

---

## Social Theory Today. A Conversation with Hartmut Rosa

### Teoría Social Hoy. Una Conversación con Hartmut Rosa

---

**Dario Montero & Felipe Torres**

*Andreas Reckwitz and you share the motivation of consolidating a theory of society, and with it a theory of Modernity, as the central task of sociology (Reckwitz & Rosa, 2021). The public interest in a theory of this type, in all-encompassing analyses and interpretations of the societies of the present, as well as in the 'longue durée' of socio-historical processes, has intensified in the world over the past decade. Why do you think that the interest in this 'big picture' has grown?*

I think because there is so much confusion. I don't think it's a new need. I would say it's something intrinsic of humanity to have a sense of how we connect to the whole, what we are part of. This is part of the phenomenological portrait: we are set in a reality which we need to interpret. Of course, if you live in a stable, ontological picture or religious outlook, we wouldn't have to come up with new interpretations all the time. But in our age, when it's very unclear what is our position in the universe and even in world history, this generates a lot of disorientation and perplexity. We constantly interpret our own history: we no longer believe that Modernity and Enlightenment is the self-evident course humanity should take, the right way, so to speak. This of course creates the need to reinterpret who are we, where are we going. This explains why there is this need. And if sociologists don't do it, then people like Harari and others will do it, who are not necessarily better equipped.

*And at the same time, our academia becomes more and more specialized...*

Exactly, sociologists don't do it. That's why Andreas and I decided to write this book, precisely because there is an overwhelming tendency of sociologists to try to become natural scientists. But this leaves a great void: the interpretation of where do we go and where should we go. We see these two tendencies on a world-wide scale. On the one hand, what sociologists think of 'professionalization': we are like the hard-core science of physics based on empirical data. Sometimes I find it funny. For example, when I'm in the World Congress of Sociology, and I tell people that I work on acceleration and resonance, they would say: "Oh, what's your set of data?" The other tendency is an opposite one: students, like the ones who participate in your group<sup>1</sup>, and young researchers – they go back to social theory, and this is why Marx is very attractive all over the world.

---

1 Rosa is referring to the Núcleo de Investigación "Teoría Social Hoy" of the Department of Sociology at Universidad de Chile. <https://teoriasocialhoy.org/>

*How do you think this affects the work of theory? Do the so called “paperization” and the claim of “publish-or-perish” leaves room for theory - or do these tendencies go against this big-picture-thinking?*

I am pretty sure that this logic of publishing in high-ranking international journals does not produce good theory. It forces you to do empirical stuff, what we call ‘evidence-based research’. And I always make this joke: “well, my research is not evidence-based, but it’s brain-based”. Publish-or-perish means to publish in high-ranking international journals, but what I find interesting is that when you look at what makes an impact, what people discuss, what people read all over the world, you realize that it’s not these journal articles, but essays or books. Think of what we discuss as social theory –works by Habermas, or by Michel Foucault, or by Bruno Latour: none of this consists of papers in high-ranking journals. The logic of the academic system is not very helpful for developing self-interpretation and social theory. There is social theory going on, but it’s not coming out of the normal academic business.

*So, in that regard, would you say that this format of publishing goes against theory?*

Yes, I would say so. It’s impossible for two reasons. One, because developing theory takes a long time and a lot of space. But the second reason is that your colleagues, your peer-reviewers will kill it. If it’s a new theory, they would say “well, it’s not solidly grounded, it’s not state-of-the-art”, or so.

*Did you say that good theory nowadays comes from outside the academia?*

Almost, at least outside of the routinized academic business. Not necessarily outside of academia, but on the sideways, so to speak. There are many examples. If you think about the speed-stuff, Paul Virilio was the first to invent the ‘dromology’, the theory of speed, and he is an autodidact, not coming from academia. If you take Bruno Latour, you could say that he comes from the STS -Science and Technology Studies– but he somehow invented it. Actor-Network theory was also a very weird thing. They do not even fit within disciplines. What was Foucault? A philosopher? By the way, in the US, Foucault and Derrida were taken up in Cultural Studies, which is not a clear discipline. Charles Taylor, for example, was in a political science department, but they almost threw him out. He wasn’t considered a philosopher in the analytic tradition, and he wasn’t a social scientist. And when he moved from Oxford to the US, he had a hard time finding a disciplinary home.

*Before moving on, how would you explain the difference between social theory [Sozialtheorie] and theory of society [Gesellschaftstheorie]? And how important is it for your work? At least in your book with Reckwitz you mention this distinction.*

Actually, people make this distinction in different ways. In my view, *Gesellschaftstheorie* or theory of society is about the ‘big picture’, the structures of society, what is modern society or capitalist society, while social theory starts from the micro level, from what happens when two persons interact. For example, what Simmel writes about it: “how the dynamics changes when there are two friends and then all of a sudden comes a third along?”; or “how does the struggle for recognition operates on the micro level, let’s say, between children and parents?”. Therefore, you could also say that social theory is kind of timeless, in Simmel’s sense: it tries to define the laws of

of social interaction, while *Gesellschaftstheorie* is always historically-specific. But this distinction is a bit fuzzy, and when I do theory, I'm not much concerned about this. Theory should not start from this abstract, disciplinary questions: is it really sociology? Is it macrosociology or microsociology? I think this is the wrong way of going at something. You should start with a problem or a phenomenon, like acceleration or resonance. And then you realize that in order to really think about it, you have to draw on philosophical ideas, on psychological insights, on literature. That's what I call the 'best account': try to give the best account of the problem you are dealing with. And don't worry too much about whether this is 'social theory' or 'theory of society'.

*What are the social theories that most interest you today? It would be instructive to hear the names of its exponents, the core arguments, and an evaluation from you as to why they deserve attention.*

Do you want a sincere and spontaneous answer? The way I think about theory is not about complete pictures. As I just said, I really start with problems. Right now, I'm really interested in Randall Collins' work, but only because I find something useful to think about social energy. This is my specific interest: I want to think of social energy not as an individual phenomenon. Then, I looked around and I found Randall Collins, but that doesn't mean that I consider him the most important social theorist. During the past years I also found Bruno Latour. At first, I thought it's very strange, Actor Network Theory appeared to me as kind of mad. But then I realized, "well, I share with him the interest in reconceptualizing agency". I wanted to develop a concept of agency where agency is not my agency or your agency, but something in the middle. In this respect, I got also interested in the work of Karen Barad, someone connecting physics with feminism. She talks about 'intra-action', a concept which might help to shift the focus of agency. Dipesh Chakrabarty, with his concept of 'provincializing Europe', is very interesting too. He comes from poscolonialism, but he also tries to connect human history with natural history – stressing the different forms of temporalities involved. And although I think he doesn't get the right answer yet, I find it an interesting question. I could also mention Achille Mbembe, although today in Germany he is somehow contested due to alleged antisemitic remarks (by comparing Palestine to apartheid). So, some people say that they will no longer invite Achille Mbembe – and I think that's rubbish. The French writer, François Jullien, I find interesting, because he draws on China and has wonderful insights, but I wouldn't say that for me he is a great social theorist. I may also include in this list Bachir Diagne. But I come back to my point: don't start with theories, start with problems, and then look for inspiration. This pushes me towards theories, sometimes into philosophy, even to Aristotle. It's useful to go back to Aristotle when you think about energy – but I always have this kind of punctual interest in theories.

*We are about to celebrate 100 years since the foundations of German Critical Theory, also known as the Frankfurt School, were laid. How alive and relevant is this School of thought today?*

I mean, to be quite honest, I think it's very much alive – along with Marx. I find this amazing and I see it confirmed wherever I go. Particularly among students, who go back enthusiastically to Marx. So it's still relevant. I think there is still interest at all levels: in the media, with colleagues, and certainly with students. I just saw here in

Santiago <sup>2</sup> a fascination with Walter Benjamin. In my university and in Leipzig, people go back to Adorno. Of course, you still see great interest in Frankfurt, and also in Berlin with Rahel Jaeggi. She has hundreds of students very much interested in this tradition. And we too tried to establish Jena as a center for that. My feeling is that people go rather back to the first generation, like Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, even Fromm. Perhaps right now Honneth and Habermas are receiving less attention, which I find a pity. I think their work are very important contributions to Critical Theory. But I understand why this happens. For the first generation there was something essentially wrong about our modern way of living, about our modern form of existence, whereas for Honneth and Habermas there were just a few flaws in the system – they were both kind of boosters of Enlightenment and Modernity. And I think this is why people rather go back to the first generation, precisely because they feel that there is something fundamentally wrong going on right now. I must say that I also go rather to the first generation, but I've learnt a lot from Honneth, who raises the point that we are struggling for recognition all the time, and Habermas, who claims that the search for justification and agreement is essential for human beings. When I started as a sociologist –rather late, because I began my career as a philosopher and political scientist– I had the feeling that Critical Theory was a thing of the past. At that time systems theory was exploding. And I could really say that in my lifetime I've seen how systems theory is losing relevance. After the heyday of systems theory, there came Latour and Actor-Network-Theory. So, again, I had the feeling that Critical Theory was no longer a thing of the present. But at the end, I think it's the most long living tradition.

*Can you comment a bit more on the diagnosis of the first generation and its relevance for our contemporary society?*

If you read Adorno, he would criticize almost the whole project of modernity. Fromm and specially Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* distinguish two forms of existence and talk about the modern Promethean stance towards the world. I'm very close to them: something is fundamentally wrong – what I call the aggressive stance towards the world, which encompasses nature, society and ourselves. I get this sense from Marcuse, Adorno, Fromm – but I don't get it from Habermas and Honneth, because they say that basically Modernity is a good thing, that we are moving in the right direction. The critical aspect of these theories gets diluted. For Habermas the modern project is incomplete, but it's a good thing. But in our present-day situation, there is the feeling –especially among the youth– that something has gone very wrong. This experience is very widespread. From generation to generation the sense of moving forward, of creating a better world, gets lost. So now the younger generation is facing the abyss. Understandably, they look for a theory which can explain what's been going wrong.

*The great social theory from Hegel till today has always had its focus on Western modernity. Do you perceive an institutional and spiritual decline of modern society as we know it? And if it were true that China or other civilizations are seriously contesting the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon countries, should we not begin to redirect our energies as researchers towards a theorization of these other forms of society?*

Yes, I think that's what you should do: think of alternative possibilities. But you have to go rather far back in history to find it. The interesting thing is that when you criticize Modernity or even capitalism, people immediately ask you whether you are a communist. And this I find really amazing because there have been so many different forms of organizing society: the Mayas, the Aztecs, the Incas, the old Babylonians, the Indians, the Egyptians... there have been so many forms. But now we find very hard to think out of the box. Now, when you talk about Modernity, there are different ways of thinking about it. One is in geographical terms, and then you can say that now China is rising. But in my view what China does right now is clearly within the social formation of modernity. For me the core of modernity is dynamic stabilization and of course Chinese society, Chinese economy is living exactly on this model – and so is India. So, the fact that there is a shift in geographic center from Europe to Asia, if you so like, doesn't change much about the modern social formation. I realized recently that I'm not so much interested in the history of ideas, from what the great philosophers thought; I'm more interested in the history of mentalities, of what ordinary people thought, the discourses, the social imaginaries. And I think there's something going on at least in Europe: there was this kind of deep conviction that Enlightenment was a good thing, actually we still use the word "modern" as a positive thing, but this is changing on a very deep level. People becomes suspicious of our history: we realize that colonialism and slavery was connected to Enlightenment in a more intimate form than we thought before. I really think that we lost historical resonance in two ends. On the one end, we no longer feel that we are moving somehow towards a better world. 'Better' in two senses: a more liberal, emancipated society (freeing slaves, giving voting rights to women, etc.) which provided a sense of justice; but also the idea of a 'pacification of existence', that our children will have a better life, that they will not have to be constantly afraid and struggling for their material conditions. We lost this sense for the future. No one believes that the future will be better, neither economically, nor politically.

*Actually, quite likely, the opposite...*

Yes, now everyone expects the future to become worse. War is coming back, plague is coming back, piracy is coming back, torture is coming back. Everything we thought was from the past is coming back. I really think this is important to our contemporary age. We lost the future but we are also losing our history: today we think that the Enlightenment and their representative figures weren't that great. Last week we had this discussion in Erfurt of whether we should rename our Max Weber Kolleg because Weber was a racist. This is really a crisis of contemporary society.

*Since you spoke of different forms of society and life, do you think that Rahel Jaeggi's concept of 'forms of life' is helpful for understanding our current predicament?*

I think this is really difficult. Contrary to Reckwitz, who uses 'forms of life' too, but simply utilizes it in the context of many social practices, Jaeggi thinks the concept philosophically through. The problem is that for her there are very local and embedded forms of life (I think she talks of a *fränkische* form of life), and then capitalism is a form of life, Modernity is a form of life, but then there is the Berlin form of life, and so on. And so, you don't really know how do they interrelate, where does one form of life end and where the other one begins. I think we need a concept like this, but it's also true that we don't know what we should talk about—which is part of the crisis of

thinking. In the book with Reckwitz (Reckwitz & Rosa, 2021), I talk –in connection with this problem– about *Formationsbegriffe*, formational concepts. Can we talk of ‘societies’? Is there really a Chilean society? Where does it start, where does it end? The same with the term ‘culture’: is there a Chilean culture, a Spanish culture or a Mapuche culture? And something similar occurs with the concept of forms of life. My attempt to solve the problem was with the term of ‘social formation’ and my claim was that we need to identify a structural logic and a cultural logic.

*But why do you think that social formation is a more adequate concept than that of forms of life?*

I mean, it’s a similar idea. But I inherited something from Adorno, from the first generation of Critical Theory, and that is: I want to think of totalities, not just of individual trends. And when I read about forms of life, for example with Rahel Jaeggi, it can be very local. Social formation for me is a macro category: we talked about a big picture. It’s a historical formation with institutional and structural realities which have become very solid and very encompassing.

*The “late modernity in crisis”: is it lived in a different way in Europe than in Latin America? As an outside observer, what phenomena or processes within Latin American societies attract your attention, or stand in contrast with what you see in Europe?*

What I really like about Latin-American thinking is this idea of ‘buen vivir’ – I was fascinated by this attempt in Ecuador and Bolivia and other countries to connect as modern societies to older traditions, and particularly with indigenous elements of thinking about life. I’m trying to get at theories of resonance but also at practices of resonance. And I thought that maybe, over here, there are traditions and resources you can draw on to really connect with. This seems to me to be something that we don’t have in Europe. The other point that I would like to make in answering your question is more political. Today Europe is so much tied to the United States, politically and economically speaking, and I think that we need to gain some independence from them. EU and USA are now kind of a unity. I consider this unity the center of this neoliberal, ultra and ‘turbo’ capitalist brutality. In Latin America you have that too, particularly in Chile after Pinochet, but you also have this raw opposition to it, so maybe social conflicts are stronger here. Late modernity is in crisis on all levels –on the macrolevel, the environmental crisis; on the social level, war and declining democracy; on the individual level, burnout and stress, a psychocrisis. So, what should we do about it? And I would say: the solution will not come out from Europe, but might rather come from Latin America o Asia. I think there are other traditions alive here and the social formation has never been so solidified as in Europe. There was always more conflict, struggle and resistance. There are deeper cracks. And as Leonard Cohen sings: “There is a crack in everything / that’s how the light gets in”. Cracks are not a bad thing in this case; they are the sources from where something new might get born.

*So Chinese economic, military and political hegemony is not that clear at this point?*

Probably they are the strongest power nowadays in the world. Something that I found really depressing is that Western countries, like the United States and the EU, seem to want to go to war with China. That’s my interpretation of the current situation. But this is so stupid in the face of the global crisis. I don’t expect positive changes from the

Chinese government or system. They are really competitive. It's a wild neoliberal reality which they created with surveillance capitalism. This doesn't sound to me as the solution to our problems. But it may be that in ancient forms of thinking and traditions –Chinese, Indian or Japanese– there might be the elements from which we could come up with a new vision of life. Particularly since they have this notion of 'mediopassivity'. In Western thinking is subject/object: I do something or something is done to me. But for the Asian way of thinking, agency is in the middle.

*After giving these questions so much time and thought, how do you reconcile a macro theory of modernity with the thesis of multiple modernities or 'amodernities', with this process of creative adaptation (many times imposition) of modern institutions that perform the various cultures around the globe?*

I must say that these theories sometimes frustrate me a bit. I will not make friend by saying this, but you get a lot of confuse thinking there. If Modernity is a historical epoch, then of course we find forms of life which are diverse. But for me Modernity is not an epoch, it's a social formation, which has become very penetrating all over the world. With the multiple modernities stuff, I really studied that literature as good as I could, and I found a lot of authors who insist on difference. "China is very different from Chile, or from India", let's say. Fine, there is difference, we have multiple forms of societies. But what is the modernity part then? The difference cannot be the modernity. So, if you insist on multiple or entangled modernities, you somehow have to define the modern component in it. And you will not find the modern part in difference. I always make this point. Most of the problems come from putting too much in the term 'modernity'. My solution to this is to say: a society is modern when its mode of stabilization is dynamic (it requires growth, acceleration and innovation in order to reproduce itself) and then point out that this is the social formation that we see in China, in India, in Latin America, in Northern America, in Europe, and even in Africa for the most part. But you might find some Amazon tribes' forms of life which aren't stabilized in this form. This definition is very straightforward. At the same time, it leaves room for huge variety for cultures. Of course, you have different religions, different self-interpretations, different languages and not everyone is affected in the same way by the logic of dynamic stabilization.

*And then the cultural part of your theory of modernity corresponds to what you call the triple-A approach to the good life...*

Yes, this is an intrinsic part of the project of modernity, in order to distinguish it from the process of modernization. For me dynamic stabilization is the structural aspect of modernity, which you find it in most places – in some parts of Africa, let's say, you might find some forms of life which resist it but they are always under pressure and in danger of losing out. But then there is the cultural side of modernity, the triple A approach: the attempt to enlarge the horizon of the availability, the attainability and accessibility. When you look at least to official China or India they are doing the same. They want to progress in science, they are globalizing themselves, they want to be dominant, they want to have higher income, better living conditions, etc. This means they are following the triple-A approach. There are cultural differences and traditions, particularly when it comes to religion. But somehow most of them seem to be capable of fusing with the triple-A horizon, which provides the motivational energies for the modern structures to function. I would claim that the triple-A approach colonizes or fuses with very different cultural traditions. These are very difficult problems, anyway.

*By listening to you I got reminded about this small text by Peter Osborne (1992) where he claims that Modernity is not an epoch but a qualitative category. He not only takes distance from the idea of modernity as a historical period, but also tries to avoid a normative definition in terms of specific features (secularization, industrialization, etc.) by which to evaluate how 'modern' a society is. He also wants to avoid the notion of a (in)complete modernity, but he doesn't provide a positive solution to overcome all these problems...*

When people talk about multiple modernities or entangled modernity or amodernities, they bring together the descriptive and the evaluative elements. But when I talk about dynamic stabilization, I don't mean it in evaluative terms: it's more like a description of the movement of the planets. In my thinking Modernity is the problem, it's not the solution towards which every society should develop. At first, I provide a neutral description of Modernity, then my evaluation of it is negative rather than positive. I'm very far away from modernization theories. But I would insist that it's not all that clear whether all these things that you just mentioned –secularization, democratization, rationalization, etc.— are the hallmark of modernity. Look at the United States. Is it very secular? Probably not so. We might become less democratic, less secular, less individualistic, but we remain modern. The logic of dynamic stabilization is still in power. Parsons was wrong. It's unclear whether we will be more individualized or more secularized in the future. People always said about China that this country will eventually secularize, liberalize, democratize, and so on. But I think it's unclear where we are going and we might well go into a transhumanistic state where all these terms might lose their meaning – and still be ruled by the logic of dynamic stabilization.



## **Referencias**

Osborne, P. (1992) “Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category”  
*New Left Review* Vol. 192, n. 1. pp. 65-84

Reckwitz, A. & Rosa, H. (2021) *Spätmoderne in der Krise. Was leistet die Gesellschaftstheorie?* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.