



Hartmut Rosa's project for critical theory

Thesis Eleven
2016, Vol. 133(1) 122–129
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0725513616638464
the.sagepub.com



Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (Columbia University Press, 2015)

Reviewed by: Isaac Ariail Reed, *University of Colorado at Boulder, USA*

Traditional/modern/postmodern: A salvageable distinction?

In the second chapter of *The Country and the City* (1975: 9–12), Raymond Williams traces the time elevator whereby every generation of English writing seems to yearn for the previous generation's life when 'true rural England' existed, and with it a sense of real *community*. By the end of this short chapter, the reader can only grin as writers from hundreds of years ago refer yearningly to the Middle Ages and rail on about how 'an older rural civilization' has been lost under the crushing onset of urbanization.

This reader must confess that he now, somewhat sadly, is inclined to think in these terms when he conducts graduate seminars on Habermas and Foucault. The *schadenfreude* over English writers' yearning for rural England quickly becomes anxiety that social theory experiences a similar problem with its core distinction of traditional/modern/postmodern. Everything that is postmodern can be found in the modern, and the modern itself is, in the end, late medieval. For every Bret Easton Ellis novel there is a passage in James Joyce or Dostoyevsky, and on and on it goes. Is the very hinge on which we swing so much social theory itself a distinction without referent?

Hartmut Rosa's ambition in *Social Acceleration* is not only to salvage the distinction but also to redefine and explain it. At the core of his book are a series of hypotheses about the dynamics of developed societies in the 20th and 21st centuries, whose implications and consequences are then carefully interpreted so that they can serve as the diagnostic basis of a new approach to critical theory. The leaping off point for all of this is, amazingly, the confused and confusing work in the social theory of time and the constant

Corresponding author:

Isaac Ariail Reed, University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO 80309, USA.
Email: isaac.reed@colorado.edu

impression – in popular culture and in high social theory – that modernity is somehow about ‘everything going faster and faster’. Rosa parses this literature with style and aplomb, separating common sense from common nonsense and furthermore salvaging and putting to new use the deeper insights to emerge from thinking about the social construction of time. I will skip commenting on his commentary. Instead consider Rosa’s first major distinction, between three different kinds of social acceleration:

Technical acceleration, which refers to the use of techniques, and especially technology, to make ‘goal-directed processes’ increase in velocity. Here is where we place the railroad-automobile-airplane triptych, as well as massive changes in the speed of communication (and production). Acceleration of this sort induces time-space compression.

The acceleration of social change, by which Rosa means the change in the speed at which action-orientations, expectations, and experiences change. In other words, if there is an acceleration of social change, then, e.g., the norms, motivations and life plans of people in your grandfather’s generation are not only different than your own but, furthermore, your norms are *more different* from your grandfather’s than your grandfather’s were from *his* grandfather’s. And so on.

The acceleration of the pace of life. Simmel’s work on the metropolis is the classic statement here, and there are, for Rosa, objective and subjective components to this type of acceleration. Objectively, ‘action episodes’ per unit of objective time increase, particularly by compressing, say, the length of a meal or time spent sleeping, or by multi-tasking. Subjectively, the sense of feeling ‘pressed for time’ increases as one feels – for reasons that Rosa discusses at length – more and more obligations, and experiences a ‘fear of missing out’.

If this sounds, in my summary, wildly impressionistic, it is to Rosa’s credit that the first half of his book is dedicated to nailing down precisely what it would mean to say that these three types of acceleration are happening, and then examining a wealth of empirical literature to see if, in fact, they are. The answer is, more or less, ‘yes’ for all three types, with particular surges in acceleration at the turn of the 20th century and the turn of the 21st. These surges are marked by their counterpoints: first of all, handwringing about how the good life is being lost, and, second, a series of ‘decelerations’ or ‘inertias’ which he goes over in some detail. The big story is, though, that, a lot of the so-called ‘paradoxes’ of modernity disappear pretty quickly when one makes, and substantiates empirically, a series of hypotheses about acceleration. Thus Rosa replaces theoretical meandering and metaphor about the paradoxes of modernity with some serious analytic precision.

Explaining the shift

All of this, however, is a lead-up to the larger wager of the book, which is that in *explaining* the interrelation of these forms of acceleration and the ‘external motors’ that drive them, we can come to a deeper understanding of modernity, late modernity, postmodernity, etc. Briefly, that explanation has two parts. First, the three analytically

distinct forms of acceleration are intertwined empirically in a reinforcing spiral. They call forth each other causally, in the following way: Technical acceleration drives the acceleration of social change (e.g. change in the speed of travel or communication creates changes in the patterning of social relationships); acceleration in social change drives acceleration in the pace of life (e.g. as the social environment accelerates, the number of possibilities for action and adaptations that have to be made to ‘keep up’ also increases); and acceleration in the pace of life creates demands for the time-saving devices of . . . technological acceleration. It must be immediately stated that this is pictured as a spiral that can start anywhere; Rosa is not a technological determinist. Indeed, he views technological acceleration as having various social and cultural presuppositions and causal drivers. Thus the first answer to why modernity seems to be associated with acceleration is that ‘in modernity social acceleration becomes a self-propelling process’ (p. 156).

Second, there are three external motors that drive social acceleration; this means, among other things, that intentional actions, social movements, or other interventions that merely aim to halt the self-reinforcing spiral will not succeed in disrupting the process. Here, Rosa puts the multidimensionality of his theoretical imagination into full gear. The economic motor of acceleration – and especially technological acceleration – is the familiar story of time in capitalism (especially evident in the theories Marx and Harvey); the social structural motor is differentiation (an adaptation of Luhmann); and the cultural motor is the ‘promise’ made by acceleration – a promise to provide a life full of rewarding experiences. The latter hypothesis deserves special mention, for while the other two motors will be quickly recognizable to the knowledgeable reader, Rosa’s hypothesis about a cultural motor for acceleration goes well beyond any Weberian or neo-Weberian thesis about Protestant culture, time discipline, and modernity.

In essence, Rosa – drawing on a wide range of cultural history – proposes that an accelerated life, wherein *more experiences* per unit time are continually promised, is modernity’s answer to the problem of death and the secularization of temporal horizons. As he writes provocatively, what

achieved cultural hegemony as modernity advanced . . . [is] the idea that an *accelerated enjoyment of worldly options*, a ‘faster life,’ will once again allow the chasm between the time of life and the time of the world to be reduced. . . . The idea of the good life . . . is to conceive of life as *the last opportunity*, i.e. to use the earthly timespan allotted to humans as intensively and comprehensively as possible before death puts a definitive end to it. (p. 181)

Coming after Rosa’s comprehensive review and reinterpretation of time use studies earlier in the text (which, by itself, lends credence to the utility of having theorists around to synthesize and rethink material), this is a compelling and complex argument, which should prompt more historical sociological research on romanticism in the 19th century, among other things. In contrast, the chapter on the military and the state as operative forces at the origins of the social acceleration of modernity, while onto something important, is far too brief and far too disengaged from post-Tilly historical sociology to be useful.

Redrawing the core distinction

Rosa uses his theory of social acceleration to posit a distinction between ‘classical modernity’ and ‘late modernity’, thus taking the position that something significant in the structure of social life has shifted since the 1970s, but that this qualitative shift is the result of a quantitative surge in the underlying acceleration processes that characterize modernity as a whole, and the era of classical modernity in particular. Classical modernity here means the era of the classical social theorists (e.g. later 19th and early 20th centuries), with the structures it produced emerging into full flower in the middle 20th century (especially the welfare state). What we are really talking about when we talk about the first surge of accelerated modernity is, then, railroads, telegraphs, machine guns, ‘the social question’, industrial production, and the development of democratic politics.

Although the origins of the many different processes, tendencies and understandings that make up classical modernity reach all the way back to the late Middle Ages and early modern period, the era focused on by Reinhardt Koselleck in his foundational texts – 1770 to 1830 – is a key precursor to the era of classical modernity for Rosa. For it is in the *radical shift in how we view ourselves as placed in time* that he locates the democratic project of modernity. As Rosa explains, ‘the transformation of the experience of history lies at the root of the reconceptualization of the role and status of politics in modernity’ (p. 257); in other words, the better society is no longer located in heaven, or in some kind of impossible utopia, but *in time*, in a way that can be progressed towards in an enlightened manner as citizens grasp their collective way of life in their own hands, and hand off to the next generation a project of collective self-determination. This democratic project was, then, *enabled* by the first surge of acceleration that drove classical modernity (the progressive surge, we might say), and will be *disabled* by the ‘late modern’ surge, according to Rosa.

Thus Rosa locates the project of modernity in the relationship between acceleration and humans’ capacity to master their own fate. The problem, as he sees it, is that the new surge of acceleration (which started in the 1970s but really took off after 1989), embodied today in the tremendous speed of global capital, the new wars, and various other processes recognizable from the sociological literature on globalization, has *exceeded the temporal requirements of democratic deliberation*. There is no time for parliamentary argument and the long back-and-forth of lawmaking, as the fundamental human capacity for rational dialogue has an inherent limit to how quickly it can proceed. Thus, to manage the wickedly complex social environments created by late modern acceleration, political systems turn increasingly to executive power and, in another register, automated responses. And thus ‘politics’ in the sense that emerged from the French Revolution is evacuated of importance, and people lose control over their conditions of life. Rosa is not optimistic that the coming crisis of collective self-determination and ‘political steering’ can be resolved in a positive manner.¹

Before launching into my own critique, it must be said that this is by far the most compelling rendering of the traditional/modern (‘classical modern’) / postmodern (‘late modern’) distinction that I have read in the last ten years. In this sense, Rosa has superseded his predecessors and influences; he has synthesized the project of critical

theory in a way that connects it to empirical sociology as well as to the philosophical concerns of the Honneth school; and he actually provides a grounding for understanding these distinctions between eras that is rigorous, carefully thought out, and manifestly multidimensional. Reading the book, I was ‘won over’ in this specific sense – having long felt that the Marxist-Harvey approach to the postmodern was the most rigorous but also one-sided, I now see Rosa’s achievement as required reading on the matter. What follows is thus a critique provoked by the fact that the typical problems with this genre of work have been assiduously avoided. Instead, a different set of quite fascinating problems emerges.

Geography, empire, and time: Critique of Rosa

To see the problems that attend Rosa’s text, we can begin with the time use studies that he so brilliantly thinks through. This is in many ways the high point of the book; if *only* more critical theorists would work this hard to understand the empirics in a key area of sociology, we would all be in better intellectual shape. But it must be said that as Rosa develops his thinking, it becomes clear that at the center of his insights are the working lives of the middle classes in the most developed countries. This in itself is not a problem. *However*, because Rosa’s phenomenology of time in modernity is centered on this group of people, its relationship to the economic engine of the late modern world remains obscure. After all, Harvey’s understanding of flexible accumulation and post-Fordism as the key to ‘postmodernism’ is an account of dispossession and the dispossessed. For Harvey and others, the most obvious empirical reference points for understanding contemporary capitalism are (1) factory workers in the global south and east, and (2) workers in the developed world who also face precarious employment, many of whom have more than one unstable job at once. This is the outcome of the collapse of the Fordist compromise between capital, labor and the state. Never having enough time may indeed be a problem, in a way Rosa could theorize, for these workers. But it is fundamentally *not* a phenomenology of life beset by the television paradox and the erasure of a border between home and work life via email. Thus there is a disjunction between his lifeworld studies and his articulation of the economic motor of acceleration, one that I do not see resolved in the book. If Rosa really wants to account, via his theory of acceleration, for the post-1970s shift in *capitalism*, surely his reference point should include studies of the phenomenology of factory work, like Aiwā Ong’s *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (1987). For it is in these factories, rather than in the home lives of the harried and hurried middle classes, that one can grasp most clearly how surplus value is extracted for the purposes of profit.

This critique raises a larger issue with the whole project of understanding the crisis of our times as one of democratic ‘steering’. Who is steering? And are they steering national economies or global ones? Do we really want to locate critical theory’s normative commitment to democracy in a slightly nostalgic rendering of the ambitions of 20th-century European social democracy at the national level? The steering metaphor has been central to European debates about experts, expert knowledge, and the risk of technocracy as the democratically insufficient pathologization of the social democratic project since Habermas’s debates with Luhmann in *Legitimation Crisis*. From this

standpoint, to be sure, Rosa's argument that democratic steering is disabled by acceleration is certainly interesting. But *precisely because* Rosa's theory is so rigorously multidimensional, and thus cognizant of the interplays between culture, social structure, and capitalism, one is led to doubt the underlying narrative itself. Allow me to make this point in as crude a way as I can, via turning to a simple and US-centric periodization.

If we take the basic dates of Rosa's narrative seriously – that the political project of modernity comes into consciousness between 1770 and 1830, classical modernity manifests in acceleration between approximately 1870 and 1920 (with certain implications for the welfare states that develop between 1945 and 1965), and a second wave of acceleration begins in the 1970s that launches the world into the crisis of late modernity, then one must say from the perspective of American history, this all looks a little bit eerie. These dates really mean something else, do they not? Any serious social history of the USA would have to admit that the USA was, from 1776 to 1863, a *slave society*, from 1876 to 1965 a *caste society*, and from 1965 to the present a *racialized society*. And, even a brief survey of the history of labor in the USA, or the history of racism, would find a deep intertwining between the systematic undervaluation of black labor and vicious stereotypes about the 'backward', 'lazy', and thus supposedly *untimely* 'nature' of African-Americans. When we add to this an understanding of the USA's western expansion in North America as an imperial venture, one is left to wonder why Rosa is so silent on the history of race and empire as part and parcel of the history of accelerative modernity, particularly given the Hegelian starting point of the whole project. For the first surge of acceleration in classical modernity coincided with the height of European empire (for which telegraphs, radios, machine guns, and fast ships were, I would hazard to say, rather useful); and the world of 'late modern' globalization is also, of course, the *postcolonial world*, and the world of the new international economic order.

I am aware that the relationship between the postcolonial critique and sociological theories of modernity and multiple modernities is a contentious one, and thus that Rosa has surely heard something along these lines before. But my point is not only (indeed not primarily) normative, nor is it a call for 'inclusion' of a particular brand or school of social theory. Rather, it becomes clear when reading the text that there is a series of quite specific ways in which the existence of empire is intertwined with the empirical connections that sit at the core of Rosa's argument. For example, to understand the importance of secularized time-consciousness as a spur to democratic political imperatives in classical modernity, some understanding of the cultural politics of 'civilization' and 'barbarism' is necessary for the mere reason that the two conceptualizations ('modernity' and 'civilization') were bound together by the working semiotics of several generations of European and American elites. Similarly, if we are really going to do to a sociology of the modern social construction of space, some account of global imperial ambitions is required. One cannot, for example, understand the social magic of the railroad as accelerator in the USA without understanding the Native American genocide and the construction of 'the West' as 'open space' waiting to be settled. Allow me one final example: how can we understand the continuing importance of war and states in acceleration unless we comprehend that the period of great peace *in Europe* (1815–1914) was not exactly a period of peace elsewhere? To be clear, I think that it is quite possible that the distinction central to Rosa's narrative

(traditional/modern/late modern) might indeed remain intact after answering these sorts of questions. But surely they must be answered for this really to be a theory of modernity of the scope and ambition that Rosa ascribes to it.

Towards a critical sociology of generations

All of this critique is, of course, itself the result of Rosa's admirable ambition. If he were content to just limit himself to a reinterpretation of time use studies in the USA and Germany, none of this would matter. But Rosa wants to make these studies speak to our understanding of modernity, and thus contribute to a trenchant and insightful diagnosis of the times. In my view, such a diagnosis requires a rewritten history of the modern era that is truly global in nature. Nonetheless, Rosa has made a massive contribution to social theory by giving us a precise understanding of acceleration, and I am sure that the demand to include empire will appear as simply too much for what is already a somewhat sprawling, impossibly erudite text. Thus I wish to end on a different critique, one that goes, I think, to the heart of Rosa's thesis in a more explicitly constructive way.

Underlying all of Rosa's elaborated theoretical artifice is a quite simple but illuminating point about the acceleration of social change. Crudely summarized, it is this: at a given time in a given space, three or at most four generations can exist together, making the limit of the 'immediately communicable' the past 80 to 100 years. In traditional societies, social change occurred at a pace that was *intergenerational*, according to which the expectations of grandparents were of immense use to grandchildren. In a sense, in these societies, three or four generations lived 'together in time'. In the classical modern era and into the 20th century, social change was *generational*, such that as individuals and as a collective, each generation 'started out on its own' to 'make one's way in the world' (individually) and renew the social contract (collectively). When the pace of social change is generational, individuals can *strategize* for the life course, and construct identities that are neither fixed by tradition nor destroyed by seemingly constant reinvention. However, in late modernity, the rate of change has increased such that it is *intragenerational*, which renders the insights of parents nearly irrelevant, reduces the capacity to strategize over the course of a life, and thus leads to *situational identities* and *situational politics*.

There are two implications of this, somewhat under-articulated by Rosa. The first is that the very idea of a 'modern life' may have been a blip on the radar screen of human history – a short period where, almost by accident, the rate of social change coincided with the length of 'a generation'. Thus, everything else aside, perhaps it is after all the case that, as Michel Foucault once wrote, 'one can certainly wager that man [will] be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' (1994: 387). The second is that we desperately need a new sociology of generations. For Rosa's concept of generation is much less elaborated, and much less clearly grounded, than most of his other concepts. Anyone who currently teaches undergraduates in the universities of the developed world knows that the 'generational consciousness' of '68ers is an entirely different animal than whatever is going on with students today. Indeed, to return to my earlier criticism, one might see one of the successes of the civil rights movement in the United States as achieving a *generational* change in the racial contract. Perhaps, then, the next step in

Rosa's project can answer the following question. Given social acceleration, who do age cohorts think they are, and how does it matter (or not matter) for politics? This is but one question raised by Rosa's erudite and enjoyable book, which surely reinstates the requirement that critical theory connect itself to empirical sociology, and empirical sociology accept the necessity of critical theory.

Note

Copyright Isaac Ariail Reed, 2014. Parts of this review appeared as 'When Acceleration Negates Progress', *Contemporary Sociology* 43(6): 820–823, 2014.

1. It must be said that Rosa's argument about the democratic deficit and the threat to progressive politics constituted by late modern acceleration, while quite compelling, is less rigorously grounded in empirical political science than his work on the experience of time is in time studies.

References

- Foucault M (1994) *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ong A (1987) *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Williams R (1975) *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press.