

Hartmut Rosa says we're running faster just to stay in place

The German sociologist's theory of “resonance” offers an alternative: deceleration.

by [David J. Wood](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue



Hartmut Rosa (Photo by Stifterverband, used via Creative Commons license)

As the pandemic began to recede in the early summer months and everyday life hinted at a new normal, I listened closely for how people in my congregation reflected on their experience of the last 15 months or so. One of the most common themes I heard—and I realize this says a great deal about my socioeconomic context—is that they never realized that another way of life was possible.

Specifically, they talked about how they experienced a whole different relationship to time. Almost to a person, they vowed to negotiate with their employers a different type of schedule—one that frees them to work part of every week from home and that requires much less overnight travel. Options were now conceivable, negotiable, and doable that had been previously unimaginable. They talked as if a collective treadmill had been turned off and we were now free to move at a speed conducive

to a different way of life. They spoke of being more in touch, more in sync, even more alive. In effect, they'd experienced a new way of being with others, with themselves, and with things in the world around them.

We are all situated in and related to the world—that is a given. What is not given is *how* we are situated, what kind of relationship we have to the world.

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa believes that to live in late modernity in Western capitalist societies is to be caught up in an accelerating way of life that leaves us feeling that we must run faster and faster just to stay in place. What plagues late modern life is a way of being situated in the world that is oriented by a drive to make the world more available, accessible, useful, and controllable. We are continually seeking to expand our reach, and we live in fear that we will lose what we have already attained—as if we are on a down escalator and if we do not keep climbing we will inevitably fall behind. This is to be expected in a society in which maintaining the status quo requires constant escalation.

Rosa's critical analysis of late modern life is the focus of [*Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*](#) (Columbia University Press) and is presented in much shorter form in [*Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*](#) (Aarhus University Press). He summarizes it this way: "Modern society is one 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." The result is that we become alienated from the world, ourselves, and each other.

Fortunately, Rosa does not leave us with a pessimistic, depressed, or demoralized outlook on our situation. We are not fated simply to make the best of a deteriorating situation. He believes there is another way to live, and it can be summed up in one word: *resonance*. In [*Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*](#) (Polity Press), Rosa provides an extensive introduction to resonance as the alternative way of being situated in the world. His subsequent (and much slimmer) volume, [*The Uncontrollability of the World*](#) (Polity), is a more concise introduction to resonance, with an emphasis on uncontrollability.

Resonance is both descriptive and normative for Rosa. It is descriptive in the sense that it names a basic human need and capacity; it is normative in that it serves as a "yardstick of the good life." If experiences of resonance are fundamental to our

formation as human beings, then it follows that a good life is one in which experiences of resonance develop and recur.

According to Rosa, the experience of resonance has four characteristics. The first, which he calls “being affected,” is the feeling of being called, addressed by something or someone external to us. This is the experience of being touched or moved, and it can be elicited by a piece of music, a book, a passage of scripture, poetry, a landscape, or a conversation with a friend. Second is self-efficacy—our response, our reaching out to what moves us to make a connection. The third characteristic is transformation. We are changed in some way; we feel alive.

The final characteristic is uncontrollability. Resonance cannot be manufactured, predicted, purchased, stored, accumulated, or forced. Much like grace, Rosa writes, “resonance always has the character of *gift*, of something that is bestowed upon or befalls us.”

Rosa also identifies three axes, or spheres, in which we experience resonance. The horizontal (social) axis speaks to our experiences of being related to other community members—friends, family, and fellow citizens. The diagonal (material) axis names our relationship to objects, whether natural or artifacts, including works of art, books, and materials with which we work or play (as in sports). The vertical (existential) axis identifies our relationships to life, history, religion, existence, and the universe writ large. While distinct, these axes intersect and interrelate in our experiences of resonance.

Rosa uses the Eucharist as an illustration of an occasion in which all three axes of resonance are in play: the vertical (existential) axis of resonance in the worship of God in song, confession, and prayer; the horizontal (social) axis of resonance in experience of the fellowship of the gathered community; and the diagonal (material) axis of resonance in the way worshipers relate to sacred objects and artifacts such as the bread, chalice, wine, cross, and altar—all of which are charged with resonant capacities. This act of worship encompasses all three axes of resonance, “mutually activating and reinforcing each other.”

Reading Rosa evokes theological connections, and there are places in his writings where he explicitly incorporates religious experience and sensibilities into his theory of resonance. In his essay “Available, Accessible, Attainable: The Mindset of Growth and the Resonance Conception of the Good Life,” for example, he writes:

To me, the central element of the bible, or the Koran, is the idea that at the root of our existence, at the heart of our being, there is not a silent, indifferent or repulsive universe, dead matter or blind mechanisms; but a process of resonance and response; someone who hears and sees us, and who finds ways and means to touch us and to respond, who breathes life into us in the first place. The very practice of prayer for the believer opens up such an “axis” which connects his innermost core with outermost reality. The praying person turns inward and outward at the same time.

In *Resonance*, he frames the narrative of scripture and its relevance to resonance theory in the following way:

From Solomon’s plea to Jesus’ cry on the cross, the Bible seems to be a singular document of human pleading, begging and praying, waiting and hoping, whispering and shouting for an answer. And one might also add that its response to all of this pleading is a single great promise: There is one who hears you, who understands you, who can find ways and means of reaching you and responding to you.

What would it mean for church leaders to use the yardstick of resonance rather than relevance? What would it mean for the church to resist the temptation to keep pace and instead live into its mission as disclosing an alternative way of being situated in the world?

Rosa names what pastors (and congregants) yearn for in our congregational life: that our worship, our fellowship, and all the ways we live and serve together would be conducive to resonant experiences. How might the framework of resonance reshape and refocus pastoral leadership?

The soaring rates of burnout and depression among pastors are indicative of people who work among those who have high expectations (even if unarticulated) of resonance. For Rosa, educators and caregivers (and I would add pastors) work in contexts in which individuals seek not just to be attended to but *responded to*. If pastors are not leading lives that are conducive to resonance, inevitably it will undermine their capacity to cultivate a communal life as a sphere of resonance.

Reading Rosa, I am reminded of the memorable phrase from Ralph Waldo Emerson:
“In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.”

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