

Social Acceleration: Five “Deflationary” Comments¹

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Abstract. I argue that some arguments associated with “acceleration debate” consolidated by the work of Hartmut Rosa are “inflationary” –not necessarily incorrect. Then I explain what such conceptual dramatization means and what the “deflationary” approach is. After that I outline five polemical comments about accelerating capitalist modernity. Importantly, I do not take an issue with convincing arguments claiming that modern era is an era of social intensification, dynamization and acceleration as other important thinkers such as Reinhart Koselleck, Marshall Berman, Robert Hassan and Paul Virilio have claimed. In this essay I take issue with three dimensions of the acceleration debate. Namely with 1) often-apocalyptic outlook that many (not all) acceleration thinkers maintain; 2) with rather undifferentiated inferences made thereupon, and; 3) with some conceptual insensitivity associated with acceleration. The conclusion comprises a simple proposition –more ethnography of social acceleration is needed, more observation and in-situ social investigations of time use, temporal orders, social rhythms, waiting are overdue in order to substantiate conceptual debate on social acceleration.

Keywords: Social Acceleration; Time; Theory; Deflation; Rosa.

[es] Aceleración social: cinco comentarios “deflacionarios”

Resumen. Sostengo que algunos argumentos asociados al “debate sobre la aceleración”, consolidados por la obra de Hartmut Rosa, son “inflacionarios”, pero no necesariamente incorrectos. A continuación, explico qué significa esa dramatización conceptual y en qué consiste el enfoque “deflacionario”. Después esbozo cinco comentarios polémicos sobre la modernidad capitalista acelerada. Es importante destacar que no me opongo a los argumentos convincentes que afirman que la era moderna es una era de intensificación, dinamización y aceleración social, como han afirmado otros importantes pensadores como Reinhart Koselleck, Marshall Berman, Robert Hassan y Paul Virilio. En este ensayo discrepo de tres dimensiones del debate sobre la aceleración. En concreto, con 1) la perspectiva a menudo apocalíptica que mantienen muchos (no todos) los pensadores de la aceleración; 2) con las inferencias más bien indiferenciadas que se hacen al respecto, y; 3) con cierta insensibilidad conceptual asociada a la aceleración. La conclusión es una propuesta sencilla: se necesita más etnografía de la aceleración social, más observación e investigaciones sociales *in situ* del uso del tiempo, los órdenes temporales, los ritmos sociales, la espera, para fundamentar el debate conceptual sobre la aceleración social.

Palabras clave: aceleración social; tiempo; teoría; deflación; Rosa.

Sumario. Social Acceleration: A Drama? Deflating Acceleration/Speed. 1. Modern individuals are helplessly subjected to social acceleration. They/we are passive victims of oppressive time-pressure, busyness, rush and haste. 2. Time-pressure, busyness, rush, haste, commonly reported problems according to many inquiries, affect modern individuals in more or less the same way. 3. Acceleration is negative experience only. 4. Acceleration equals modernity. 5. Acceleration has fixed meaning and is reducible to technological progress. Future Research Avenue: *Simmel in Shenzhen*. Conclusion. References.

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There is plenty of conceptual resources and empirical evidence suggesting that modernity is characterized by social speed-up³. Such claims manifest themselves in multiple and heterodox ways nevertheless. Some Anthropocene theorists, for example, note unprecedented social, urban and economic dynamization of the past decades and its ecologi-

cal and environmental effects on the planet Earth⁴; technological acceleration and its intertwinement with new forms of accumulation strategies –probably best embodied in high-frequency trading– need to be taken and interrogated with utmost seriousness⁵. Speeding-up and progress are tightly linked and comprise deeply entrenched modernist im-

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³ Cf., above all, H. Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, translated by J. Trejo-Mathys, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2013, first published in German in 2005.

⁴ J.R. McNeill and E. Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2014.

⁵ Cf. the groundbreaking account by D. MacKenzie, *Trading at the Speed of Light: How Ultrafast Algorithms are Transforming Financial Markets*,

aginary⁶. Yet, at the same time, there is plenty of catastrophism and near-apocalypticism associated with acceleration, or at least arguments that connect “epidemics” of sleeplessness, anxiety, burnt-out, psychological vertigos, exhaustions, distractions, depressions with allegedly ubiquitous acceleration dynamics of modernity.

The issues of social dynamization, intensification and acceleration are at the forefront of contemporary debates in social theory. Zygmunt Bauman’s liquid modernity, Manuel Castells’ network society, John Urry’s complexity theory from the 1990s, more recently Rosa’s social acceleration and Judy Wajcman’s account on time pressure in digital capitalism⁷ evokes a common idea that modernity can and perhaps should be perceived through the lens of acceleration. Such, no doubt valuable observations are often couched in terms of the temporal incompatibilities between different temporal orders –for instance by highlighting the tension between, if not incommensurability of, organic biological rhythms of human life and that of the global capitalist economy⁸.

At the same time, there are numerous other accounts⁹ that give the impression that acceleration is the mega-force of modernity, gluttonizing, as it were, everyone and everything¹⁰. In this essay, I argue that the processes of acceleration of human life –without in any way suggesting a flat homogeneity in how acceleration has been theorized– affect different social sites in different ways and impact on psychological and biological constitution of human life in multiple, ambiguous and often contradictory fashion. Without challenging the basic theoretical tenets and thesis offered by the aforementioned authors, this essay will raise some “deflationary”¹¹ polemics focusing

primarily on the overwhelmingness, novelty and apparently dramatic outlook that are often integral to the theories of fast modernity. It argues that various pathologies characterizing the great acceleration are unequally distributed, manifest themselves diversely rather than uniformly, depending on a given social setting and other sociologically relevant variables. Human agents are in various, however limited, ways capable of negotiating, processing and managing the temporal pressures and requirements inherent to the logics of contemporary capitalism¹². Such nuanced view by no means refutes the seriousness of the temporal pathologies in fast modernity. Quite the contrary: it seeks for more ethnographically-driven precision when identifying the most vulnerable social sites, processes and provenances prone to temporal colonization inflicted by 24/7 global accelerated society.

Social Acceleration: A Drama?

Many evidences directly and indirectly point out that modernity is not only fast but that it is getting faster, that it is modernity is accelerating. As Rosa suggests, if one looks at past 200 years, it is difficult *not* to see a dramatic social acceleration triggered by the industrial revolution (but also by French revolution, the Enlightenment and even by the Reformation)¹³: many social processes are accelerating (think of technological progress, forms and speed of communication, transport, logistics); and one can even say that modern society as such accelerates (modern societies stabilizes itself only dynamically, it needs to keep accelerating in order to stay where it is). There is now an entire body of literature which synthesizes and, taken together, systematizes acceleration

Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press 2021.

⁶ E. Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2009.

⁷ Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*, London, Sage, 2007.

⁸ J. Wajcman, *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

⁹ H. Rosa, “The speed of global flows and the pace of democratic politics”, *New Political Science* 27(4), 2005, pp. 445-459, H. Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ For example, M.C. Taylor, *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why we Have so Little Left*, New Heaven, CT, Yale University Press, 2014; T. Friedman, *Thank You For Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide To Thriving In The Age of Accelerations*, Danvers, MA, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

¹¹ Even Rosa account, arguably the most sophisticated, is not unproblematic. Just one example: his explanatory model the “acceleration cycle”, cf. e.g., H. Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, Malmö, NSU Press, 2010. The problem here is that technological acceleration which is somewhat sealing the circle, is not something unequivocal, it is used differently in different context. Thus, the logic Rosa offers is not taking into account the diversity of different use of different technologies in different context). Indeed, many make important and barely disputable points. One can barely deny technological acceleration –just think about the changes in technological make-up of modern society in past 15 years. We have phenomena like high-frequency trading, 3D printing, cryptocurrency. All of them are accelerators in their distinctive sense.

¹² The notion of deflation is not used here dogmatically; it is not used in purely economic/economistic manner. I take it literally, i.e. I imagine the process of deflation as an intentional human-driven deflation a rubber tyre on a wheel of a truck. Cf. economic definition in P.L. Siklos, “Deflation”, *EH.Net Encyclopedia*, Edited by Robert Whaples. URL: <http://www.eh.net/encyclopedia/contents/siklos.deflation.php>, 2004, accessed in Sept 2021.

¹³ M.G. Flaherty, *The Textures of Time: Agency and Temporal Experience*, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2011. M. Flaherty, “The lathe of time: Some principles in temporal agency”, in M.G. Flaherty, L. Meinert and A.L. Dalsgård (eds.), *Time Work: Studies of Temporal Agency*, Berghahn Books, 2020, pp. 13-30.

¹⁴ Cf. also the work of Ben Agger, especially B. Agger, *Fast Capitalism: A Critical Theory of Significance*, Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1989; B. Agger, *Speeding up Fast Capitalism: Internet Culture, Work, Families, Food, Bodies*, Boulder, CO, Paradigm Publishers, 2004. Agger, in comparison to Rosa, was arguably even more explicit in his critique of “capitalist realism” (Fischer) –especially when it comes to critique of political economy. Agger’s take on acceleration/speed (i.e., his grounding in late Marx), and his notion of *fast capitalism*, on the one hand, and Rosa’s (i.e., his grounding in early Marx) takes on social acceleration, on the other, would perhaps deserve a substantial comparative analysis.

as a quintessentially modern and thoroughly (late) capitalist imperative. Many accounts thematize and criticize acceleration in a very specific fashion. Acceleration theorists and commentators often claim that the effects and social impact of what they often label 24/7 non-stop global acceleration are unprecedented: an environmental and social catastrophe, if not apocalypse is looming; the self is fragmented democracy needs to be re-temporalized¹⁴; biological needs such as sleep are under siege¹⁵; our thinking is “abbreviated”¹⁶; concentration is no longer possible, we are now all distracted and suffer of attention deficit disorder; we all are pressed for time and on a verge of a collective burn-out; “epidemics” of anxiety and depression are oftentimes associated with dramatically fast modern life. It just simply appears that modern individuals are helplessly engulfed by the mega-force of the great acceleration, we witness the emergence of a new archetype: *homo distractus*¹⁷.

In one of the recent accounts on acceleration/speed¹⁸, the US cultural critic Mark Taylor, whilst capturing the zeitgeist of late modernity, reflects on what he calls the “trap of speed” in the following way:

In “real” time everything speeds up until time itself seems to disappear, and fast is never fast enough –everything has to be done now, instantly. To pause, to delay, to stop is to miss an opportunity... Speed has become the measure of success –faster chips, faster computers, faster networks, faster connectivity, faster news, faster communications, faster transactions, faster delivery, faster product cycles, faster brains, faster kids, faster lives. According to the gospel of speed, the quick inherit the earth... The acceleration of life is rapidly approaching the tipping point, where there inevitably will be social, political, economic, financial, physical, psychological, and ecological meltdowns... It is not too late to change, it is necessary to slow down long enough to reflect on how the values implicitly and explicitly governing our lives have evolved and how they must be transformed for human life as we know it to survive¹⁹.

There are actually many other examples and thinkers I can use, but Taylor is representative. His message is rather clear: one somehow cannot escape the impression that contemporary capitalist moderni-

ty is out of temporal bounds; that human agents are passive victims of structural mega-forces of technologically induced speed and frenetic pace of social change. We are told –often by armchair celebrity theorists and journalists– that we are unable to intervene to the temporal workings of the social world and also that our cognitive and psychological makeup is colonized by “high-speed runaway world”, to paraphrase Giddens, irreversibly. In principle, many may see that there is *some* validity to such claims, but also sense that such claims are somewhat inflated, over-dramatized, and perhaps grandiose. They might be analogical to Latour’s criticism of the ubiquity the notion of “globalization” which he called “globaloney”²⁰. Thus I propose some a minor deflation. I begin the next section with a very brief qualification of deflationary approach.

Deflating Acceleration/Speed

Drawing on Thomas Osborne, I would define deflationary approach²¹ as *a sensitivity* –or a “weak” method– that contributes to an assessment of whether or not acceleration features aforementioned proportions, especially those that are couched as inherently negative, dangerous, and apocalyptic. Hence by adopting deflationary approach I take here critical interpretivist, perhaps skeptical view, *not oppositional one*. The deflation entertained here takes a form of several notes which *do not* challenge the connection between capitalist modernization and acceleration –and the overall transformation of Rosaesque “temporal structures of modernity”– but sketches several territories in which acceleration emerges as an ambivalent and contested process and/or experience²². My approach hence challenges somewhat regimented cultural meaning that surrounds acceleration reminding an emerging “thought style”²³, i.e., a dominant ethical orientation, value-base, and highly particular perspectivism.

Five provisional critical notes undermining the overwhelmingness and negativity of acceleration are discussed in the rest of this article. The first three focus on acceleration experience, the latter two are more of a conceptual nature. I always state the explicit or implicit claim integral to the acceleration debate and then “deflate” the claim.

¹⁴ Cf. the ground-breaking work of Robert Hassan, e.g., R. Hassan, “Network time and the new knowledge epoch”, *Time & Society* 12(2-3), 2003, pp. 226-24; R. Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Time and Acceleration of Politics and Society*, Leiden, Brill, 2009.

¹⁵ J. Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and The Ends of Sleep*, London, Verso.

¹⁶ Again, cf. a fascinating account on “abbreviated” thinking by Hassan (2003).

¹⁷ A. Dedyukhina, *Homo Distractus*, London, Consciously Digital, 2018.

¹⁸ On different uses of “acceleration”, “speed”, and “velocity”, cf. Vostal (2016: 2 *fn.* 3).

¹⁹ M. Taylor, *Speed Limits*, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-3.

²⁰ B. Latour cited in G. McLennan, “A further response to «A question (about universities, global challenges, and an organizational-ethical dilemma)»”, *GlobalHigherEd Blog*: May 4, 2012. URL: <https://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2010/05/04/a-further-response/>. Accessed Sept, 2021.

²¹ T. Osborne, *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and the Ethics of Truth*, Lanham, Rowan & Littlefield, 1998, pp. xii-xiii; T. Osborne, “Against «creativity»: A philistine rant”, *Economy & Society* 32(4), 2004, pp. 507-25, here p. 431.

²² J. Wajeman, *Pressed for Time*, *op. cit.*

²³ L. Fleck, *Genesis and Development of A Scientific Fact*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979, first published in German in 1935.

1. Modern individuals are helplessly subjected to social acceleration. They/we are passive victims of oppressive time-pressure, busyness, rush and haste

Not really. They/we have and use temporal agency, often combat or resist acceleration. They/we develop discreet temporal strategies that help us navigating (in) the fast world. Many, if not all of us –necessarily and by default– juggle time, manage time, negotiate time. We use diaries, electronic calendars, planning techniques, we deploy temporal discipline, we compartmentalize time, “we have time-sheets in our heads”. Sometimes individuals are unmarked by acceleration experience altogether. Also, as if you consult/harvest time-diaries banks (such as the one *The Centre for Time Use at Oxford* maintains) that map how people use time things get even more complicated. Gershuny and his collaborators long-term inquiry convincingly and robustly claims that the feeling of being “always rushed” registered in the western populations is, I would say, inflated. Sullivan and Gershuny (following Jacobs and Gerson, and Robinson and Godbey) say that the: “[d]iary evidence from the United States and Western Europe suggested that, over the last 50 years or so, overall workloads (combining paid and unpaid work) were not changing much, and, if anything, were decreasing”²⁴.

Also declaring that one is busy has a specific function in modern society. Gershuny²⁵ further notes that being busy is a signal of privileged social position, of a status, and thus it might account for an impression people are deliberately conveying rather for accounting for real state of affairs. He calls this “a badge of honor”. Being busy in a nearly universal excuse –this might be a problem for time researchers. If one’s informants in an ethnographic query refuse to talk to you due to their busyness– is it a signal of their status or is it already a finding in its own right?

2. Time-pressure, busyness, rush, haste, commonly reported problems according to many inquiries, affect modern individuals in more or less the same way

No –and I also draw on Gershuny *et al.*’s work here. These experiences are very much unequally distributed in any societal formation. They depend on many important and diverse sociologically relevant variables such as age (the perception that the world is speeding-up changes with age), gender (young single mothers experience time-pressure differently than others), occupation (IT knowledge workers

and well-educated professionals would report different time experience than agricultural workers), place of living/working (time experience in urban environments is surely different than in rural areas as Simmel already noted), family status (single individuals might have very different time resources than individuals living in nuclear families). Psychological and neurological dispositions –dyslexia, brain injuries– affect time perception, too. In other words, acceleration theories underestimate the psychological and phenomenological complexities of lived and felt time. On the other hand, many individuals are “decelerated” by various circumstances. For instance, many report “Sunday blues”²⁶ –a kind of melancholia and ennui-charged slowdown that precedes the working week. Many precarious workers are forcefully decelerated by having unstable or no job at all²⁷ (cf. Rosa 2017).

3. Acceleration is negative experience only

I claim such statement is reductive. Acceleration experience can be enjoyable and energetic both in literal and figurative sense (Duffy 2009; Tomlinson 2007; Vostal 2015). Oddly enough perhaps, time-pressure and being busy is often reported as a propeller of creativity, productivity and efficiency. Many individuals flourish in the conditions of social acceleration. To put it in a slightly in a trivial way: many people are busy & happy. A specific example may be extrapolated from the onset of a research project I am now finalizing, which has investigated “maintenance” of experimental time, or beamtime, in two “big science” European research facilities: from about 550 hours of ethnographic work and countless interviews it is clear that when I’ve asked my respondents (scientists) “are you busy?”, they always say so; or when I probed into the question ‘do you have enough time?’, the most likely response would have been: no, never. But then, I spend many hours with them in informal settings and whilst chatting with them for say two hours (sometimes more) I realised that a) it is not that dramatic with the evil acceleration taking such heavy toll as we tend to assume b) even if many (respondents, but also journalists and commentators) do admit that world is faster than some 10 or 20 years ago, they have their (often meticulous) temporal strategies and tactics to deal with time (also see my the first point) c) they might experience occasional oppressive “acceleration moments” –that they often take an intellectual and/psychological lesson from– but are far from being crushed by permanent ubiquitous

²⁴ O. Sullivan and J. Gershuny, “Speed-up society? Evidence from the UK 2000 and 2015 time use diary surveys”, *Sociology* 52(1), 2018, pp. 20-38, here p. 24.

²⁵ J. Gershuny, “Busyness as the badge of honor for the new superordinate working class”, *Social Research* 72(2), 2004, pp. 287-314.

²⁶ J. Zuzanek, “Sunday blues: Sunday time use and its emotional connotations changed over the past two decades”, *Time & Society* 23(1), 2014, pp. 6-27.

²⁷ H. Rosa, “De-synchronization, dynamic stabilization, dispositional squeeze: The problem of temporal mis-match”, in *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, edited by J. Wajcman and N. Dodd, Oxford, OUP, 2017, pp. 25-41.

headless acceleration that would unavoidably colonize their personal and professional lifeworlds.

I do think that we don't have to be neoliberals or corporate managers here to accept that acceleration is multidimensional experience. Here I am directly opposing the Marxian armchair "false consciousness" argument, which maintains that if you enjoy some form of acceleration, you actively reproduce fast capitalism with its inequalities, inhumanities, absurdities.

4. Acceleration equals modernity

This is an extremely tricky claim. I say YES *and* NO. The response would then very much depend how we use the term modernity. Most of the acceleration commentators discuss the association between acceleration and western or European colonial modernity. How might non-western acceleration manifest itself? Are we really talking about a global phenomenon? What is happening in South America, Africa and Asia in this respect?²⁸ Even modernity in North America and Europe might be seen somewhat differently, surely in terms of its periodization. This indeed is a postcolonial line of thought²⁹, but I think that acceleration in the present literature is often associated only with the empire, the core, the west. Very little is known about acceleration experience/process beyond such mental maps. What if we consider acceleration experience of the factory workers of the Global South, including Central and South Americas? It surely is not just the European harried and hurried middle-class that is pressed for time³⁰. How does European and postcolonial busyness differ? Paradoxically, acceleration theories originating in the west might be of more relevance in contemporary China and Japan. Also, there are in-between liminal spaces and technological and logistical peripheries such as "terminals" and "nodes" that enable and propel acceleration processes of communication, transfer and transportation, from cloud farms, upon which our digital communication depends, to Marc Augé's "non-places"³¹ such as airports and ports, upon which physical transportation and mobility relies.

5. Acceleration has fixed meaning and is reducible to technological progress

Again, not really. The notions of acceleration and/or speed contain shifting cultural connotations and associations. In a discursive sense, acceleration, in modern society, these notions have been valorized as propellants of the capitalist system³²; as "discursive bricks" connecting *proto-modern* idea of progress and human betterment; and as virtues associated with wit and intellect. We –moderns?– are rushing into a better future we might say, following Reinhardt Koselleck³³. The notions have been also, however, condemned by countless cultural and social critics. The *Slow-* has been perceived as regressive and unpractical and often equated with laziness, procrastination but also with *lack* of intelligence and morality³⁴. Still, the *slow-* is in many cases depicted as a desirable and ethically justifiable antipode to the "evil" fast world, hence underpinned by positive associations. Regardless how attractive the concept of slow might be, it is important to realize that both critics and advocates of the *slow-* call for *duration* rather than slowness (maybe "slowing down" –not blanket slowness– of specific processes is still a good idea)³⁵.

In other words, to deflate theories of the great acceleration means to give it an empirical and ethnographic substance, that would be based on in-depth studies. There are many other domains of human activity where urgency rules (some parts of medicine, construction, manufacturing, fashion, the whole food chain, all modes of cargo and passenger transport). Acceleration/speed are also sometimes automatically expected –I don't want the ambulance or firemen to be slow; no one wants slow medicine in marginal situations– and some emergencies of environmental kind assume *very* fast solutions. Another thing is dialectics. Modernization is not only acceleration but also deceleration. Rosa understands this mutual relationship well, his theory might easily call theory of social acceleration *and* deceleration –expressed powerfully by the term frenetic standstill by Paul Virilio³⁶.

²⁸ There are some fascinating emerging reflections indeed dealing with these questions. Cf. O. Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2013; P. Hitchcock, "The speed of place and space of time: Toward a theory of postcolonial velocity/city", in JK Watson and G Wilder (eds.), *Postcolonial Imaginaries for the Global Present*, New York, NY, Fordham University Press, 2018, pp. 241-258.

²⁹ I refer here to an immense body of scholarship, mainly the work of e.g., H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994; G. Bhabha, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and Sociological Imagination*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000; R. Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, Cambridge, Polity, 2007; F. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, London, Pluto Press, 1986, first published 1952; A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001. W. D. Mignolo and A. Escobar (eds), *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, London, Routledge, 2010; E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, NY, Pantheon Books, 1978; B. de Sousa Santos, *The End of The Cognitive Empire: The Coming Age of Epistemologies of The South*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018.

³⁰ I.A. Reed, "Hartmut Rosa's project for critical theory", *Thesis Eleven* 133(1), 2016, pp. 122-9.

³¹ M. Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, London, Verso, 2009.

³² W. E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, Minneapolis, MN, The University of Minnesota Press, 2002; S. Glezos, *The Politics of Speed: Capitalism, the State and War in an Accelerating World*, London, Routledge, 2012, pp. 85ff.

³³ R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On Semantics of Historical Time*, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2004.

³⁴ S. Nadolny, *The Discovery of Slowness*, Philadelphia, PA, Paul Dry Books, 2005.

³⁵ Cf. also my critique of the *slow-* in academia (Vostal 2021).

³⁶ P. Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, New York, NY, Semiotext(e), 1986; P. Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, New York, NY, Semiotext(e), 1991.

Future Research Avenue: *Simmel in Shenzhen*

One of the “speed ethnography” I have currently in mind –whether I will pursue depends obviously on whether I get project funds– is called *Simmel in Shenzhen: De-assembling rhythms of Confucian ethics and Shenzhen Speed*. It aims to trace temporal in/compatibilities and diverse rhythms between Confucian ethics³⁷ –considering especially the Five Constants (*Wuchang*, 五常)³⁸ and the principle of *guanxi*– and the so called “Shenzhen Speed” (*Shenzhen sudu*, 深圳速度). Several studies have examined the tensions between of Confucian ethics with (broadly conceived) western business ethics³⁹. Although other scholars have examined the construction of Confucian selfhood⁴⁰ and its relationship to the liberal construction of western identities⁴¹, I am not aware of any studies dealing with a temporal analysis of either Confucian ethics or Shenzhen Speed or their connections.

O’Donnell *et al.* identify three phases in Shenzhen’s development: experiments (1979–1992), exceptions (1992–2004) and extensions (2004–the present)⁴². The first phase gave rise of the term Shenzhen Speed (hereafter ShS), which then described the city’s rapid urban development and construction, made possible by the status of special economic zone (SEZ), endowed to the city by the Beijing government in 1979 in order to experiment with market economics and capitalism under the auspices of Chinese-style socialism. Roughly during the second phase, ShS referred to the short development cycles of cheap counterfeits of western products (*shanzhai* 山寨)⁴³. It was not unusual “for western companies that announced a new gadget to find a *shanzhai* version of it on the shelves before they could put it on sale themselves”⁴⁴.

Recently, with the advent of mobile phones and smartphones and due to a major crackdown on intellectual property theft, the term ShS has been used to refer to a non-stop “assembly-line zone” that makes use of cheap hardware and extremely cheap labour, mostly domestic migrants from rural areas in Chi-

na, with shop floors quickly producing electronics for companies such as Apple, Amazon, Cisco, Dell, Intel, Microsoft, Samsung, Sony, Toshiba and many other tech giants. This mundane fact became apparent for many western consumers as a result of the widely publicized “Foxconn suicides”⁴⁵. Today, ShS describes the pulse of the city, which now includes booming high-tech companies that excel in the fields of biotechnology, artificial intelligence, advanced computing and software design, all of it supported by venture capital firms and angel investors of both local and foreign provenance. Nevertheless, none of these earlier usages of the term “Shenzhen Speed” have become completely redundant in contemporary Shenzhen. What follows is a provocative mental exercise, but one that is somehow irresistible: If Georg Simmel was astonished by the pace of life in *fin-de-siècle* Berlin⁴⁶, what would he make of today’s Shenzhen, especially considering its expansion and ultra-fast pace of city life? One can speculate: Would Simmel perhaps resist the temptation to adopt a *blasé* attitude and instead look at how ShS (or some of its “components”) and its relationship to Confucian Ethics (CE) might be mobilized and translated into democratically progressive instruments? One still wonders.

The researcher will closely follow various interactions of rhythms, look at how various rhythms are synchronized and ordered in order to be productive, and search for specific examples of Confucian Ethics and Shenzhen Speed in the field. The first site where different shades of ShS and CE and their encounters will be studied is a giant market in Huaqui-angbei where many manufactures from all over the Pearl River Delta region have their showcases and storefronts and which still supplies the global market with counterfeits (much less so than in the past), but also with drones, AI devices, electric scooters, selfie-sticks and many other items. Not far from the market, one can find the hub of the new creative class of Shenzhen, the consultants, the so-called “industrial design companies” assisting local and foreign firms in product development. Familiar with the peculiarities of local business culture as well as with west-

P. Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, London, Sage, 2000; P. Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, New York, Verso, 2000.

³⁷ K.-I. Shun and D.B. Wong (eds.), *Confucian Ethics A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

³⁸ Rén (仁, humaneness); Yì (義/义, righteousness/justice); Lǐ (禮/礼, rite); Zhì (智, knowledge); Xìn (信, integrity).

³⁹ G. K. Y. Chan, “The Relevance and Value of Confucianism in Contemporary Business Ethics”, *Journal of Business Ethics* 77(1), 2008, pp. 347–360; Y. Fan, “Guanxi’s Consequences: Personal Gains at Social Cost”, *Journal of Business Ethics* 38 (3), 2002, pp. 371–380; B. White, “Business in China: Confucianism, Guanxi, and the modern Chinese marketplace”, *Leight Review* 14, 2006, pp. 55–63.

⁴⁰ C. Cheng, “A Theory of Confucian Selfhood Self-Cultivation and Free Will in Confucian Philosophy”, in K.-L. Shun and DB Wong (eds.), *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; V. Shen and S. Shun (eds.), “Confucian Ethics in Retrospect and Prospect”, *The Council for Values and Philosophy*, Washington, DC, 2008.

⁴¹ S. Kim, “The Autonomy of Confucian Communitarianism: The Confucian Social Self and its Discontents”, *The Philosophical Forum Quarterly* 42(2), 2011, pp. 111–130.

⁴² M. A. O’Donnell, W. Wong and J. P. G. Bach (eds), *Learning from Shenzhen: China’s Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

⁴³ The word also means mountain hideout or mountain village beyond the control of authorities, poor quality product, or someone who is a peasant.

⁴⁴ A. X., Mina and J. Chipchase J (2019) A Scotter on Every Corner, A Drone in Every Sky, *MIT Technology Review*, 122(1), pp. 16–23, here p. 19.

⁴⁵ J. Chan, “A Suicide Survivor: The Life of a Chinese Worker”, *New Technology, Work and Employment* 28(2), 2013, pp. 84–99; J. Chan *et al.*, “The Politics of Global Production: Apple, Foxconn and China’s New Working Class”, *New Technology, Work and Employment* 28(2), pp. 100–115.

⁴⁶ G. Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture*, London, Sage, 1997, pp. 174–185, first published in 1904.

ern IP legal arrangements and “design and aesthetic norms”, they help their customers to “realize an idea, orchestrating the work between factories, custom moulding shops, and software developers”⁴⁷. The second site of investigation will be an industrial design company. The third site of ShS is *Shenzhen Open Innovation Lab* (SZOIL), a space that sets in motion the “new innovation ecosystem” connecting industrial designers with manufactures, ideas and people. In both locations, materialities, practices and imaginaries of various rhythms and provenances intermingle and encounter and interpenetrate one another. How is ShS enacted, mobilized and performed? How are the rhythms associated with Confucian ethics enacted, mobilized and performed? How are indigenous rhythms (Confucian ethics) made compatible with ShS? These are empirical questions indeed. Another research question is imminent in post-C19 world, too.

Conclusion

In this reflection I am *not* arguing that theories of accelerating modernity are invalid, but rather they need

to be somewhat “tested” or “tried out” in specific social terrains⁴⁸. It is necessary to do so for two reasons: 1) in comparison to theories such as liquid modernity, network/risk society, acceleration theories in sum account for fascinating emerging scholarship with a great explanatory usage/scope; 2) if acceleration theories are not substantiated, if they are not “tamed” by empirical/ethnographic/analytical substance they might –due to their unmodified inflation that spills over to pop-science journalism– decompose into fleeting fashionable intellectual performance to be soon replaced by the ‘next big thing’ in social, cultural and legal theorizing. So, what we need is forensic investigation how “will-to-speed” relates to capitalist reproduction. Good case studies would be *Shenzhen Speed* or *Hyperloop* (not disused here); by looking at what role waiting plays in temporal ordering of contemporary modernity; by examining “crisis of patience” and “culture of immediacy” and their implications; by investigation productive dimension of speed in specific domains. This would be, I think, interesting spin in “acceleration debate” –and not another book, disconnected from the previous ones on how everything speed-ups in indeterminate fashion.

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⁴⁷ AX, Mina & Chipchase J, “A Scotter on Every Corner, A Drone in Every Sky”, *MIT Technology Review*, 122(1), 2019, pp. 16-23, here 20.

⁴⁸ I’ve tried it in the past, cf. F. Vostal, *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

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