

# Em Tese


## AN INTERVIEW WITH HARTMUT ROSA


### Entrevistado

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## ENTREVISTA

**Let's start by talking a little bit about your own life. How did you get interested in social theory, in philosophy, in all these things? And what caught your attention about these issues in a personal way?**

I'm always asked by people: “How did you get here?”, but it's not completely easy to answer.

**It's certainly a very complicated question.**

Yes. Even when I was young, or at school, I was really interested in political issues. But I remember that after I finished High school, I was deliberating about what I should study. Actually, I was thinking about studying physics and philosophy, because I honestly like it, I still do, astronomy and astrophysics – and sometimes I think I should have done that instead of philosophy. But also, the philosophy behind “what is the meaning of it all?”. To interpret the “quantum theory”, or “the theory of relativity”. But then the advisors at the university told me: “Don't do that, because if you study philosophy and physics, you neither become a real philosopher, nor a good physical scientist”. So, I decided that I'd rather go for philosophy because then I could combine it. And I was also interested in literature, so I started German literature and political science. And then, actually, I was a bit bored by philosophy, I thought “This is too abstract for me, I want to go back again to real life”. I was studying in Freiburg, the famous “Heidegger city”. Most of the professors were teaching Heidegger and I wasn't that much into that. But then I got into the London School of Economics, the LSE, in London. There I read the stuff written by Charles Taylor, *Interpretation and the Sciences of Man* and *Neutrality in Political Science*, and this kind of stuff, and that really convinced me: “That's what I want to do, interpret who we are and what we are doing, the ways we are living and why we live the way we live”. I think that is



something that always interested me. And then, when I came back, Charles Taylor released *Sources of the Self*, his main book which I read, and then I decided: “Ok, this is what I want to do”. And then it was Max Weber also, to some extent, he wrote *The Protestant Ethic* which I found incredibly interesting, explaining: “why do we have a job?; why is that so important?; why do we have this kind of ascetic lifestyle?”; and his *Science as a Vocation*, his famous speech. I always tell my students: “If you want to read one thing in the original text, read Max Weber's *Science as a Vocation*”, because he talks about the last resources, the last Gods, he talks about how there's no way science can get to them, so that's the kind of decision... So, I shifted from philosophy and German literature to social philosophy. I did it through political theory and then I wanted to do my PhD on Charles Taylor, which I did in the end. In Germany, there was only one German social scientist, social philosopher, who knew about it, basically, and that was Axel Honneth. So, I went to him and at that time he was a political scientist, too. But then, through him, through Axel Honneth, I got interested in the theory of recognition, in the whole critical theory tradition. So, I consider myself not to be in critical theory. And I had finished doing my dissertation on Charles Taylor's identity and cultural practices. I read one article by him, about leading life and he said: “The way we lead our lives is structured and dominated by our strongest values, basically”. And I thought “but that's not true, my day is structured by the pressing things, its schedule, it dictates. I'm not doing the most important thing first, and then the second most important thing. I'm doing the most pressing thing first.” And that's how I got interested in capitalism and capitalist ways of life, so to speak. That's what attracted me, that's how I started to think about the acceleration theory. All these people, including Luhmann and the others, don't quite get it right because of the modernization, the process of... I was fascinated by the insight, that when I looked at modern life what must my students think of aliens, having cameras, watching us: “What would they see?”. That since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all the Latin America, all the America, Europe, it's a dynamization of the world and literally, with the steam engines, the steam boats, and then the railways, and the trucks, and the car, and all the airplanes. But in addition, you do not only have the incredible dynamization of people going back and forth, and of materials and goods, but also of money transfers, and ideas, and images, and messages. It's setting the world in motion. So that's how I got to the new take. And one final remark and then I will get shorter: You know I came from a small village in the Black Forest, that's where I grew up and I still live in it, except that I decided I can't *always* be there, so I went to London, as I told you, and I wrote my PhD in Berlin, and I realized that



the main difference between these urban centers, metropolitan areas and rural life is a different way of experiencing time, of almost *being in time*. So there was a bit of a Heideggerian question. But that's the kind of lifeworld experience, the way you experience time, your setting time is different between the metropolitan areas. And that's why I went to School in New York, to write my book on "Acceleration", because I thought the fastest city in the world is the right place to do that.

**It certainly is. As someone who also comes from a very small town and now lives in a – this isn't a big town, but it's way bigger than where I come from – you can feel that phenomenology. You can feel it in your day-to-day life. While reading "Social Acceleration", it struck me as brilliant the way you explain it. It has that macro sociological cover, but you can also feel it in your day-to-day life. The best sociological work has that as a characteristic, that you can see it in your own life, but it is also connected to the major processes, like modernization and capitalism. And that really struck me as something impressive.**

But that is also what I want to do, I want to do in my other books. After "Acceleration", I've written a huge book, "Resonance", and a small book on "Unverfügbarkeit" (it's not yet out in English or in French, it's hard to translate), but that's exactly what I want to do: make a connection between a phenomenological experience and the macro. Because in sociology you either have the one like Luhmann, that's is nothing like with ours lives, most of the time; or phenomenologists, which only live on the phenomenological everyday experience, but not on the macro.

**The connection between what we see in our day to day life, or what you see in face-to-face interactions and the macro systems of the economy, and global systems of society. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about. Of course, it makes sense, since you have that trajectory in your life, you would write about acceleration. It makes sense and you can see it. Now, that's more a Luhmann-inspired questions, but maybe you can answer it. What's the role of communication systems and communication media in the acceleration processes? Because in Luhmann they have a central role, a key role, and I think it's also part of what you are seeing.**

Actually, I'm not 100% sure, because normally in the Acceleration book I really treat it as an instrument. And, of course, the communication media has a kind of double role, it's one



element in this logic. The differentiation and acceleration are mutually driving each other, so the media enabled us to do things much faster than before, like the process of communication, particularly. But they don't force us to. You could very well think of a world in which you have the use of communication, the media of communication, without speeding up, which would help us saving a lot of time, but in the meantime. I'm almost convinced that there is a kind of proper logic in themselves, the processes coming through the mediatization of communication. The social shaping approach by Julie Weitzman and others, where she says: "It is never just the logic of media or the technology, and it's not just cultural processes and economic process, it's the way they relate to each other. It's the connection between these trends that kind of set up this which I call the "cycle of acceleration". When you think of the "iron cage" of the need for speed and growth in the economy, I think that's one element, even though I still don't treat them as a driving motor of acceleration.

**Do you see yourself as a sociologist, a philosopher, more one than the other? Or do you feel like my professor used to say: "You feel like a sociologist when among philosophers; but like a philosopher when among sociologists".**

That's exactly it. I would say that's kind of my experience. I would actually say that's even biographically the case. You know, I still live partially in the Black Forest, then I still feel like I'm the sociologist from the city; but when I am in the city, I'm also the person living in the village, right? This is something I realized rather early, that those people who attracted me the most, like Charles Taylor, for example, Jürgen Habermas, Theodore Adorno; but not with Luhmann or Michel Foucault, for example: you cannot really tell who or what they are, and I would actually say that they never really cared. It's social theory, social thought and social philosophy. I mean, to me it seems so obvious that social philosophy and social science need to connect. They need each other. And in the theoretical tradition I feel most at home, critical theory, they deliberately wanted to cross the barriers between the disciplines. That's why in my university, the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, from day one when I got there, I said: "I want to create a new Master's program which is called 'Social Theory'". And it connects sociology with practical philosophy and political theory and even with some segments of social psychology and history. I think that what I want to do. Of course, it came from my own training, I'm not a sociologist. I'm in-between philosophy and political science. But then the book on "Acceleration", of course, is

sociological, and this process of social acceleration is very sociological. The last book on “Resonance” is just as philosophical as it can be, so, in-between, I’m a social theorist.

**Yes, you live in the crossing between the two of them.**

That’s why it’s interesting.

**That’s one of the most interesting things, I couldn’t agree more.**

What are you? Are you a philosopher?

**I’m a sociologist by training, but I’ve been really close to philosophy all my life. I’ve spent a whole summer reading the *Critic of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant. I was always closer to this side of social theory than the applied, more methodological one.**

Yes, that’s a big rift, of course. There’s a danger that our side is about to die out. In Germany, there’s now a complete split between those who do sociology in the sense of a natural science. But I think that it doesn’t work as a natural science. I think we need it, I’m not against empirical search and I do it myself in several projects but trying to get rid of social philosophy and social theory is totally stupid.

**I believe that’s a mistake, too. And we get blind empiricism as a result.**

I don’t know why that is, but what I really find striking is that, sometimes, I think they come up with really interesting data, but zero fantasy about how to interpret it. It’s like they shy away from it. I’ve always thought: “This is so interesting, go for it, make something out of it.” But they are like: “No, no, this is my data, that’s all I have to say.”

**It’s kind of that humble scientific approach, where a more philosophical approach would want to go where the issue is, and risk it.**

And the question that raises is: What does it mean? How do you interpret it? and they say: “I don’t know.”

**I wanted to ask you how you see the field of sociology, because I read Raymond Boudon saying that sociology feels like it’s in a permanent state of latent crisis. And part of the crisis is the enormous fragmentation of theoretical approaches. We have**



**very little internal consensus about the concepts. So how do you see that working itself out, for our field? Do you really think social theory is in danger of being left out by the more applied approaches?**

When you look at how money is distributed, then the danger might actually exist. You see it in the USA, where the most interesting parts of social theory moved to other departments, like culture studies or literature and so on. I don't think you can kill it. Because the interesting thing is that this is happening in a worldwide scale. When people in Brazil and Argentina or wherever you go, think about sociology and so, who do they think about? They think of people who do theory. It could be Marx, Foucault, or Luhmann, or whoever it is. And people like Derrida, yes, he was in literature and culture studies. But this is the interesting thing. I think there is a deeper side to it. This is something I've learned from Taylor, human beings are self-interpreting animals and they do their self-interpretation in webs of interlocution. You don't do it on your own, right? And, of course, that's true for modern society, too. We need a sphere of self-interpretation, of self-reflection. And this, in our society, is done mainly through academic work. And it's not just fantasy, you are not writing novels. It's like Weber says, we do the best we can, taking in all the evidence we can get and discussing things, not just with our colleagues, but also with society. But this kind of reflective self-interpretation, I think is necessary. And it might be the case that we lost it, and then we shouldn't be surprised that we get people like "Trump" or "Bolsonaro" (can he be mentioned here? [laughs]). So, I think there's a real danger. On the other hand, of course, it's true that concepts are notoriously difficult in philosophy as in political science. There's one insight, I've never written about it, I believe, but I should, so I'll tell you a secret, because I really found it interesting. But what I found really interesting (and apparently that's a truth about human beings), that whenever you try to define a concept, whatever it is, like "define liberty", or "define democracy", even "define the State": you never manage to do it! We can only work, we can only reflect by somehow leaving the center of concepts empty. And my proof goes like this, because normally I don't know where to start, for example, let's start with sociology. Normally the other scientists think they know exactly what society is. So "define society, please, go ahead, what is a society?". Actually, there is not even an agreement whether there is one society, or the world's society, or many societies, or where do societies end. And there never was an agreement in sociology about what society is. Even Simmel, for example, said: "Let's not talk about society, let's talk about socialization". And Luhmann says that "society is only a horizon". So we almost avoid society. But we use "religion". We use "politics". And





we use “space” But then, go to a religious scientist and ask him “what is religion?”, “how do you define religion?”, and they actually tell you: “You know, we’ve given up speaking about religion. It’s too complex. We talk about rituals practices and that kind of thing”. But they speak about society as if society existed, and about politics. Then you go to a political scientist and say: “Please, define politics for me” and he says: “You know, there is policy, politics, polity, we cannot really define it”. And then I think: “Ok, at least I go to the geographers to tell me what space is”. And they tell you: “we only talk about spatialization, there is no space”. Isn’t that absolutely amazing? We can only do our work by somehow assuming that the other concepts are stable, but there are no stable concepts. Therefore, we are necessarily in crises.

**You describe yourself as someone close to critical theory. And the way I see it, critical theory is a child of the Enlightenment. And as you said before, sociology saw itself as the self-reflection of society, or as Luhmann would put it, “society observing itself”. You can think of sociology as modernity’s mirror, which society uses to look at itself and also to correct itself.**

That’s an idea by Michael Walzer... You know him? The social critic? My understanding is that sociology has, like you said, this function as a whole. Because sociology is born out of the sense that something is wrong here, something is dubious. Even, I think, Niklas Luhmann was not normatively driven, like critical theory is, but nevertheless he also thought something was wrong in our self-description. That’s why he wanted to do social enlightenment.

**I think a better self-description could allow society to get better.**

Definitely.

**And when you put it that way, it gets closer to critical theory.**

But Michael Walzer says that’s what social critique does, it holds a mirror to society, and then society can see if this is what it wants to be, and if this is actually how we do it. And there is always kind of tension between the two. But this is not actually my image, it’s Michael Walzer’s. Because I think we are not pure mirrors. Whatever we do is also constructing and reconstructing, so it’s a kind of a process. I’m really convinced by Charles Taylor, he would say, in this society, we always try to articulate who we are and what we are. But there’s always tension between the articulation and what we really are. So, it’s



kind of an ongoing process and the articulation then reflects back on what society is. I think society is not just a given, and then there's theory. And theory is not a mirror. It's a kind of permanent reshaping of what society is. If you change the concepts, you change society. It depends on how you describe it.

### **The limits of the observer, right?**

So, I think it is kind of a constructive mirror. Then we would be in agreement.

**Yes, sure. The mirror is more of an analogy or a metaphor. And you could argue that even a mirror is not a true reflection, because whatever you see in a mirror is also interpreted. But one of the things that is at the core of a critical theory is that we have a project for modernity. We have values that could be fulfilled but are not. That's one of the main differences between approaches that will be more fatalistic. Like looking at society as something that happens, and you can't drive it. I think, in critical theory, and you can give me your view on this, it's implicit that you might direct social change one way or the other. Do you agree with this statement?**

I agree, it's what critical theory does. But people like Luhmann do it too, right? Giving a certain interpretation, and that changes the way our society goes. But you think critical theory does it more in an explicit normative sense, trying to spell it out. That's what Charles Taylor wanted to do in "Sources of the self", spell it out, that's why he called it "Sources of the self": what are our constitutive goods? What is this driving for? What is this sense of where we want to get? And why don't we get there? This is exactly what I want to do. I said in some of my books that what I wanted to do is ask "What is a good life?". And, of course, that has always been a philosophical question, but that's even harder to answer, right? What are our conceptions of the good life as human subjects? What is our collective and individual conceptions of a good life? And why don't we get there? In the critical theory tradition there are maybe two overriding values. One is autonomy, self-determination. and the other is authenticity. It's not enough that I decide for myself, it's that I find the right decision, and the decisions should be true to my innermost being. Charles Taylor, in "Sources of the self", draws out how these ideas are very modern. You have to turn inwards to find out who you really are and what you want to be. Therefore, society should be such that you can make autonomous and authentic decisions. So, I thought "acceleration" is a process that in the end kind of prevent us from making autonomous decisions and even having a sense of authenticity, because you have to change all the



time. So “who am I? I’m another one in every few years”. But now, in the last book, I somehow turned away from it, and said “Well, maybe this very conception of autonomy is not the solution, but part of the problem”. I would say, it’s this drive for autonomy, “I have to decide for myself”. Did you find or read anything on my Resonance conception?

**Not yet. I left your book on Resonance for later.**

But my take is that the stress on autonomy is one motor of the logic of acceleration, and a permanent one. And now I've shifted in my own conceptual framework. Now I say that modern society is not just accelerating, it's a society that can only stabilize itself dynamically, right? And that means we can only maintain our institutional structure, for instance, the number of jobs and companies - but also the welfare system, the pension system, the educational system and so on - if you permanently achieve growth in the economy, but also if you permanently speed up life, if you permanently innovate and optimize everything. So, they are structurally forced to speed up year by year, to grow year by year, to be innovative. Not in order to get somewhere, to move somewhere, but just to keep where we are. So, the question is: “What is the driving motor of this process?”, and I believe our conception of autonomy is itself a driving motor in this logic, that's why I think of a different conception of the good life, and that's how I arrived at the resonance solution, so to speak.

**That would be closer to philosophy than sociology, but also in the grey area, in the “crossing” between them both.**

But I think it's also a sociological concept, because as you said, “the grey area in between”. But my claim really is that if you want to understand even the logic of acceleration, you can't just look at the structures as Luhmann did, right? You need to understand the culture powers, what is driving the subject. If I'm correct in saying that modern society needs year by year to grow, to speed up, to innovate, it's not institutions that grow, speed up and innovate: it's us, you and me, who innovate, who come up with innovations, who actually have to run faster and faster every year. So, the question is: “What makes us go faster every year?”. And I think it's not enough to them point to structures, because there must be kind of cultural conceptions, conceptions of the good life, for example. My claim is: “only if I understand the fears that move us and the hopes that move us, can I really properly understand the structural logic”. And my claim is that



the modern cultural frameworks contains both elements. It does contain the notion of resonance, but looking for resonance in art, in nature, in a family life and so on. So, I believe it's also a sociological element, it's not just a philosophical fantasy.

**Sure, and the resonance concept makes it closer to the idea of intersubjectivity; of good life being achieved in a community, in a relationship, always in recognition with others. We can never do it alone because we are social animals that need to be in social groups.**

Yes, but there are two points about resonance which make it a bit different from, let's say, "recognition" or Habermas' conception of intersubjectivity. One is that it's not just intersubjective. My claim is that being in resonance has a kind of substantive material dimensional. I believe we need to be with material objects, the things we work with, the things we live with, the surrounding, the space you live in. They are connected to you. You can be in resonance with it or out of resonance with it, but particularly things you work with. Work is kind of getting in resonance with some element of the world, some material element. I also have another axis which I call "being in resonance with life *per se*". I call it the "ultimate reality", and this itself is a matter of interpretation: for some it would be God. I believe God is the metaphor, the symbol of the ultimate reality. So, I believe I can sociologically explain religion: it's the symbol at the bottom of our existence, at the heart of our existence. And the way we are related to the world is a resonance system, but it doesn't need to be religious. In nature, in modern culture, in modern society, there is this kind of element: trying to get in contact with nature, or even listening to nature; and art; and even history, to some extent. So, it's not just intersubjective; it's also in connection to the materiality and to the encompassing reality. And now I even add a fourth element: being in touch with yourself; the ways you treat your body, and your feelings, and the diseases that might strike you, or the dreams you might have. I believe you can be in resonance with yourself, so it's not just intersubjective, that's the first thing. And the second is that it transforms us. Resonance is not tied to identity. I've given up that point when I did my PhD. For a long time I thought it was about having an identity; knowing who you are. And being authentic somehow meaning knowing who you really are, your inner core. And resonance doesn't really require that I stay who I am; if we get in resonance, we transform. Even in an interview, right? If we get in resonance, after we leave, we are slightly different than we were before. With recognition, I think that's not necessarily the



case. It's kind of affirming, "I recognize you, you recognize me", so we stay the same. But resonance is dynamic and permanently a transformative element.

**But do you see the relation between human beings in some way different than the relation between humans and things, or humans and nature?**

That's a difficult question. The way I set up the book, I would almost say there is no essential difference. Of course, that leads to problematic modern concepts like Bruno Latour, who came up with symmetric anthropology. Of course, there are different forms of resonance. I can talk to you and get a response, so it's listening and answering and being transformed through it. So, the media, so to speak, are very different. But I can get to the countryside and go to the Amazon river, and there I somehow feel like I get in touch with a reality that somehow seems to speak to me and I try to answer it; and I put this in the same conception of resonance. But that is one of the problems with a theory. We could say there is a symmetry when I talk to you: I listen to you and I answer you, and you to me. But when I talk to a mountain, it's different. But I am not 100% sure whether that's correct. It's different for *us*, modern human beings. In other cultures, or other centuries, the mountain could actually respond. And it's unclear what a mountain *is*. In my phenomenological experience, the mountain actually changes when I get in resonance with it. When you have an experience of resonance, it could be a piece of music, or a book, for example (of course books are difficult because they are written by human beings). Let's say you get in touch with a tree or with a mountain, then for you the tree also changes, what you are in touch with changes in this experience. So I shy away from making a categorical distinction between human beings [and things]. But, on the other hand, since I call this the *horizontal* axis of resonance, with other human beings you find it in love, you find it in friendship; but also in politics, in dialogue; and then there's the material axis, or *diagonal* axis, with the things we work with; and also there is the *vertical* or extension axis, with the encompassing reality. These axes of resonance are different, there is a certain difference between them. I'm not 100% clear on that point.

**I like the idea of, not really abandoning, but relativizing identity, because it assumes too much ontology or too much essentialism.**

Exactly. And then you have political problems, philosophical and epistemological problems. That's why I claim that the resonance theory depends on, or develops, a relational ontology. Who I am as a subject develops, grows out of resonances with other



human beings. But not *just* with other human beings, it's kind of a bodily thing: It's how you experience the world. So self and world develop out of a whole series of complex webs of resonances, and other forms of relationship. And that's why it's not an identity theory, that's something Luhmann would like.

**Not just Luhmann, there's a whole new movement of relational sociology, that emphasis that the relation is more important than the parts.**

Even in the book I said exactly that. There's a kind of priority of the relation before the nodes, so to speak. But I re-thought it, and it doesn't really make sense to speak of a relationship without "*relata*". Habermas has this great formulation when he talks about subjectivity and intersubjectivity, he talks about *Gleichursprünglichkeit* [co-originality]: they develop at the same time, and that is probably right. It's actually a problem with the resonance theory, when I started about it, is that I somehow assumed that: here is the subject and there is the world, and now they relate to each other. And I think that is false, that's cartesian ontology or epistemology. So now I would say "no, it's the kind of co-originality out of or with the relationships come the '*relata*'", the things that are related. And they change at the same time, so it's a permanent dynamic process of creation and recreation.

**I think professor Stephan Fuchs would say that it's closer to a *Hegelian* approach to the ontological relation.**

I think he could probably say so. I was socialized in the old *Kantian* versus *Hegelian* world, and there I am certainly on Hegel's side .

**You could also argue that the young *Karl Marx* would be close to a relational ontology approach. That's something I've been exploring a bit. Of course, he was always worried about the relations of production. That sets him apart from *Hegel*, but in a sense, they were talking about the same thing.**

I totally agree with that. The early manuscripts by *Marx* are very important to me, too. I thought, when I wrote the Resonance book, that I had finally understood them much better than before, because what he calls "work" there, or "labor", is exactly this process of getting in touch with some other. And there you develop self-efficacy. Because for me Resonance has four elements: it's affecting me; it's moving me; but I also reach out to the other side, so I feel self-efficacy. And in this process both ends are transformed. And this

is exactly how he describes work. And work seems like the same idea. The subject does not develop on its own, it needs this kind of *resistance* almost, this kind of obstacle in the world. And then, by working on it, the subject kind of creates itself and, in the other side, there is a permanent transformation. So, I thought, that's exactly what he means, the resonance relationship with the world. And then he discovers that if you have to sell your work, and someone else determines what you do and when you do it, there is a problem there. But in the early manuscripts, in the first parts of it, he says that it's the private ownership of the means of production that creates the pathology, and alienation, so to speak. But in the early parts of the *Paris* manuscripts, he says that's the other way around: it's the *alienation* from the world and from work that makes private ownership of property possible. So, capitalism is the consequence of a wrong way of being in the world, and that's exactly what I want to say with the Resonance book. The problems develop out of the wrong way of being related to the world, and now my idea is that the autonomy is already part of the problem. If you want to be autonomous, detached from others and from the world; and "I decide for myself", this is again an all-transformative logic. So, now I think autonomy is part of the problem.

**It would be like a critique of the libertarian ethics of self-reliance and self-determination, and the isolated individual.**

Yes, but even more than that. I've just written a new article where I put the argument to the furthest yet, where I say that the enlightenment stance to the world is a problem. In the acceleration book Charles Taylor doesn't really play any role, but now I somehow keep coming back to him. He says it is a kind of spiritual declaration of independence, that's the idea of autonomy. We have declared ourselves independent from nature. Nature is something we use, and we shape, and it's a resource, but we decide what it should look like, basically. And it's a spiritual declaration of independence from history. History should no longer guide us: we decide what to make of it, and how to live in the future. And it's a political declaration of independence: we decide for ourselves. And private property, you see it here in Florianópolis, as in other places in Brazil, where we have these incredible walls and fences around each house. That's another kind of declaration of independence: "this is mine". Therefore, I claim that this logic that develops an almost aggressive stance towards the world, that you want to conquer nature and determine the fate of history and all of our lives, that it's exactly this that's going to get us in trouble environmentally and psychologically, because people either suffer from aggression or from burnout.



**This idea of autonomy, it seems that it cannot exist in a *Gemeinschaft*. It requires the impersonality of a society, instead of a community. Because in small-scale societies, where the relations are, like Durkheim would say, more personal, it's harder to claim yourself as something separated from your group. When you are living in a society where the relations are mediated by all these systems, all these abstract forms of relating to each other, these legalized forms of relation, then you can start looking at yourself as something isolated, autonomous. Autonomous in a negative sense, as these “fences” you were describing.**

I have a new project, I've just written the first two articles, or one article which I published in two versions, in the website of the newspaper, and the other in the science journal. I called it “Medio-passivity”. I think it's even a problem of language. I believe it's an interesting argument. Our modern languages (and I think it's the same in Portuguese, even though I don't speak It) – German or French, or English, or Spanish – we only know the active mode and the passive mode, so you are either the actor of a deed or the victim, basically. I hit or I am hit. I'm the perpetrator or the victim. I think we can only look at action through these lenses, and it stresses the view of the perpetrator: “I'd rather do things than to get things done to me”. And that, of course, is connected to this idea of autonomy: “I don't want to suffer things, I want to decide them”. And you see it in other conflicts we have: we'd rather want to be self-determined, to have self-determination. Autonomy means that “I act”. It's not someone else who decides. I'm not the victim, I am the perpetrator. And I think this has brought us in a situation where we have vastly increased our capacity to be the actor and not the victim. And we see it in the way we as a society relate to nature, because we dominate it so much that we now feel that nature is threatened by us. But it has this flip side that we also feel threatened by nature: there are storms, and heat, and droughts, and this kind of stuff. So, people's main experience of nature is now “Nature is the thing which we destroy”, so we are total actors; or “Nature might destroy us, we might not have water” and so we are the victims. We see this everywhere. We see this, for example, in nuclear power, when Oppenheimer and his colleagues discovered or developed the capacity for nuclear fission. They said that now we've acquired a new capacity of creation, so we have increased our capacity of being actors. And very soon we realized “Oh fuck! This makes us incredibly victims”. When a nuclear bomb falls onto you, you are absolute victims. There's absolutely nothing we can do about it. And when a nuclear power station explodes it's the same. And my claim is that it's the same in politics,





and it's even the same in everyday life. Because think of technology. My main example is the car, but you can use whatever example you'd like. In the car I'm almost omnipotent, because it's all in my thumbs. I can make light and dark, and hot and cold, and even yellow and green. I can kind of do everything I want, turn the music on and the music off, and the windshield up or down, so I'm kind of the omnipotent actor. But if the battery is empty, I can't do anything. You are an absolute powerless victim. So, that's the core problem of our being in the world. We need what I call "Medio-passivity". Because in the ancient languages, like Sanskrit or ancient Greek language, there was a third voice, that is exactly in between the active and passive. Because when we talk about community, I always feel that it makes me too conservative, nostalgic: "It should be the community that decides". And then I am, out of a sudden, the victim. If my community is catholic, I have to be catholic, too. Therefore, I want to go to the "third voice". It's not that *I* decide, or the *community* decides; I'm *part of* the community. I have my own voice, my autonomous voice. That's a requirement of Resonance. But I don't have to put it through against all kinds of resistance, because the others have a voice, too. And then we relate in the medio-passivity, which is also medio-activity. So, my idea is that what we need to develop is a sense of social life, but also of being *with and in* nature and *with and in* history. That is medio-passivity. It doesn't mean that history should dominate us. In politics we see it, too. My example, and I think in Brazil that is the case, too, is that even in the sexuality, transgender issues, you can clearly see politically the two stances: Some would say: "Well, you're a man, and if you want to be a woman just turn yourself into a woman". Here I'm the total perpetrator, I decide what I am. And then there are the others who would say: "No, God or nature has made you a man, so please, accept that you are a man". Here I am the victim, there is nothing I can do. And medio-passivity means that there is no clear answer to it, but just that there are two voices, that somehow answer and listen, so the result could be different in each case. Sometimes it might make sense to change the sex or the gender, and it sometimes might not make sense. But what I try to get out of it is that it comes in between autonomy and community. That was a long answer for a simple question, right?

**It was a very gripping answer, it made me think a lot. I don't want to burn you out too much, so I just want to ask one more question and we can finish. This one came to me when thinking about the Enlightenment and the way critical theory observes it: as we talked before, as a mirror to try to make it better. I remembered a book by**



**Harvard Psychologist Steve Pinker called “Enlightenment now”, where he makes the case that we probably live in the best society we’ve ever seen, and it’s precisely because of these values of the Enlightenment, and that we should defend them. He doesn’t like it, but he always sounds like an optimist. And when I hear critical theorists, they always sound a little more pessimistic.**

Not just a little! It depends on who you read. When you read Adorno or Marcuse, they are total pessimists. Of course, Habermas and Honneth tried to turn it around again.

**Sure, and I always feel like there is, probably, a middle-ground, or a better way to approach this. Even the problem of acceleration, it also has two sides to it. It’s ambivalent. There are good things about it.**

Absolutely, I totally agree with it. That’s something I think I get wrong very often in interviews. Because there, like right now, I sound like a total pessimist. Like I said, the role of the Enlightenment was just plain wrong, and I think that’s certainly wrong. Maybe this idea of medio-passivity means exactly that. We should try to get to a middle ground. Of course, the interesting question is what does the middle ground looks like, but I think it is true. Yesterday I got into a bit of an argument because normally I am critical of capitalism, and I still think I am, but let’s not deny it: this way of organizing the economy, as Marx says, vastly increased our productive power, to an incredible amount.

**We can’t even imagine how big it got.**

It kind of exploded. So, it’s true, now we have the capacity and the power to feed I don’t know how many billions of people. And I think Pinker is probably quite right. There are more people now in education than ever before. Also, the child infant mortality has gone down, and so on. So, all of this is true. My claim is, nevertheless, that it has kind of become an iron cage, a kind of blind iron cage. So, my modernization story always goes like this: it has opened up vast spaces for resonant being-in-the-world; but nevertheless it has done it through the logic of structurally enforced permanent increase. And in the end, this game, as I said in the beginning, the need to grow, to speed up and innovate. And this needs energy, physical energy, but also psychological energy. It’s you and me who have to run faster next year than this year. And political energy, someone has to organize society in a way that keeps the game going. And in the end, all our energy would be put into the logic of keeping the system going, and that’s the flaw. I’m not saying everything about Enlightenment ideas are wrong. That’s the structural side. On the cultural side, I



really believe in what Pinker and others have in mind, or the critical theorists. When I describe things in terms of resonance, being in resonance with the world, sometimes it sounds, unfortunately, as if I was saying that in the past people were in resonance with nature, and with history. And that's exactly *not* what I mean. Because all forms of repression and structural inertia, so to speak, prevent people from developing their own voice and experiencing self-efficacy. I always make the argument, because I want to be convincing, in terms of gender relations. Women, in almost all societies, including modern societies, did not have a chance to develop their own frequency, their own voice. They could not choose what kind of profession to do, and probably, not even whom to love, how to live and what religion to follow, and so on. So, of course, the process of Enlightenment has given the individuals at least the *idea* that they can develop their own political voice, professional voice, voice in terms of choosing your friends. Or think about love. If you are gay, for example, you are just repressed and there is no resonance at all there. Autonomy is the idea that individual subjects, but also communities, should have the capacity to develop their voice and make it heard, and experience self-efficacy. So we certainly need that. But nevertheless, there's the structural iron cage that we need to overcome. Some of that sounds plausible, doesn't it?

**I loved it. I think we can end the interview here.**

## NOTAS

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An interview with Hartmut Rosa

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