



# Humanity and Uncontrollability

Reflections on Hartmut Rosa's  
Critical Theory

Simon Susen

palgrave  
macmillan

# Humanity and Uncontrollability

“Hartmut Rosa is perhaps the most important new voice among critical theorists, bringing together the Frankfurt School tradition and phenomenology in powerful diagnoses of our current predicament and impasses. Despite brilliant books like *Acceleration* and *Resonance*, Rosa is not well-known to English-language social scientists. Now, Simon Susen has produced a book that can change this. Combining introduction and critical reflections, *Humanity and Uncontrollability* is hugely helpful.”

—Craig Calhoun, *University Professor of Social Sciences, Arizona State University, USA*

“Simon Susen’s detailed and knowledgeable discussion of a key concept in Rosa’s work is very welcome.”

—Maevae Cooke, *Professor of Philosophy, University College Dublin, Ireland*

“In this impressive book, Simon Susen succeeds not only in providing a systematic and comprehensive overview of Hartmut Rosa’s wide-ranging social theory but also in equipping the reader with the intellectual tools necessary to discuss both its merits and its weaknesses. *Humanity and Uncontrollability* is a must-read for anyone interested in one of the most free-spirited and surprising developments in contemporary critical theory.”

—Axel Honneth, *Jack C. Weinstein Professor of the Humanities, Columbia University, USA*

“For the English-speaking world, Simon Susen’s *Humanity and Uncontrollability* is an essential guide to the complex, critical, and challenging sociology of Hartmut Rosa. Although modern society is based on assumptions about regulation, management, measurement, and hence predictability, Rosa argues that our world is uncontrollable [*unverfügbar*]. Susen provides a systematic uncovering of the various dimensions of uncontrollability [*Unverfügbarkeit*] and the more elusive but equally important notion of ‘resonance’—which is, arguably, a vital element of our being-in-the-world.”

—Bryan S. Turner, *Professor of Sociology, Australian Catholic University, Australia*

Simon Susen

# Humanity and Uncontrollability

Reflections on Hartmut Rosa's  
Critical Theory

palgrave  
macmillan

Simon Susen  
Sociology  
City, University of London  
London, UK

ISBN 978-3-031-48913-6      ISBN 978-3-031-48914-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-48914-3>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

# Contents

<b>Part One</b>	<b>Humanity and Uncontrollability</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I.</b>	<i>Unverfügbarkeit</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>Aggression</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>Controllability</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Paradoxicality</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>V.</b>	<b>Resonance</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Semicontrollability</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>VII.</b>	<b>Stages of Life</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>Conflict</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>IX.</b>	<b>Desire</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>X.</b>	<b>Uncontrollability</b>	<b>83</b>

<b>Part Two</b>	<b>Critical Reflections</b>	89
<b>I.</b>	<b>Agency</b>	91
<b>II.</b>	<b>Subject–Object Dichotomy</b>	97
<b>III.</b>	<b>(Post-)Anthropocentric Relationalism</b>	101
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Instrumental Reason</b>	103
<b>V.</b>	<b>Structure and Culture</b>	105
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Catch-All Reductionism</b>	109
<b>VII.</b>	<b>Knowledge-Constitutive Interests</b>	111
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>Power</b>	117
<b>IX.</b>	<b>Modernity</b>	119
<b>X.</b>	<b>Fatalism</b>	123
<b>XI.</b>	<b>Alienation and Emancipation</b>	125
<b>XII.</b>	<b>Romanticism</b>	131
<b>XIII.</b>	<b>The Power of Resonance: With, Through, and Beyond Humanity</b>	139
<b>XIV.</b>	<b>The Four Pillars of Resonance: Being Affected, Self-Efficacy, Adaptive Transformation, and Uncontrollability</b>	141
<b>XV.</b>	<b>The Challenge of Resonance: Problems, Tensions, and Contradictions</b>	157
<b>XVI.</b>	<b>Stages of Life</b>	175

<b>XVII.    Between the Control of Institutions and the           Institutionalization of Control</b>	185
<b>XVIII.  Between the Uncontrollability of Desire and the           Desire for the Uncontrollable</b>	197
<b>Part Three    Conclusion</b>	207
<b>Conclusion</b>	209
<b>References</b>	221
<b>Name Index</b>	265
<b>Subject Index</b>	275

## About the Author

**Simon Susen** is Professor of Sociology at City, University of London. Before joining City in 2011, he held lectureships at Birkbeck, University of London (2010–2011), Newcastle University (2008–2010), and Goldsmiths, University of London (2007–2008). He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2007. Prior to that, he studied sociology, politics, and philosophy at a range of international universities and research centres—including the University of Cambridge, the University of Edinburgh, the Colegio de México, the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Mexico City, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is Affiliate Professor of Sociology at the Universidad Andrés Bello in Santiago, Chile. In addition, he is Associate Member of the Bauman Institute and, together with Bryan S. Turner, Editor of the *Journal of Classical Sociology*.



# Part One

**Humanity and Uncontrollability**



# I. *Unverfügbarkeit*

Along with the concepts of ‘acceleration’, ‘alienation’, and ‘resonance’, the notion of *Unverfügbarkeit* ranks among the most important reference points in Hartmut Rosa’s critical theory, especially in his recent work.<sup>1</sup> It is no accident, then, that—following his extensive inquiries into ‘acceleration’ and ‘alienation’ in the context of ‘late modernity’<sup>2</sup> and the publication of his magnum opus on ‘resonance’,<sup>3</sup> which he interprets as the main source of meaning for all members of humanity—Rosa has found it necessary to offer a brief, but powerful, account of the place occupied by the concept of *Unverfügbarkeit*, loosely translated as ‘uncontrollability’, in his critical theory.<sup>4</sup>

The problem starts, of course, with the translation of the (German) term *Unverfügbarkeit* into English. As Rosa points out, *Unverfügbarkeit* is ‘one of the key elements of every experience of being in resonance with someone or something’.<sup>5</sup> To this one may add that, in fact, *Unverfügbarkeit* is a constitutive part of most, if not all, of our experiences of the world, even (or perhaps especially) in cases where this is not immediately obvious. In essence, the term *Unverfügbarkeit* refers to five different phenomena at the same time<sup>6</sup>:

1. *Elusiveness*: Something is *unverfügbar* when we cannot bring it about simply by willing it or wanting it to be the case. Indeed, on many occasions, '[t]he more we want it, the less we get it'.<sup>7</sup>
2. *Unavailability*: Something is *unverfügbar* when it is—at least potentially—inaccessible or unattainable, in the sense that we cannot secure or obtain it at will, let alone by force.
3. *Unpredictability*: Something is *unverfügbar* when the following three conditions apply:
  - a. You cannot ensure *that* it will happen (or prevent *that* it will happen).
  - b. You cannot predict *what* will happen (that is, the outcome).
  - c. You cannot foresee *how long* it will last (in terms of the temporal axis of past–present–future).
4. *Non-engineerability*: Something is *unverfügbar* when it cannot be brought about instrumentally and/or strategically by, say, fabricating it or forcing it to come into existence, meaning that it is fundamentally non-engineerable and unenforceable.
5. *Uncontrollability*: Something is *unverfügbar* when—in terms of its occurrence ('that'), substance and outcome ('what'), and duration ('how long')—it cannot be controlled, at least not entirely.

It is this fifth meaning that is particularly important to Rosa's understanding of *Unverfügbarkeit*, which is reflected in the title of the English edition, *The Uncontrollability of the World*.<sup>8</sup> And yet, all five dimensions mentioned above are central to his conception—and, crucially, his critique—of modernity. From Rosa's point of view, modernity is marked by an 'incessant desire to make the world engineerable, predictable, available, accessible, disposable (that is, *verfügbar*) in all its aspects'.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the project of modernity—both as an ideal and as a reality—is the antithesis of elusiveness, unavailability, unpredictability, non-engineerability, and uncontrollability. Modernity seeks to make most, if not all, facets of the world governable, available, predictable, engineerable, and controllable. This quest for total—or almost total—control manifests itself in key levels of our existence: socially, biologically, culturally, politically, ideologically, epistemically, scientifically, economically, legally,

technologically, organizationally, militarily, reproductively, sexually, and so forth. Paradoxically, however, this collective ‘drive and desire towards controllability ultimately creates monstrous, frightening forms of uncontrollability’.<sup>10</sup> In short, the pursuit of controllability is inextricably linked to the reality of uncontrollability.

Arguably, one of the clearest manifestations of uncontrollability is snowfall.<sup>11</sup> Not only can we not manufacture, engineer, or confidently foresee it—certainly not long prior to its occurrence; but, in addition, we cannot appropriate, let alone control, it.<sup>12</sup> ‘Our lives unfold as the interplay between what we can control and that which remains outside our control’<sup>13</sup>—or at least between what we think we can control and that which we think remains outside our control. Objective degrees of (un)controllability can be out of sync with subjective degrees of (un)controllability. The implications of this (potential or actual) discrepancy notwithstanding, the dialectic of controllability and uncontrollability is vital to human life.

Just as a world in which everything is ‘fully known, [...] planned, and mastered [...] would be a dead world’,<sup>14</sup> a world in which everything remains unknown, utterly unplanned, and unmastered would be a lively, but ultimately unliveable, world. We have a need for varying degrees of *uncontrollability*, making our lives interesting and stimulating: the facts, events, and developments that life throws at us will always retain a level of uncertainty, unavailability, unpredictability, and non-engineerability. At the same time, we have a need for varying degrees of *controllability*, making our lives manageable and viable: the facts, events, and developments that life throws at us require a feasible level of certainty, availability, predictability, and engineerability.

Seeking to control the uncontrollable, however, is an endeavour that, in most cases, is doomed to failure. ‘The more you try to bring the goal or the next point under your control, the more you try to force it, the less you succeed.’<sup>15</sup> The constant interplay between the search for control and the experience of *uncontrollability* is a constitutive feature of *life* in general and of *games* in particular. These include not only card games, board games, and games of chance but also, in the Wittgensteinian sense, language games. Consider the following examples: the high degree of unpredictability of every conversation; the infinite amount of semantic,

syntactic, and pragmatic options at one's disposal when constructing a sentence; and, last but not least, the large probability of (minor or major) misunderstandings occurring in a linguistic exchange. The question of 'the relation between what is controllable and what is uncontrollable',<sup>16</sup> however, extends far beyond the realm of (implicit or explicit) game-playing; it permeates almost every sphere of our lives—from sleep and health to love and desire.

'Our encounter with the uncontrollable and our desire or struggle to bring it under control form a red thread that runs through all areas of our lives.'<sup>17</sup> Given its existential centrality and its ontological status as an anthropological invariant, it is hard to overstate the importance of the fact that the dialectic of controllability and uncontrollability lies at the core of both seemingly trivial and genuinely meaningful aspects of our lives. We may or may not be aware of its presence in, impact on, and significance for our lives; either way, this dialectic shapes our relationship to the world in a fundamental sense. Our conscious and unconscious attempts at coming to terms with the extent to which the tension-laden relationship between controllability and uncontrollability pervades our existence, however, come at a high cost:

My hypothesis is this: because we, as late-modern human beings, aim to make the world controllable at every level—individual, cultural, institutional, and structural—we invariably encounter the world as a 'point of aggressions' [*sic*] or as a series of points of aggression, in other words as a series of objects that we have to know, attain, conquer, master, or exploit. And precisely because of this, 'life', the experience of feeling alive and of truly encountering the world—that which makes *resonance* possible—always seems to elude us.<sup>18</sup>

The fight is on. The pursuit of a meaningful life is bound up with the experience of the world as a point of aggression. The challenge consists in converting our relationship to the world from a spiral of alienation into a source of resonance.

## Notes

1. See Rosa (2018).
2. See, for instance: Rosa (2010); Rosa (2015 [2005]); Rosa et al. (2017); Rosa and Scheuerman (2009). See also, for example: Reckwitz and Rosa (2021a); Reckwitz and Rosa (2023 [2021]).
3. See Rosa (2019 [2016]). See also Rosa (2016).
4. See Rosa (2020 [2018]). See also Rosa (2018). In addition, see, for instance: Bacrău (2021); Christiaens (2020); Paar (2020); Schnurer (2019); Yu-sum (2022). Moreover, see, for instance: Hollstein and Rosa (2020); Hollstein and Rosa (2022).
5. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. vii.
6. On this point, see *ibid.*, pp. vii–ix.
7. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
8. See *ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
10. *Ibid.*, p. ix (quotation modified).
11. See *ibid.*, p. 1.
12. See *ibid.*, p. 1.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 2 (quotation modified).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 4 (*italics in original*) (quotation modified).



## II. Aggression

For Rosa, modernity is a historical context in which the world is, to a large extent, experienced as a point of aggression by those who inhabit it.<sup>1</sup> This insight obliges us to reflect on the basic phenomenological argument that ‘human beings are always already situated in a world, always already *au monde*’.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as ‘there is something’<sup>3</sup> and ‘*something is present*’<sup>4</sup> that surrounds us and in which we are immersed, the ‘distinction between subject and world’<sup>5</sup>—that is, the distinction between humans and their environment—is preceded by a form of *Dasein*, which, by definition, transcends any artificial separation between ‘actors’ and ‘acted-upon’. Thus, a phenomenologically informed sociology, understood in Rosian terms,<sup>6</sup> conceives of the relationship between subject and world not as a *precondition* but, rather, as ‘the *result* of our relatedness to this presence’.<sup>7</sup>

There are multiple ways in which we, as humans, relate (and, crucially, do *not* relate) to the world. Our relationship to the world is shaped by ‘the social and cultural conditions into which we have been socialized’.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as these conditions are pathological, they are experienced as disempowering by those embedded in them. Arguably, ‘for late-modern human beings, the world has simply become a point of aggression’.<sup>9</sup> In the context of late modernity, almost every aspect of people’s lives ‘must

be known, mastered, conquered, made useful'<sup>10</sup> and may be commodified. This trend has been exacerbated by recent technological developments, notably those 'unleashed by digitalization',<sup>11</sup> but also by the systemic imperatives of rationalization, optimization, growth, expansion, competition, and profit-maximization—all of which are reinforced by global capitalism.

These macro-trends manifest themselves in micro-trends, putting systemically induced pressures on people's everyday lives, which are colonized not only, at the *political* level, by the administrative imperatives of the state and, at the *economic* level, by the profit-maximizing logic of the market but also, at the *cultural* level, by the expectation that all adult members of society be capable of attending to ever-growing to-do-lists, each entry of which may be experienced as a point of aggression.<sup>12</sup> The more we seek to be on top of our to-do-lists, however, the more these lists govern our existence. The more we seek to get the tasks included in our to-do-lists out of the way, the more these tasks regulate our actions and interactions. It appears, then, that a merely systemic mode of functioning is dominating our lives. Rosa's critical account of modernity is summarized in the following thesis:

My theory is that the *normalization and naturalization of our aggressive relationship to the world* is the result of a social formation, three centuries in the making, that is based on the *structural principle of dynamic stabilization* and on the *cultural principle of relentlessly expanding humanity's reach*.<sup>13</sup>

In brief, modernity is a historical condition founded on two fundamental principles: the structural principle of *dynamic stabilization* and the cultural principle of *the expansion of humanity's reach*. Hence, Rosa's architecture of the social is based on a structure–culture distinction: *structural* (including institutional and systemic) arrangements cannot be produced, reproduced, and/or transformed without *cultural* (including behavioural and ideological) forces, which either strengthen or weaken the legitimacy of the given. This approach combines the analysis of *structural* constituents (from a *third-person* perspective) with the analysis of *cultural* constituents (from a *first-person* perspective). The former tends to be associated with structuralism and functionalism, whereas the latter



tends to be associated with hermeneutics and phenomenology. In the context of modernity, '[w]e are structurally compelled (from without) and culturally driven (from within) to turn the world into a point of aggression',<sup>14</sup> since its systemic forces colonize and dominate our everyday lives and, by implication, our subjectivities.

Modern society may be defined as a historical formation that '*can stabilize itself only dynamically, in other words one that requires constant economic growth, technological acceleration, and cultural innovation in order to maintain its institutional status quo*'.<sup>15</sup> This confluence of constant economic expansion, technological speeding-up, and cultural reconfiguration, however, is not primarily driven by an incremental logic of 'a lust for more'<sup>16</sup>—in the sense of '*higher, faster, farther*'<sup>17</sup>—but, rather, perpetuated by 'the fear of having *less and less*'<sup>18</sup> and, therefore, of losing out. Modernity's incessant pursuit of growth, acceleration, and innovation is propelled not only by a compulsive desire for more and more but also by a pathological anxiety to fall behind and, consequently, to be left out. From a macro-sociological point of view, it is imperative to recognize that 'modern societies can stabilize themselves only *dynamically*, that is, *through escalation*'.<sup>19</sup> There is no such thing as a 'non-dynamic' modern society. By definition, modern societies can exist only if they keep growing, accelerating, and innovating.

Remember Woody Allen's famous statement: 'A relationship, I think, is like a shark, you know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark.'<sup>20</sup> From a Rosian standpoint, the same applies to modern society. Unless it constantly moves forward, it withers away. What we got on our hands in the case of late modernity is a formation that is very much alive. The life of this historical condition, however, is shaped not only by dynamism but also by pathological forms of functionalism, whose preponderance is as *empowering* for systemic forces as it is *disempowering* for ordinary actors.

In the long run, social formations are unsustainable if they are based exclusively on negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety. Modern societies are no exception. A vital positive feature they have in common is 'the promise of *expanding our share of the world*'.<sup>21</sup> In the context of modernity, *Welterschließung* (world disclosure) is inextricably linked to the constant pursuit of *Weltreichweitenvergrößerung* (expansion of our share of

the world). A central mantra of modern existence, therefore, is the promise—or at least the implicit or explicit belief—that ‘[o]ur life will be better if we manage to bring more world within our reach’.<sup>22</sup> To turn this commitment into a reality, we have to render most—if not all—components of modernity governable, available, predictable, engineerable, and controllable.

The far-reaching significance of this doxa is reflected in the fact that ‘the categorical imperative of late modernity—*Always act in such a way that your share of the world is increased*—has become the dominant principle behind our decision-making in all areas of life and across all ages’.<sup>23</sup> The reach for endless reach is an unreachable dream that permeates almost every aspect of late-modern existence. It *transcends* traditional social boundaries in the sense that it pervades almost all dimensions of our lives *regardless* of the positions we occupy, and the dispositions we acquire, within different interactional realms and *regardless* of the degree to which we are conditioned by key sociological variables (such as class, gender, ethnicity, age, and [dis]ability). In the ‘digital age’<sup>24</sup> (expressed in the ‘digital turn’<sup>25</sup>), the world is ‘at our fingertips in a historically unprecedented way’.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, our existence, insofar as we participate in the presentation of self in digital life,<sup>27</sup> is at other people’s fingertips. To be clear, the presentation of ‘the digital self’<sup>28</sup> may be as inauthentic, performative, partial, misleading, and distorted as the presentation of ‘the non-digital self’.<sup>29</sup> As a resonance- and recognition-seeking process, however, the presentation of self is essential to the construction of both ‘empirical’ and ‘virtual’ realities. If ‘*life comes down to bringing the world within reach*’,<sup>30</sup> then social death is equivalent to the failure to succeed in this endeavour.

## Notes

1. On this argument, see *ibid.*, pp. 5–14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5. See Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]), p. 88. Cf. Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]).
3. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5 (italics in original).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6. See Rosa (2019 [2016]). See also Rosa (2016).
7. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 5 (*italics added*).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 6 (quotation modified). See Marcuse (1966 [1955]), p. 111 (quoting Max Scheler).
10. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
12. See *ibid.*, p. 7.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 8 (*italics added*).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 9 (*italics in original*).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 9 (*italics in original*).
18. *Ibid.*, p. 10 (*italics in original*).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 10 (*italics added*).
20. See Allen (1977 [Film]).
21. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 10 (*italics in original*). On this point, see Rosa (2019 [2016]), pp. 309–310.
22. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 11 (*italics in original*).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 11 (*italics in original*).
24. On the ‘digital age’, see, for instance: Bastos (2021); Belk and Llamas (2013); Boltanski and Esquerre (2022); Burda (2011); Feenberg and Barney (2004); Fuchs (2022); Housley et al. (2022); Junge et al. (2013); Negroponte (1995); Orgad (2012); Perriam and Carter (2021); Runnel et al. (2013); Susen (2015a), pp. 98, 116, 117, 227, and 303*n*232; Susen (2023b); Susen (2023d), esp. pp. 849–853; Thompson (2005); Wajcman (2015); Westera (2013); Zhao (2005).
25. On the ‘digital turn’, see, for example: Athique (2013); Baym (2014 [2010]); Belk and Llamas (2013); Burda (2011); Junge et al. (2013); Negroponte (1995); Runnel et al. (2013); Susen (2015a), pp. 34 and 289*n*175; Westera (2013); Zhao (2005).
26. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 12. On this point, see von Thadden (2018).
27. See Belk and Llamas (2013) and Zhao (2005). See also Susen (2015a), p. 116. Cf. Goffman (1971 [1959]). Cf. also Susen (2016c).
28. See Zhao (2005).
29. See Susen (2016c).
30. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 12 (*italics in original*).



### III. Controllability

Insisting that ‘making the world controllable is not a homogeneous process’,<sup>1</sup> Rosa posits that, its multiple forms and manifestations notwithstanding, it comprises at least four key elements. Making the world controllable means (1) rendering it *visible*, (2) rendering it physically *reachable* or *accessible*, (3) rendering it *manageable*, and (4) rendering it *useful*.<sup>2</sup> This pursuit of the visibility, reachability or accessibility, manageability, and utility of the world is central to the project of modernity and, by implication, its main ingredients—from capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism to scientism, empiricism, and positivism. It is no accident, then, that all four dimensions are embedded in the institutional arrangements by which modern societies are sustained: (1) *science*, (2) *technology*, (3) the *economy*, and (4) *law* and the *state*.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1.

The *scientific enterprise* operates in accordance with the formula ‘K-R-K’ (existing knowledge–research–more knowledge),<sup>4</sup> aiming to broaden our epistemic horizons *ad infinitum*, as reflected in the German term

‘*Wissenschaft*’, which designates the scientific ideal of ‘*Wissen schaffen*’ (‘creating knowledge’).

## 2.

*Technological progress* unfolds in accordance with methodologically rigorous, empirically substantiated, and rationally evaluated procedures, by means of which key—that is, experientially relevant—dimensions of the world can be explained and understood as well as engineered and controlled.

## 3.

Under capitalism, *economic development* occurs in accordance with the logic of ‘the capital-driven, escalatory programme M-C-M’ (money–commodities–more money),<sup>5</sup> resulting in global processes of production, marketization, competition, circulation, and consumption. These processes permit consumers to exert different degrees of personal control, notably by acquiring material and symbolic goods as well as knowledge and instruments.

## 4.

*Judicial regulations and political-administrative apparatuses* are established in accordance with the normative principles of ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ as well as ‘law’ and ‘order’, aimed at guaranteeing that social processes, structures, and arrangements be not only relatively predictable and controllable but also justiciable and evaluable, especially in terms of their capacity to generate, and to sustain, more or less stable forms of life.

In short, ‘the ubiquitous struggle for power’<sup>6</sup>—be it in its scientific, technological, economic, judicial, political, and/or any other constitutive variants—is, ultimately, ‘a struggle for control: the struggle to expand our

share of the world'.<sup>7</sup> *Machtkämpfe* are *Kontrollkämpfe* or, more precisely, *Verfügbarkeitskämpfe*: those involved in them struggle for (or against) their individual or collective capacity to make particular aspects of the world *verfügbar*—and, crucially, to do so in accordance with their interests, agendas, and desires. Irrespective of whether these interests, agendas, and desires relate primarily to scientific, technological, economic, judicial, political, and/or other elements of social reality, whose constitution, organization, and distribution are implicitly or explicitly at stake, '*power always manifests itself in the expansion of one's own share of the world, often at the expense of others*'.<sup>8</sup>

Just as, in asymmetrically structured social realms, *Welterschließung* (rendering the world accessible) is closely intertwined with implicit or explicit forms of *Machterschließung* (rendering power accessible), *Weltreichweitenvergrößerung* (expansion of our share of the world) is intimately entangled with *Machtreichweitenerweiterung* (expansion of our share of power). This scenario, of course, can result in *Weltübererschließung*, when—notably in different types of hubris, marked by excessive levels of self-confidence—we push the limits of the world too far and end up paying a high price for this endeavour (the potential occurrence of further pandemics, climate catastrophe, and/or nuclear war being obvious examples).<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this scenario can lead to *Machtübererschließung*: in extreme cases of power concentration, characterized by the asymmetrical distribution of socially relevant resources, particular actors or groups of actors are conferred disproportionate levels of control and/or influence over other actors or groups of actors. To put it bluntly, the struggle for control is a struggle for power and, thus, for an individual or collective actor's capacity to render the world (a) visible, (b) reachable or accessible, (c) manageable, and (d) useful on *their* terms and in accordance with *their* interests, agendas, and desires.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Ibid., p. 15.
2. See *ibid.*, pp. 15–17.
3. See *ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

4. Ibid., p. 17.
5. Ibid., p. 17 (quotation modified).
6. Ibid., p. 18.
7. Ibid., p. 18.
8. Ibid., p. 18 (*italics in original*).
9. Cf. Turner (2023). Cf. also Turner (2022).
10. Cf. Susen (2014b).



## IV. Paradoxicality

The key paradox that Rosa explores in his analysis can be summarized as follows: *the more we seek to make the world controllable, the less controllable it becomes*. Put differently, the pursuit of ultimate controllability is not only futile but also contradictory, in the sense that, in practice, it turns into its opposite—that is, it triggers experiences of uncontrollability. Whether we seek to make the world controllable by virtue of science, technology, the economy, the judiciary, culture, morality, politics, or any other civilizational achievements, it presents itself to us as ‘*constitutively uncontrollable*’.<sup>1</sup> In light of our incessant and variegated, but ultimately pointless, attempts at exerting total, or at least partial, control over central aspects of our existence, the world ‘withdraws from us, becoming mute and unreadable’.<sup>2</sup> Two obvious examples of this trend are environmental destruction and globalization: both are present in most people’s minds, and both tend to be perceived as threatening, destabilizing, and increasingly uncontrollable—despite concerted efforts, made by individual and collective (including institutional) actors, to influence both processes in a decisive manner.



To illustrate the validity and significance of this predicament, Rosa draws attention to important contributions made by classical sociologists:

- In *Karl Marx's* critique of alienation,<sup>3</sup> it becomes clear that, under industrial capitalism, the world 'is no longer adaptively transformed, but only appropriated'.<sup>4</sup> Work is converted into labour and downgraded to an estranging mode of instrumental appropriation, thereby ceasing to provide a resonant source of adaptive transformation.<sup>5</sup>
- In *Max Weber's* inquiry into rationalization,<sup>6</sup> it seems—paradoxically—'irrational that human beings do not work in order to live, but live in order to work and accumulate'.<sup>7</sup> Translated into Rosa's terminology, in the modern age, we live 'to grow, accelerate, and innovate'.<sup>8</sup> On this view, the entire process of rationalization is aimed at 'making life and the world calculable, manageable, and predictable'<sup>9</sup> with respect to vital (notably scientific, technological, economic, judicial, political, and/or any other constitutive) dimensions of human existence.
- In *Georg Simmel's* sociology,<sup>10</sup> '*human beings relate to each other, to things, and to the world as a totality*'.<sup>11</sup> Life in the modern metropolis is inconceivable with people's capacity to internalize, and to function in accordance with, 'a basic dispositional requirement',<sup>12</sup> which consists in maintaining their physical, mental, and emotional distance from, and indifference towards, one another.
- In *Émile Durkheim's* study of the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity,<sup>13</sup> we are confronted with the extent to which anomie has become a widespread social pathology in the modern era.<sup>14</sup> In this new epoch, the pursuit of controllability appears to have triggered the experience of 'total uncontrollability',<sup>15</sup> leading to a paradoxical situation, which may be described as 'modern ambivalence'.<sup>16</sup>

Unsurprisingly, one finds similar themes and insights in the works of great poets, novelists, and philosophers, to some of whom Rosa makes reference in this respect<sup>17</sup>—notably Friedrich Schiller,<sup>18</sup> Samuel Beckett,<sup>19</sup> Albert Camus,<sup>20</sup> and Hannah Arendt.<sup>21</sup> Arendt's interpretation of alienation as 'an existential *relation of relationlessness*'<sup>22</sup> is particularly important to Rosa's approach. While we may establish a large number of

relationships to the world, there is no guarantee that we will be able to translate these into meaningful, valuable, and/or resonant experiences. This is the case when we feel that these relationships do not really matter to us and—often in the form of depression and/or burnout—‘all axes of resonance have fallen mute and “nothing speaks to us anymore”,’<sup>23</sup> triggering this ‘feeling of a loss of world’.<sup>24</sup>

This central—and, arguably, existential—concern is conveyed in Rosa’s hypothesis that ‘the fundamental fear of modernity is fear of the world’s falling mute, of which burnout and depression are only a timely (and perhaps heightened) expression’.<sup>25</sup> A critical diagnosis of this sort can be captured in conceptual dichotomies depicting the differences between ‘the world as it is’ and ‘the world as it could and/or ought to be’: instrumental appropriation *vs.* adaptive transformation, reification *vs.* revivification, loss of world *vs.* gaining world, the-world-becoming-unreadable *vs.* the-world-becoming-comprehensible, disenchantment *vs.* ensoulment, domination *vs.* emancipation, alienation *vs.* resonance. To the degree that modernity is marked by the preponderance of the former and by the absence, or short supply, of the latter, it ‘stands at risk of *no longer hearing the world* and [...] losing its sense of itself’.<sup>26</sup> In such a scenario, ‘a relation of relatedness to the world’ is being (or has already been) replaced by ‘a relation of relationlessness’.<sup>27</sup> If this is the case, then modern humans have lost their ‘ability to be *called*, to be *reached*,’<sup>28</sup> and to experience the world as an irrevocable source of resonance.

## Notes

1. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 19 (italics in original).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
3. See Marx (2000/1977 [1844]). On the concept of ‘alienation’, see also, for instance: Beljan (2017); Forst (2017); Ghisu (1997); Grashoff (2012); Henning (2015); Israel (1972); Jaeggi (2016 [2005]); Jaeggi (2016); Kögler (1997); Oppolzer (1997); Rosa (2010); Sayers (2011); Schacht (1971 [1970]); Schacht (1994); Schmitt (2003); Schmitt and Moody (1994); Sørensen (2016); Susen (2007), pp. 14, 104, 105, 106, 108, 127n22, 184, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 279, and 293; Susen (2020b), esp. pp. 317–321 and 323–324; Zima (2014).

4. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 21.
5. See *ibid.*, p. 21.
6. See Weber (2001/1930 [1904–05]) and Weber (1978 [1922]). See also, for instance: Weber (1927 [1923]) and Weber (1991 [1948]). In addition, see, for example: Lassman and Speirs (1994); Löwith (1993 [1932]); Oakes (2003); Outhwaite (2019); Parkin (2002 [1982]); Ray and Reed (1994); Rosenberg (2016); Sayer (1991); Schluchter (1979); Turner (1992); Turner (1996); Turner (2000); Weiß (1985).
7. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 23.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 23. See Weber (2001/1930 [1904–1905]) and Weber (1978 [1922]). See also Schluchter (1979).
10. See Simmel (1978 [1907]), Simmel (1986 [1950]), and Simmel (1997 [1903]). See also, for instance: Cooper (2010); Deflem (2003); Frisby and Featherstone (1997); Gross (2001); Helle (2015); Lechner (1991); Vandenberghe (2010); Wolff (1964 [1950]).
11. Rosa (2020 [2018]), pp. 23–24 (*italics in original*).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
13. See Durkheim (1984 [1893]). See also, for example: Calhoun (2007); Laxer (1995); Lockwood (1992); Turner and Rojek (2001).
14. See Durkheim (1966/1951 [1897]). See also, for instance, Durkheim (1964) and Durkheim (2010 [1924]).
15. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 25.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
17. See *ibid.*, pp. 25–29.
18. See Schiller (1902).
19. See Beckett (2006 [1957]).
20. See Camus (1975 [1942]). See also Camus (1971 [1954]).
21. See Arendt (1998 [1958]). See also, for instance, Arendt (1967 [1951]) and Arendt (2005). In addition, see, for example: Brunkhorst (2014); Haugaard (2018); Jaeggi (1997); Sørensen (2016); Straume (2012).
22. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 27 (*italics in original*). See also *ibid.*, pp. 28, 30, 35, and 122n10. In addition, see Arendt (1998 [1958]) and Sørensen (2016). Moreover, see, for example: Jaeggi (2005), pp. 19–61; Susen (2007), p. 184; Susen (2020b), pp. 317–318.
23. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 27.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

25. Ibid., p. 28. On this point, see also Rosa (2019 [2016]), pp. 305–377. In addition, see Ehrenberg (2010) and Neckel and Wagner (2013a), esp. Neckel and Wagner (2013b).
26. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 28 (*italics in original*).
27. See *ibid.*, p. 28. See also *ibid.*, pp. 27, 30, 35, and 122<sup>n</sup>10. In addition, see Arendt (1998 [1958]) and Sørensen (2016). Moreover, see, for example: Jaeggi (2005), pp. 19–61; Susen (2007), p. 184; Susen (2020b), pp. 317–318.
28. Rosa (2020 [2018]), p. 28 (*italics in original*).



## V. Resonance

Far from existing independently of each other and representing two entirely separate realms of being, subject and world ‘emerge first from their mutual relatedness and connection to each other’.<sup>1</sup> Rosa’s approach stands firmly in the phenomenological tradition of intellectual thought in that it is based on the assumption that ‘[s]ubjects are always “in the world”, always already involved with, wrapped up in, and related to the world as a whole’.<sup>2</sup> Their very existence hinges on their capacity to relate to, to engage with, and to respond to one another.<sup>3</sup> To this emphasis on existential immersion, Rosa adds an element that is vital to our being-in-the-world: our need, desire, and search for *resonance*.

Rather than conceiving of ‘[r]esponsivity or capacity for resonance’<sup>4</sup> as an exclusively human faculty, as if it were fundamental only to our species, Rosa insists that it goes far beyond the boundaries of our existence. On this view, it is ‘the “essence” not only of human existence, but of *all* possible manners of relating to the world’.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it lies at the core of *all* entities inhabiting, depending on, and relating to the world. As humans, we need to accept that our capacity for resonance is ‘the necessary precondition of our ability to place the world at a distance and bring it under our control’.<sup>6</sup> If we could not respond to the world and if the

world could not resonate with us, we would not be able to relate to, let alone to exert at least some level of control over, it. The search for control (and controllability) is parasitic upon the pursuit of resonance—not vice versa:

A capacity for, or rather a dependence on, resonance is constitutive not only of human psychology and sociality, but also of our very corporeality, of the ways we interact with the world tactilely, metabolically, emotionally, and cognitively. The basic mode of vibrant human existence consists not in exerting *control* over things but in resonating with them, making them respond to us—thus experiencing *self-efficacy*—and responding to them in turn.<sup>7</sup>

Resonance is the antithesis of alienation. The search for resonance is the antinomy of the pursuit of controllability, not least because the indeterminacy of the former cannot be captured within the parameters underlying the determinacy of the latter.

Far from being reducible to a merely subjective experience, perception, or projection, still less a metaphor, resonance—in the Rosian sense—is a ‘*mode of relation*’,<sup>8</sup> which has four key characteristics:

## 1.

*Being affected*: Resonating with somebody or something involves ‘being “inwardly” reached, touched, or moved by them’.<sup>9</sup> Sources of resonance may vary across a range of possibilities: another human being, a group of human beings, our social environment, our natural environment, and/or situations. Possible ‘resonance triggers’ may be—among many other things—art, music, thoughts, ideas, and food, but also flora and fauna, landscapes, the weather, and so forth. The experience of being affected in a resonant manner, then, may be conceived of as a ‘call’ or ‘appeal’.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, however, the ‘person or thing from whom or from which we experience such a call appears to us to be not just of instrumental value, but “intrinsically” important’.<sup>11</sup> Put differently, the subject or object triggering resonance within us is not reducible to a mere tool: rather than being a means to an end, they must be *ends in themselves*, in order for genuine resonance to occur in the first place. Even when we find ourselves