kind of knowledge I'm producing, I always felt that I'm not producing knowledge. I always thought that's wrong, and I still think so. I'm not producing knowledge. What I produce is a suggestion for self-interpretation. I give an account, I use Charles Taylor's term again here, and I try to give my best account. So, I tell people, colleagues, whoever wants to read it, that I think this is where we are, I think these are our problems, I think this is where we could go. And that is not the end, that's the beginning. Then you have to enter into dialogue with colleagues and with people from all over the world. And I must say that I try to personally do that. I talk to pupils, to students, but also to workers, even to homeless people, and ask, do you have a sense of resonance? Do you have a sense of alienation, and if not, what are the alternatives to it? So, we don't produce knowledge, but we are part of giving self-interpretations. And of course, if you are at the university, you have the luxury that you have all the data which you need, and if something is lacking, you can do an empirical investigation yourself. But the interpretation and the dialogue are essential for my understanding of sociology, and I hope that we will preserve it. The German situation is quite funny, where there are people like me, Andreas Reckwitz, Armin Nassei, Heinz Bude, or Steffen Mau. They publish books like mine, and the public reacts strongly to them. And many colleagues become pissed off, because they don't think it's science, that it's just like novels. What you see is that the public and society need these kinds of attempts, so I hope we will not lose this struggle.

*Karl: Does this mean that sociology should become more public?*

Hartmut: I think it could go public, but not in the sense of "we know it" and therefore we tell it. But we should have a voice. We should try to give an account of what's going on. I'm really an advocate of public sociology. But not just in the sense of the knowledge

I produce, the interpretations should be given back to society, but also the other way around. There is no one set of knowledge. The world and society look different from different places. If you're a worker or a homeless person or a sick person, a young person or old person, society is something different. And public sociology means you try to draw on all of these to produce accounts of society. So, it's public in two ways, it's a two-way relationship.

*Carl: So, sociology should be part of society's self-reflection.*

Hartmut: Yeah, of course. I think it's that anyway, right? And it would be stupid if society says that we can no longer afford to pay for this kind of enterprise.

*Karl: What do you think is needed in order to be able to pursue this? Especially since we currently have a system which forces us to write articles that are incomprehensible and useless for the public.*

Hartmut: I totally agree. Something has gone thoroughly wrong, and not just in sociology. At least in Germany, there's a lot of money in the in the university system. And politicians think you just have to give out money and then you will get good research, but that's completely wrong when they give it in competition, and let you compete for the money. I think a good system for doing research would be if researchers try to give their best account of society and then come to a question, and when they need money to do the research, they should get the money, or a chance to apply for it. But in general, it's the other way around: the government says, "here's a lot of money, who wants to have it?" And then colleagues get together and say, OK, we do totally different things, but how could we get that money up there? Then it's not the most interesting question but the smallest common denominator which defines the research question and that produces boring articles, boring consortiums. I was reading a master's thesis of someone quoting a Youtube video of Adorno, who was saying that we're raising sociologists who are very good in theoretical abstractions and methodological approaches, but incapable of sparking any interesting ideas, or even questions. I think we have almost lost the capacity to come up with really exciting questions. And that's a little frightening.

*Christian: It sounds a little bit like the reasoning by C. Wright Mills in *The sociological imagination*.*

Hartmut: That's right, and that was quite some time ago, right?

*Karl: This relates to where you want to go next with your work. You mentioned the concept of social energy, could say something about this direction of thought?*

Hartmut: It's something I'm exploring. For me, public sociology means I also like to develop my ideas not just in my closed room. I'm not sure that I will really turn this into my next book. I have tried to collect material which is in between the idea of social energy and the idea of medio-passivity. Referring to what we just discussed about lacking interesting questions; for me, this is a symptom of a society running out of energy, or out of social energy. And it relates to burnout syndromes, right? There might even be something like a collective burnout. Where are the visions which inspire people, which give steam to social transformations, even revolutionary steam, where does it come from? From where do social movements take their power? But also for societies as such, I really believe we have an energy problem. When someone suffers from burnout he will tell you "I had invested so much energy but nothing came back". I think that's true for us on the individual level, and on a collective level. We use up more and more coal and oil, and somehow it seems like nothing is coming back. Not enough is coming back. I want to think of what this kind of energy is. We probably have a misconception that it's *my* energy that I have to invest, while there seems to be something like a *circulating* social energy, in the sense of Stephen Greenblatt. I even have the hope to overcome eurocentrism with this, because I think in Chinese thinking, in Japanese thinking, in Indian thinking, and with the Greeks, you have concepts of *energeia* or *dynamis*, or even in theology, *pneuma*. It's not something we have to produce, but it's something circulating. So, I want to go a bit in that direction to come up with something maybe truly revolutionary.

*Christian: What's on your bedside table right now? What are you reading?*

Hartmut: I read a lot of novels, not always sophisticated novels, contemporary novels of all sorts. I think I get energy from those rather than from academic literature.

## Literature mentioned or quoted

- Adorno, T. W. (2005[1951]) *Minima moralia: Reflections from damaged life*. London: Verso.
- Jaeggi, R. (2014[2005]) *Alienation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1955) *Eros and civilization: A philosophical inquiry into Freud*. New York: Vintage.
- Mills, C. W. (1959) *The sociological imagination*. New York: Evergreen books.
- Rosa, H. (2013[2005]) *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosa, H. (2019) “La société de l’écoute. La réceptivité comme essence du bien commun”. *Revue du MAUSS*, 53(1), 361-395. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdm.053.0361>
- Rosa, H. (2019[2016]) *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rosa, H. & C. Henning & A. Bueno (eds.) (2021) *Critical theory and new materialisms*, London: Routledge.
- Rosa, H. (2023) *When monsters roar and angels sing: Eine kleine Soziologie des Heavy Metal*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Cherry, M. (2021) *The case for rage: Why anger is essential to anti-racist struggle*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ståhl, C. (2020) “En stum värld? Om resonans, social responsivitet och utbrändhet”, *Sociologisk Forskning* 57 (3-4):227–247. <https://doi.org/10.37062/sf.57.21831>

## Author presentations

*Karl Malmqvist* (corresponding author), lecturer and researcher in sociology, University of Gothenburg, Department of Sociology and Work Science, Box 720, 405 30, Gothenburg, Sweden.  
[karl.malmqvist@socav.gu.se](mailto:karl.malmqvist@socav.gu.se)

*Carl Cassegård*, professor of sociology, University of Gothenburg.

*Christian Ståhl*, professor of sociology, Linköping University.