

Resonance: the concept's political uses and potentials

Call for contributions

September 12-13, 2023

Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

The concept of *resonance*, systematically presented in Hartmut Rosa's 2016 book and enriched through a series of subsequent publications, constitutes the centerpiece of both a novel sociological theory and an important step forward in contemporary critical theory. Indeed, Rosa's ambitious project is both descriptive and normative, simultaneously offering a fresh conceptual apparatus for future sociological research and strikingly innovative tools for renewing – and even fundamentally reorienting – the critical tradition in social philosophy. It does so by grounding meaningful and substantive claims about the structural requirements for leading a good life in the fundamentally relational nature of our existence and developmental genesis: the resonant character of our relationships to ourselves and other people, necessary for the very birth of subjectivity and autonomy, thus provide a reference point for sustainably improving our collective relationship to the world. In other words, stable and regular resonant relationships are the basis for a flourishing life.

With respect to the tradition of critical theory, Rosa's endeavor presents two unique features. First, it claims to englobe and incorporate nearly all major issues and concepts that have preoccupied critical thinkers since Marx. Second, and perhaps more importantly, its conceptual focus is not on the unacceptable phenomena that systemically characterize our world (e.g., alienation), but rather on the structural aspects whose promotion will allow for a more fulfilling and sustainable collective existence. Rosa enables both of these features by concomitantly 1/ identifying the guiding thread that runs through the history of critical theory – the rejection of systematic and overbearing experiences of alienation –, 2/ redefining this negative concept at an appropriate level of abstraction – in short, a *relation of relationlessness* –, and 3/ defining its antithesis: a *relation of relatedness*. While these short formulas do no justice to Rosa's impressively thorough and minute work of conceptual elaboration, they provide a first glimpse of the scope of his endeavor.

While Rosa is not the only contemporary author to put forward a “positive” critical concept – Axel Honneth's categories of *recognition* and *social freedom* come to mind – his theory goes a step further than others in daring to make substantive claims about the nature of a “good life”. While Honneth's theory outlines the psychological and social conditions necessary for individuals to *formulate* and *pursue* their own reflexively-conceived visions of the good life, Rosa's sociological and conceptual ingenuity allows him to outline key structural traits that any good life would need to adhere to. Careful not to infringe upon the ethical pluralism that is foundational to contemporary liberal democracy, he prescribes not the *content* one needs to adopt but rather the basic architecture common to any coherent view of a sustainably good life.

Rosa makes this possible by focusing on what he calls “axes of resonance”. While individual experiences of resonance – characterized by intrinsic interest, perceived self-efficacy, a lack of total control, the presence of strong evaluations and the responsiveness and mutual transformation of our relationships to ourselves, others and the world – are ephemeral and cannot be forced, Rosa manages to outline a series of conditions that foster the “mode of relation” that he calls *resonance*. Interestingly, much emphasis is put on the relational infrastructure that allows for a human life to be sustainably populated with such experiences. Eleven such axes – including social and political relations, work and education, as well as nature, religion, art and history – are developed as viable means to meet the mental, relational and institutional conditions necessary for a resonant life. The idea is not that an individual must master each and every axe in order to flourish, but that the long-term stability of at least a few axes must be attained in order for resonant experiences to naturally and regularly reoccur.

Readers of Rosa’s work might then expect a ready-made political agenda in order to orient a collective struggle to secure access to such stable axes of resonance. Such readers would be disappointed; indeed, in the concluding chapter of *Resonance*, Rosa addresses the perceived apolitical nature of his theory, which, as he notes, “does not pursue its own political agenda” (p. 458). He is quick to follow up, however, by underlining his theory’s potential to serve as “a compass in contemporary political debates, as it provides a standard for action” (ibidem). While his book contains some elements that may be interpreted as taking a substantive political stance, in particular regarding the democratic nature of the economy and our relationship to time and income in a post-growth society (pp. 434-443), much of its political thrust remains on the more general level of encouraging a cultural paradigm shift in which “the *quality* of our relationship to the world should become the measuring stick for political and individual action” (p. 436). By positioning itself as a normative guide based on structural conditions of sustainable resonance, Rosa’s theory thus explicitly tackles the dangers of privatizing the issue of the good life. These dangers, such as the reduction of the good life to the acquisition of certain resources (a necessary but clearly insufficient condition for relations of resonance), have eroded confidence in the ongoing suitability of liberal formalism.

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This brings us to the present call for contributions. Beyond the relative political agnosticism of the careful theorist, is it possible to further identify the political potential of the concept of *resonance*, whose explicit goal is to guide our collective choices, to help us shape our utopic visions, and to make us believe that another – healthier, more fulfilling and more sustainable – relationship to the world is possible? In other words, can the concept of *resonance* constitute an effective lever to incite productive public debates on the structural content of the good life, beyond its role in developing an empirical sociology of relationships to the world?

In this workshop, we seek to explore the opportunities and challenges surrounding the potential political uses of the concept of *resonance*. This effort seems even more important given that very little literature has been dedicated to the topic.

A first set of relevant questions concerns **the concept’s capacity as a collective action frame**, that is, a social representation that plays a series of key roles in the coordination of collective action, ranging from the diagnosis of social ills and the prognosis of specific political goals, to the motivation of social actors by supplying them with “vocabularies of motive”. Questions in this realm might touch upon the concept’s *audibility* among various political and social entities, the *clarity* provided by its normative leverage, its power to *unite* the political will of social groups with parallel interests, or its ability to sustainably *inspire* a collective effort to imagine and pursue a

coherent and fulfilling future. Participants might also tackle the issues of populism and political extremism through the conceptual tools Rosa offers.

Is the concept of resonance sufficiently audible, and if not, are there neighboring concepts that might be more easily heard while championing a similar vision? Is it englobing enough to constitute a common flag uniting and thus strengthening social struggles of different stripes, or does it run the opposite risk of undermining the political force of these struggles by attaching them to an overly-general buzzword? Can the concept keep its promise to overcome the dead-ends of identity politics whilst offering a conceptual guideline for the achievement of a meaningful life at the individual level? Finally, is the concept sound enough to orient our choices in a way that will actually help us improve our collective relationship to the world?

A second set of questions relevant to the workshop might tackle **the contexts and scales at which the concept might have better purchase**. While Rosa's critical sociology allows for a rethinking of our collective relationship to the whole world, perhaps his concepts are particularly suited to specific fields or levels of political organization. We seek to understand not only the concept's general potential in shaping debate and action, but also the contextual particularities that mediate its effectiveness.

If so, are there limits to the scale – institutional, local, national, global – at which it may be impactful? Are there particular fields or spheres in which its potential is greater than others? For example, could it have any political bite in economic or educational debates? Or could political and philosophical discussions about distributive justice benefit from engaging with Rosa's framework?

Finally, we welcome contributions questioning the **potential limits of the concept of resonance when it comes to understanding and shaping the political field** understood in a more restricted sense – decision-making procedures, state institutions, social movements, etc. On the descriptive side, the political sphere appears ambiguous in nature, comprising actions as diverse as deliberation-based cooperation, strategic influence through threats and material inequalities, or relations of sheer violence (wars, police repression, ...). Even if it clearly has some potential to do so, it is unclear whether the conceptual apparatus of resonance can fully capture the multifarious nature of politics. On the normative side, Rosa contends that we should organize the political as a sphere of collective resonance (pp. 215-225). Yet, his normative rationale is lacking. This seems problematic: such a normative stance could be an easy target for the many critics of an overly consensual conception of (deliberative) democracy, which tends to paper over the conflictual and violent events that can sometimes bring desirable changes to political systems. Participants are encouraged to investigate the normative desirability of conceiving the political – or democracy, more specifically – as a sphere of resonance.

What are the characteristics of the contradiction inherent to resonant relations? Could such contradiction capture the agonism some consider to be intrinsic to "the political" (Mouffe) or power relations (Foucault)? Should political institutions and manifestations be conceived of as spheres of resonance, despite the risk of overshadowing the necessity of "violence" in some political contexts? Or is the dialectic of alienation/resonance a better perspective to grasp what is at stake in the conflictual political organization of our communities?

The workshop will be held in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, in the afternoon of September 12th and in the morning of September 13th 2023.

Participants will be asked **to submit a max. 1000-word abstract (in English) of their contribution**. The two half-days will be organized according to the themes of the received contributions.

We are delighted to welcome professor Olivier De Schutter as keynote speaker of the first session.

Deadlines:

Submit abstract by **March 30, 2023**.

Confirmation of acceptance by **May 15, 2023**.

Submit contribution by **July 15, 2023**.

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