

BOOK REVIEWS

ROSA, HARTMUT. *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Cambridge, Medford: Polity Press. 2020. 140 p. ISBN: 9781509543151 (hardcover); 9781509543168 (softcover)

Hartmut Rosa's study ambitiously proposes to explain the comprehensive experience of living our contemporary modern reality. His argument unravels through the lens of two major concepts. Leading the reader along a clear line of thought, applying the concept of uncontrollability (*Unverfügbarkeit*) and resonance to the different aspects of social life, and exemplifying the general claim with common everyday experiences and vivid metaphors, he uncovers a grand narrative on modernity in a relatively small book.

Rosa understands modernity as a social and cultural system which is only stabilised dynamically. This is a system which turns the entirety of the world into an object of aggression characterised by a longing to expand our share of the world by means of control. The book is primarily built on the paradox of the following stance: while we wish to convert things into controllable objects—that is, to turn them (1) visible and observable, (2) reachable and accessible, (3) manageable and (4) useable—the very thing that we brought under our control loses its resonant capabilities, that is, those aspects that are meaningful in terms of human existence. With objectification, commodification and the aforementioned steps of control, things are no longer able to touch, call, or change the very subject that controls them, as one is only able to create meaningful, resonant relationships with semi-controllable things. The author demonstrates this with many examples. One such example concerns musical pieces: on

the one hand we are unable to resonate with them, unless we gain the necessary skills to play an instrument, but on the other hand, they lose their resonant qualities once we completely master them. It is only semi-controllable things that have their own voice, that are capable of calling to us. Once controlled, the contemporary world falls mute, Rosa concludes, and, therefore, the different cultural phenomena (analysed in the book) are symptomatic of this general stance.

The nine chapters of the monograph are structured in a straightforward, logical manner. The first chapter presents a diminutive introduction into Hartmut Rosa's phenomenologically influenced sociology, which understands social life as an interplay of structural and cultural forces, that is, an interplay of empirically researchable institutions and hermeneutically understandable cultural drives. Rosa interprets dynamic stabilisation as the structural principle, and the need for expanding one's control as the cultural one. The second chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of what the different dimensions of controllability are (visibility, reachability, manageability and usefulness). This is followed by a more theoretically oriented section in which the author rereads the very classics of sociology (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim) and reinterprets some of their well-known concepts (alienation, disenchantment, and anomie) and integrates them into his narrative on modernity. Similar to the second, in the fourth chapter, we read a more nuanced description of a key term (elaborated

on in a previous volume, c.f. Rosa 2019), the one of resonance—that is, the mode of connecting to, responding to things—as opposed to acts of rule, aggression and control. Chapter five connects these two key terms of controllability and resonance and further analyses their relation, whereas the next two chapters apply these insights to understand certain aspects of the individual life stages (cultural forces) and to describe some of the sociostructural characteristics of certain institutions (structural forces). The last two chapters, followed by an ending of short concluding remarks, are more speculative and each one points out a paradox. In an anthropological-psychological fashion, chapter eight analyses the conflicting relation between our libido and the uncontrollable, while chapter nine prognostically delineates how the immense control of things reintroduces the uncontrollable to our world.

The author's understanding of people's place in modernity is applicable to various phenomena. In my reading, the more empirically oriented chapters five and six form the backbone of the book, recounting not necessarily detailed, but thought-provoking examples, that clearly demonstrate the wide-reaching analytical potential of his theory. This is also provable through a short list of the diverse topics these parts touch upon: from gene manipulation, childcare, education, career planning, marriage, travelling, medication, euthanasia and last wills to bureaucratisation, measurability, commodification, identification, and so on. Hartmut Rosa convincingly explains how these various aspects of life are defined by controllability, and how the different operations of the various social institutions serve the same aim. While these thoughts may potentially ignite self-reflection for individuals, they can also be further elaborated in scholarly endeavours. For instance, measurability, quantification, the role of numbers in our present social

reality—examples that Rosa ponders—are omnipresent in our societies (education, work, sports, gamification, etc.) and could, therefore, be further investigated through the theoretical repertoire of many different disciplines.

Despite its merits, what Hartmut Rosa's theory lacks is diversity. Take, for example, a similarly grandiose narrative on modernity also centred around a few concepts, those reflected in Zygmund Bauman's writings on liquid modernity. Analysing how the role of space changes in liquid modernity, Bauman writes not only about the metaphoric figure of the tourist, but also that of the vagabond, that is, the privileged and the deprived groups of our times (Bauman 2000). Also, when he adopts the concept of Fortress Europe, he does not only write about those inside, but also about the groups stuck outside the exclusive political-economic structure (Bauman 2007). One could find many such examples in Bauman's work, but even this vague parallel might be able to point out what is missing from Hartmut Rosa's concept: the hermeneutically discovered culture is a vertically and horizontally undifferentiated one. To put it simply, in the 'we' perspective, from which the author offers most of his analysis, 'they' are not visible; the author does not depict society as a stratified system, or culture as a plural, diverse entity.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Rosa's monograph is a fascinating read and an ambitious attempt to describe contemporary Western culture and thematise its problems. People of different academic backgrounds might be able to resonate with the book and integrate its insights into their fields of study.

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