

Book Review: Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity

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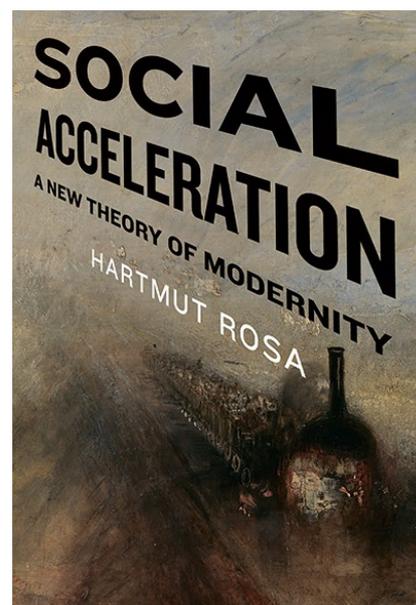
In *Social Acceleration*, **Hartmut Rosa** considers the quickening tempo of modern social life, arguing that our institutions and practices are marked by the shrinking of the present. The book is gracefully written and convincingly argued, writes **Kye Barker**, and it seems that critical theory still has quite a bit to tell us about the way we live today.



Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity. Hartmut Rosa. Columbia University Press. July 2013.

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What can critical social theory still tell us about the way we live today? Clearly the case is not as dire as György Lukács would have us believe in his 1962 preface to *The Theory of the Novel* – that the German intelligentsia, and the progeny of the Frankfurt School in particular, have taken up residence at the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss,’ where everyone is well sated by *panem et circenses*, but strays far too close to meaningless absurdity to have any chance of developing a critical theory of society. According to Jürgen Habermas as he was cited in the introduction to [Hartmut Rosa](#)’s wonderful book, “only when the social sciences no longer sparked a single thought would the time for social theory be past.” In *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Rosa finds that spark in the curious paradox of contemporary society of how “we don’t have any time although we’ve gained far more than we’ve needed before” (xxxv). It is this paradox which leads Rosa to analyse what he takes to be the fundamental aspect of our modernity: the acceleration of social processes.



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This book is essential reading for critical theorists, sociologists, political theorists, and anyone who wishes to gain a better understanding of what could possibly be meant by the phrase ‘We Moderns.’ It rigorously systematizes the temporal theme which has been present in Western Marxism since Marx. Rather than localizing the modern condition in structures of production, epistemology, or culture, Rosa shifts the focus of critical theory in order to “establish a new research paradigm at whose centre stands an acceleration in the temporal structures of modern society” (p. 26). This paradigm is grounded in referenced historical studies. It is a surprising book, not in its grandiose intent – this is on par with much of contemporary critical theory and, as Rosa notes, many recent books on the sociology of time – but in that it adeptly picks up a thread that has always been a part of critical theory and thematizes it in a way that is both systematically elegant and empirically verifiable.

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Rosa systematizes social acceleration by breaking it into three fundamental processes: technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life. Technical acceleration is defined by Rosa as the acceleration of goal-directed processes and is driven on by the economic motor that may be reduced to a saying of Benjamin Franklin's: "Time is money". Although this accelerator is not limited to technological advancement, it is the most prominent manifestation of this process. The acceleration of social change is perhaps the most difficult to understand, but recognizing it makes the complexity of modern life more comprehensible. It is what Rosa terms the "contraction of the present" (p. 76) in the sense that it shrinks the period of time in which action-orienting experiences and expectations matter. Social beliefs and actions have a shorter and shorter period of validity and are frequently contemporaneous with other beliefs and actions with which they are radically inconsistent.

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Rosa's description of the acceleration of the pace of life that he links his work to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In Weber's assessment the ascetic care for the acquisition of external, material goods, once tied to the religious promise of eternal life, has become an 'iron cage' for worldly life under capitalism. Rosa reinterprets this cultural process from the perspective of its temporal structure and subsequently sees the religious promise of eternal life replaced in capitalist culture by the promise of absolute wealth. Accelerating the pace of life, and exhausting as many of its options as possible, then appears as the best way to achieve that promise in the face of the inevitability of death. It is in this process that Rosa sees the equivalent of Weber's 'iron cage.' Not all aspects of modern life have been subsumed homogeneously into a pattern of acceleration. It is simply the case that the three aforementioned accelerative processes are dominant in and constitutive of the modern form of life.

These processes have been, for better or worse, tied to the project of modernity. Although the project of modernity plays a backseat role in the book to the processes of modernity, it is truly the protagonist of this study. Rosa follows Habermas in centring the project of modernity on the idea of the progression of both the individual autonomy of all people and the political autonomy to determine the collective form of life. The arrival of late modernity is then seen by Rosa as the point at which the process of modernity stopped serving the project of modernity. The break between “classical” and “late” modernity is the moment, sometime around the late 20th century, when the accelerative processes of modernity were unleashed. At this moment projects supporting individual and political autonomy could only manifest in the world as efforts to slow down social processes.

This explanation of the break between “classical” and “late” modernity aids in delineating a project of modernity which is clearly endangered, and provides a theoretical foundation for how the vulnerable project may serve as a break against the unleashed processes of social acceleration. My only fear here is that although the book avoids the theoretical dangers of the “Grand Hotel Abyss” it delivers a paradigm which is itself a sort of “iron cage” in which the process and project of modernity are to forever struggle against each other in an unsynthesizable dialectic. Whether this paradigm may be used for a truly emancipatory project, the definitive task of critical theory, is unclear.

Still, the intellectual rewards and pleasures of this book outweigh any of its potential problems. Moreover, if this book is any indicator, critical theory still has quite a bit to tell us about the way we live today. The book is gracefully written, convincingly argued, and is well worth the congealed social relation which you could call your time, but which ‘We Moderns,’ following Benjamin Franklin, have come to call your money.

Kye Barker lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. In August 2012 he received an MA in the social sciences from the University of Chicago, and before that he earned a BA in history and political science from the University of Kansas. His research interests include the legacy of German émigré intellectuals in the mid-20th century, contemporary political theory, and aesthetics. Next year he will pursue a PhD in political theory. [Read more reviews by Kye.](#)

