Alienation and Acceleration

Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality

Hartmut Rosa

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HARTMUT ROSA

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Modern life is speeding-up, incessantly. Strange as it is, while the art of saving time reaches unprecedented heights through the introduction of ever-new technologies of communication and production, it nevertheless feels like we are running out of time. In all western societies alike, time-famine is rising and individuals report the impression that they have to run faster and faster each year – not in order to get somewhere, but just to stay in place!

This book presents an analytic framework to identify the causes and effects of the various speed-up-processes which define modernity – and it develops A Critical Theory of late-modern temporality. Crucial for this is the idea that acceleration in the end leads to monstrous forms of alienation from time and space, from things and actions – and from self and others.

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Introduction

This book is an essay on modern life. It does not aim at complete scientific or philosophical rigor, but at asking the 'right' kind of questions for social philosophy and sociology to re-connect to the social experiences people have in late-modern societies. It is based on the conviction that the social sciences need to ask questions which 'ring' with people's lives, which electrify students and which then, in turn, trigger empirical research. Furthermore, I believe that all too often, sociologists, philosophers and political theorists alike are immersed today in debates and research-projects that do not spark any flame even for themselves. We just follow paradigmatic riddle-solving in the sense of Thomas Kuhn, the result being that sociology and social philosophy have not much to offer to the general public. Hence, I feel that we are in danger of running out of claims, hypotheses and theories that are inspiring and challenging for late-modern culture, for students and artists and anyone interested in the fate and future of our societies.

Thus, in this book, I want to go back to the most important question there is for us humans: What is a good life – and why don't we have one (for I simply take it that so far, it seems to be the normal state of affairs that much of our personal and social lives are in dire need of reformation)? Since we all know that the answer to the first part of this question is virtually impossible to give, I start with the second part. In fact, I believe that the latter part of the question lies at the heart of all versions and generations of Critical Theory we have seen so far; it was Adorno's question for sure, but it also moved Benjamin and Marcuse, and more recently, Habermas and Honneth, too; and also, it motivated the young Marx in his early manuscripts from Paris. Thus, by writing this essay, I seek to re-invigorate the tradition of Critical Theory. Put straightforwardly, the claim I want to develop is this: One way of examining the structure

and quality of our lives is to focus on the temporal patterns. It is not just that virtually all aspects of life can be insightfully approached from a temporal perspective, but furthermore, temporal structures connect the micro- to the macro-level of society, i.e., our actions and orientations are coordinated and made compatible to the 'systemic imperatives' of modern capitalist societies through temporal norms, deadlines and regulations. Hence, I contend that modern societies are regulated, coordinated and dominated by a tight and strict temporal regime which is not articulated in ethical terms. Hence, modern subjects can be described as minimally restricted by ethical rules and sanctions, and therefore as 'free', while they are tightly regulated, dominated and suppressed by a largely invisible, de-politicized, undiscussed, under-theorized and unarticulated time-regime. This time-regime can in fact be analysed under a single, unifying concept: The logic of social acceleration. Hence, in the first part of this book, I will claim that modern temporal structures change in a very specific, pre-determined way; they are governed by the rule and logic of an acceleration-process which is indiscernibly linked to the concept and essence of modernity. Since I have developed this claim at length and repeatedly elsewhere (Rosa 2005a, 2003, Rosa and Scheuerman 2009), I will restrict myself here to a brief recapitulation of the theory of social acceleration. In the second part, I seek to establish the claim that an understanding and critical analysis of the temporal norms secretly governing our lives is of highest importance not just from the starting point of Critical Theory, but also for the most prevalent contemporary versions of it. Thus, if we accept that what endangers our capacity to lead a good life are distortions of the structures of recognition (as Honneth argues) on the one hand and of communication (as Habermas has it) on the other hand, we can gain important insights on the nature of those distortions by examining the temporalities of recognition and (political) communication. Therefore, I will try to show how and why social acceleration is most relevant for any critique of the late-modern structures of recognition as well as communication. However, my larger

goal is to re-establish a much older concept of critical theory developed by Marx and the early Frankfurt School, but given up by both Honneth and Habermas alike: The concept of alienation. Hence, I will claim that in its present, 'totalitarian' form, social acceleration leads to severe and empirically observable forms of social alienation which can be seen as the main obstacle to the realization of the modern conception of a 'good life' in late-modern society. Therefore, in the third (and most important) part, I will try to sketch out the conception of a 'Critical Theory of Social Acceleration' that uses alienation as a central conceptual tool, but also seeks to re-interpret and revive the concepts of ideology and false needs.

In the end, however, I feel that I cannot eschew the first part of the basic question forever without losing credibility. What (inarticulate) concept of the good life is a critical theory of social acceleration based on? In the last pages of this essay, I will try to approach this question from the backside, so to speak: Since I use 'alienation' as the negation of the good life, the first part of the question can be re-formulated as: *What is alienation's other?* What is a non-alienated life? The critics of the concept of alienation have long and rightly pointed out that some forms of alienation might be an unavoidable and even desirable moment of any human life such that any theory or policy which seeks to eradicate the roots of alienation is positively dangerous and potentially totalitarian. Therefore, the closing paragraphs of this book do not seek to establish a vision of a completely non-alienated life, but to recapture moments of non-alienated human experience. These – such is my hope – could provide a new yardstick for the evaluation of the quality of human life. If this is too optimistic, at least it could provide the basis for a critical theory which identifies those tendencies and structures that undermine the possibility of experiencing those moments.

A Theory of Social Acceleration

1. What is social acceleration?

What is modernity all about? Sociology and social philosophy,[1] I want to claim, can be understood as reactions to experiences of modernization. These forms of social thought come to life as individuals experience dramatic changes in the world they live in, and in particular, to the fabric of society and social life. In standard literature about modernity and modernization, these changes are interpreted and widely discussed as processes of *rationalization* (as Weber or Habermas would have it), of (functional) *differentiation* (as theories from Durkheim to Luhmann argue), of *individualization* (as Georg Simmel then and Ulrich Beck now would claim), or, finally, as *domestication* or commodification, as those theorists from Marx to Adorno and Horkheimer claim who pay central attention to the rise of human productivity and instrumental reason. Therefore, there are innumerable definitions, books and debates on each of these concepts.

However, if we leave alone standard-sociology for a moment and examine the vast multitude of cultural self-observations of modernity, we find that something is missing from these accounts: Authors and thinkers from Shakespeare to Rousseau and from Marx to Marinetti as well as from Charles Baudelaire to Goethe, Proust or Thomas Mann[2] almost invariable notice (always with amazement, and very often with great concern) the speeding up of social life and, in fact, the sped-up transformation of the material, social and spiritual world. This sense of a speeding up of the world around us has, in fact, never left modern man. Thus, in 1999 James Gleick in his book *Faster* observes (in its subtitle) "the acceleration of just about everything", while Douglas Coupland a few years earlier presents his celebrated *Generation X* book (in its subtitle) as "tales for an accelerated culture". Consequently, Peter Conrad

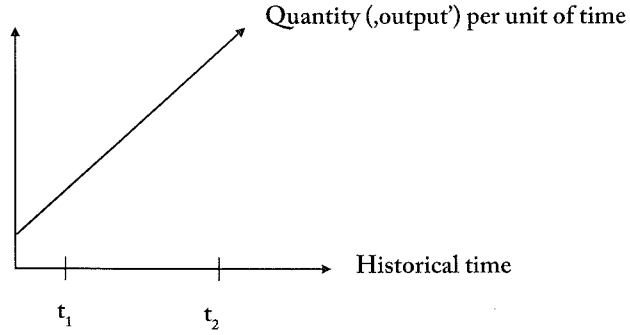


Figure 1: Technological acceleration as an increase in quantity per unit of time. t1 and t2 variously might refer to 1800 and 1960 for the speed of transport as kilometres per hour, or 1960 and 2000 for the operational speed of computers etc.

Therefore, technological acceleration necessarily entails a decrease in the time needed to carry out everyday processes and actions of production and reproduction, communication and transport, given that the quantity of tasks and actions remains unchanged (figure 2).

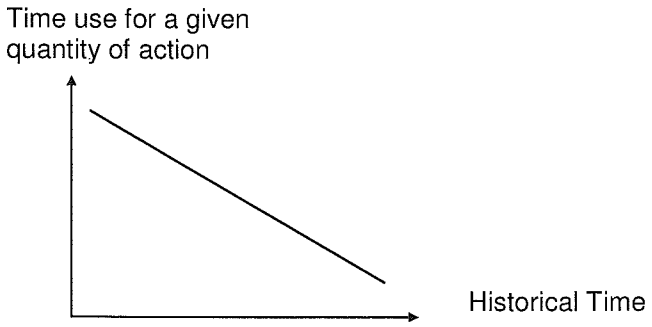


Figure 2: Time-ressources needed for the execution of a certain quantity of action (e.g., the crossing of 10 kilometers, the multiplication of a book, or the answering of 10 messages) in the age of technological acceleration (cf. figure 1)

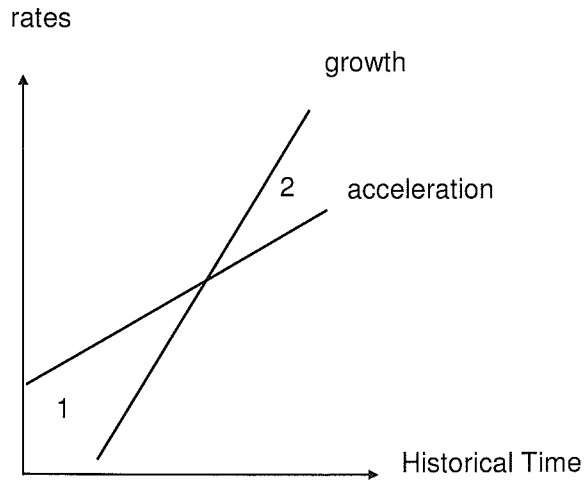
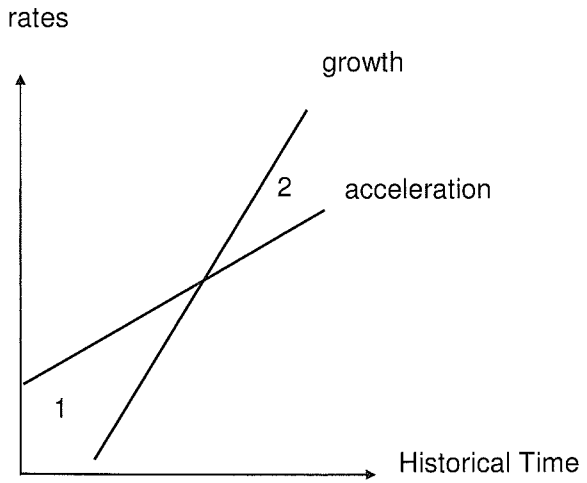


Figure 3: "Free-Time" (1) resp. "Time-famine" (2) are consequences of the relationship between growth-rates and accelaration-rates. (1) depicts a decelerating, (2) an accelerating pace of life. If both rates are identical (at the intersection), the pace of life remains unchanged despite of technological acceleration. In ácceleration-society', rates of growth systematically outweigh the rates of acceleration (2).

Figure three shows this relationship between technological acceleration and quantitative growth-rates quite clearly. It recurs with the history of more or less all technological inventions since the industrial age in an almost identical form: Growth rates exceed acceleration-rates, and therefore, time is getting more and more scarce in the face of technological acceleration. Hence, we can define modern society as an 'acceleration society' in the sense that it is characterized by an increase in the pace of life (or a shortage of time) *despite* impressive technological acceleration-rates. How does this come about? In order to answer this, let us briefly examine the driving wheels of modern social acceleration in the next chapter.



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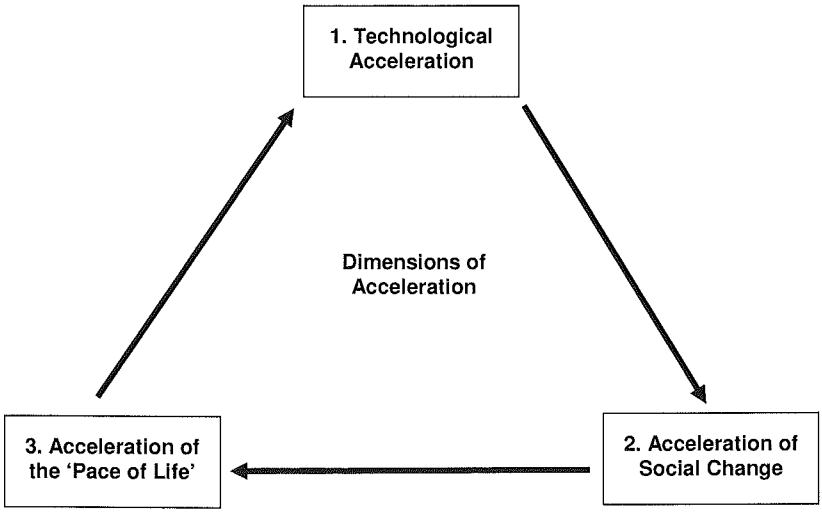

Figure 4: The acceleration-Cycle

3. What is Social Deceleration?

Even though the foregoing analysis has brought to light sufficient evidence for the identification of three different, albeit interlocking categories or realms of social acceleration, this by itself is not sufficient to establish the claim that modernity indeed leads to an acceleration of society itself or to legitimate the idea that modernization is in fact acceleration. For it is easily conceivable that we always find a number of processes which

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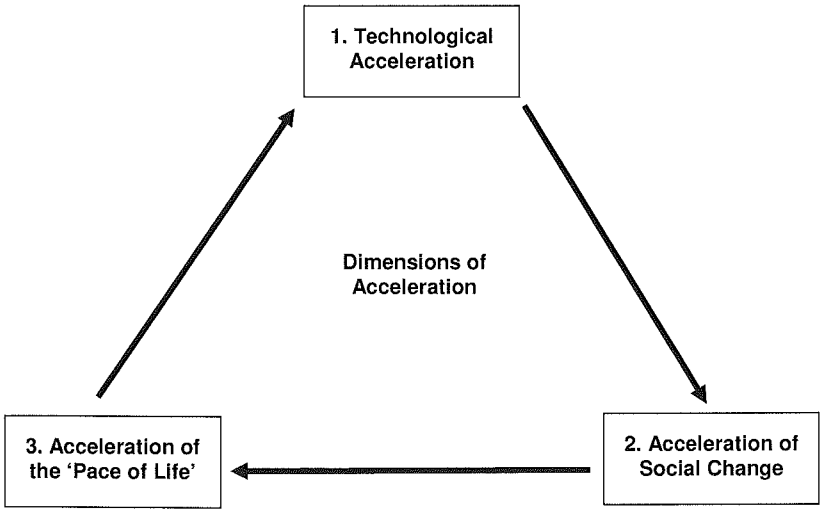

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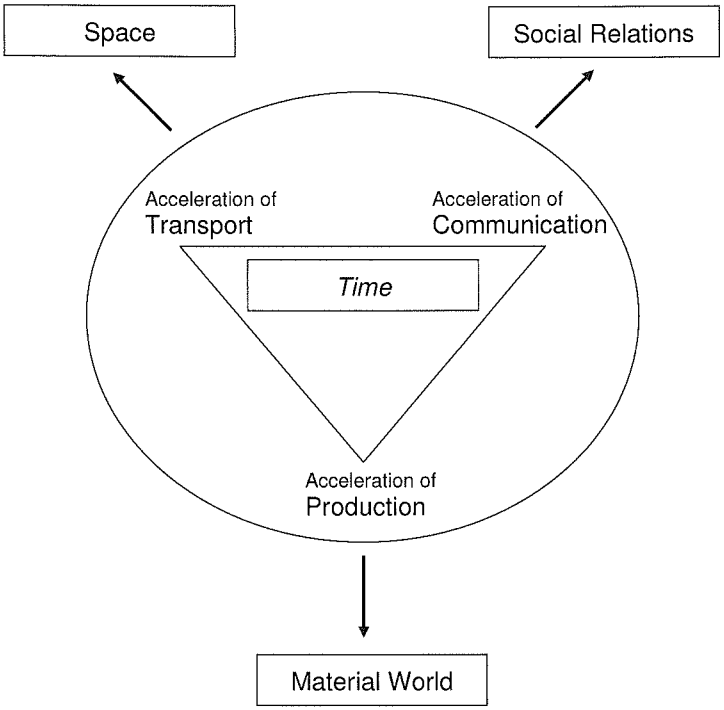

Figure 5: Technological Acceleration and the Transformation of our "Weltbezüge". By consequence, social acceleration brings about changes in our relationships towards the objective, the social as well as the *subjective worlds*.

As we have seen already, whereas time seems to move faster and to become a scarce commodity in modern life, space appears to literally 'shrink' or contract. It loses its sense of vastness and resistance: Modern travelers fight with schedules, transfer-times, congestions and delays, not with the obstacles of space. And as the monetary as well as temporal costs for crossing space diminish – and the opportunity costs, too, since we

Social Acceleration and the Contemporary Versions of Critical Theory

6. Requirements of a Critical Theory

If, as I stated at the outset, it is my goal to delineate the outlines of a Critical Theory of Social Acceleration, I will have to consider the requirements of a contemporary version of Critical Theory first. This I want to do – very briefly – in this chapter.

In my view, a contemporary version of Critical Theory should be faithful to the original intentions of the founding fathers of this tradition – from Marx to Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, but also to people like Walter Benjamin and Erich Fromm, and on to Habermas and Honneth – without getting overly gagged and bounded by methodological considerations and principles which, on the one hand, never were uncontested among writers of the Frankfurt School, and on the other hand might no longer be adequate to an analysis of contemporary society. In fact, the conviction that methodology and even truth are always historically bound and limited, i.e., that there is no a-historical epistemological truth, and that all forms of theoretical analysis have to be closely connected to changing forms of social practice – a conviction of fundamental importance to this tradition of thought[20] – requires that new approaches in Critical Theory can not blindly follow or repeat the methodological and theoretical insights of old.

But what are the guiding intentions of Critical Theory? Here, I would like to follow Axel Honneth in the suggestion that the identification of social pathologies is an overriding goal not just of Critical Theory, but of social philosophy in general. Now, for Critical Theorists, these pathologies cannot just be understood as functional distortions or dysfunctional workings of society which endanger the (material and/or symbolic) reproduction of society, for this would undermine the possibility of

Outlines of a Critical Theory of Social Acceleration

10. Three variants of a critique of temporal conditions

The idea of founding social criticism on an analysis of the temporal conditions of society is based on the fact that time is an all-pervasive element of the social fabric. In fact, all social institutions, structures and interactions are processual in nature and involve temporal patterns, hence, time is not one particular realm of the social, but a core element in all its dimensions. Approaching society through its temporal aspects, therefore, is an analytical 'trick' to provide a steady and unified focus for analysis and criticism. However, the concept of 'social acceleration', as we have seen above, is exceeding the temporal realm in so far as the underlying acceleratory process is the driving force not just of the temporal evolution of society, but also of changes in its social and material fabric (to use Niklas Luhmann's famous distinction of the social, the temporal and the material (Sach-) dimensions of society). In my view, social acceleration is the core-process of modernization, and therefore, a critique of modern society is well advised to take it as its starting point.

Generally speaking, there are two respectively three basic forms of social criticism. First, there are many variants of a *functionalist* critique of social institutions and practices. Thus, for example, the later Marx, and many Marxists following him, have argued that capitalism is riddled by inherent contradictions which necessarily produce severe crises, leading sooner or later to a breakdown in social reproduction. In short, the functionalist criticism is based on the claim that a social system (or practice) *won't work* in the long run. This is quite different form the second form of criticism, the *normative critique* of society. Of course, functionalist and normative criticisms can be combined, but analytically, they clearly have to be separated. A normative critique claims that a social

Conclusion

This essay, very obviously, presented a very one-sided and biased account of late-modern life. All along, it stressed the dangers and pitfalls and neglected the gains and opportunities of speed. Furthermore, the central concept of alienation still is conceptually fuzzy and philosophically under-developed. Yet, its has not been the goal of this exercise to come up with a full-fledged new version of Critical Theory, but to break the ground and lay the foundation for it in two respects: First, I hope to have convinced readers of the need for a comprehensive analysis and critique of the temporal structures of (late-) modern society. Second, it was my aim to demonstrate the possibility of a re-introduction of the concept of alienation into contemporary Critical Theory. This re-introduction, I believe, can be achieved without falling back on essentialist conceptions of *human nature* or *essence*. What we are alienated from through the dictates of speed, I have argued, is not our unchangeable or unalienable inner being, but our capacity for the appropriation of the world.

If, for example, it is true that we as late-modern consumer-citizens try to compensate for the lack of appropriation with increased acquisition and a confusion of consumption with acquisition, then we might have a non-paternalistic and non-perfectionist basis for a contemporary critique of alienation and false-needs. It is not that the social theorist mysteriously knows about 'our' true needs, it is the consumer-subject him- or herself who displays forms of dissatisfaction and compensation that can be analyzed, among others, through attentive introspection. Furthermore, such a critique of 'temporally caused alienation' does not presuppose the misleading ideal of a subjectivity free from any inherent tensions, conflicts and separations. As critiques of the idea of a 'true authenticity' from Helmuth Plessner through Adorno to contemporary post-structuralists have argued convincingly, there can be little doubt that

any attempt for a political and cultural elimination of alienation leads to totalitarian forms of philosophy, culture and politics, and to authoritarian forms of personality.

Yes, human subjectivity is inevitably de-centered, split, full of tensions and defined by insoluble conflicts between desires and evaluations. However, the late-modern dictates of speed, competition and deadlines create two dilemmas which nevertheless justify the verdict of a new form of alienation that deserves social criticism: First, those dictates result in patterns of behavior and experience which, as I have tried to point out, are not created by one or the other set of values or desires, but which remain truly 'alien' to the subjects. Second, in contrast to other types of socio-cultural regimes such as the Catholic Church, the late-modern setting does not provide ideas or institutions of potential 'reconciliation': All failures and shortcomings directly fall back on the individuals. It is exclusively our own fault if we are unhappy or fail to stay in the race. One consequence of this is that subjects in late-modern high-speed settings increasingly fail to reconcile and align the differing temporal horizons of their lives: The patterns, structures, horizons and expectations of our everyday-actions, even while we might be able to master them, increasingly separate from the expectations and horizons we develop for our life as a whole, from the temporal perspective of our life-plan, and furthermore, as I have tried to point out, we lack a defining sense of the connection between our individual time-structures and our place in historical (let alone cosmological) time.

Thus, a critique of the temporal structures of society, of its accelerating motors and its alienating consequences, in my view is the most promising candidate for the possible futures of Critical Theory. It might even appear to be the only rationally available option in a world that has become too fast and instable for the thorough analysis of its features. That the world appears to be too elusive not only for its planful political shaping, but just as much for its rational reconstruction and epistemological appropriation, in my view, is not the cause, but the result of an alienation the heart of

which is a thorough (temporal) distortion of the late-modern self-world relationship.

For late-modern subjects, the world (including the self) has become silent, cold, indifferent or even repulsive. This, however, signals a most thorough form of alienation if 'responsivity' in the self-world-relationship is the adequate 'opposite' of alienation. What we need, of course, is a full-fledged account of what a *non-alienated* form of life might look like. As of this moment, I do not even have an outline of such an account. However, I am convinced that 'the silencing' of the world, the 'deafness' in the relationship between self and world is the most persistent and most threatening concern in all the diagnoses of 'pathology' that we find in critical social analyses of modernity: The idea that we cannot but *call out* into the world and wait for a response which we might never get is not only the root of existentialist accounts of the absurd, as Camus has it, but it also lies at the heart of early Marx' concept of alienation, of Weber's concern for disenchantment, of Durkheims analysis of anomia, of Lukacs' (and Marcuse's or Honneth's) account of reification and of Adorno and Horkheimer's fear of the complete dominance of instrumental reason.

Mimesis, Adorno's antidote, in my view, is defined right by the counter-idea of a 'responsive' mutual approach between self and world. So far, in the history of occidental human history, there appear to be two great cultural forms, or systems, to make the world 'responsive': *Religion*, which allows for one or many responsive Gods out there, and *Art* – poetry and, first of all, music – which, as the Romantics put it, awakens the world to respond with song.[23] Thus, it might well be that the late-modern 'return of religion' as well as the most peculiar feature of an all-pervasive 'musicalization' of everyday life – no supermarket, no elevator, no airport without music; and an increasing number of people in public spaces who apparently try to stimulate experiences of 'self-resonance' through earplugs, while at the same time, just by doing so, they display utter non-resonance to and for their environment – in fact are symptoms of a late-modern resonance-disaster.

From this, it appears to me, follows the idea that a 'good life' in the end might be a life that is rich in multi-dimensional experiences of 'resonance'; a life that vibrates along discernible 'axes of resonance', to use Taylor's term one last time. Such axes can evolve in the relationship between the subject and the social world, the object-world, nature, work etc. *Resonance* in this sense as 'alienation's other', of course, is an existentialist or emotional rather than a cognitive concept: Whether or not the world resonates with us does not seem to depend much on the cognitive *content* of our conceptualization of the self-world-relationship. Quite to the contrary, whether or not we find stories about a benign God or an enchanted 'deeper' nature plausible or attractive quite likely depends on our pre-cognitive 'being in the world': If this world feels uninviting, cold and indifferent, those stories gain little credibility. Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that the cognitive structures of our self-world-conception have some influence on how we experience the world, too. If you believe, for example, that Satan lurks behind every corner, you might start to feel the world to be a hostile place. And if you believe in *Rational Choice* theories which claim that it is the sole goal of human beings to (instrumentally) satisfy their preferences and utility-functions, you should not be surprised if the world appears to be utterly 'silent'.

This, of course, at this point is mere speculation, but a speculation I find interesting enough to stimulate further research into a Critical Theory of acceleration and alienation.