

# Resonance in Sociology

## Positions, Critique, and Research Desiderata

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*This article addresses the topical relevance and value of the notion of resonance for sociology (Section 1). A second section brings to light a variety of different sociological concepts of resonance (Section 2). The following positions/thinkers are reconsidered and critically assessed: Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (2.1.), Hartmut Rosa as a representative of more recent critical theory (2.2.), Vincent Miller as representative of social phenomenology (2.3.), and my own works with both (socially) phenomenological and empirical orientations (2.4.). Four objectives are pursued in these assessments and in the essay as a whole. These consist, first, in delimiting the boundaries of the concept of resonance (within sociology); second, in setting forth a foundational, non-normative conceptual definition of resonance; third, in problematizing the ambivalence of the term "resonance;" and fourth, in illustrating the possibilities of a concise application of resonance within various research fields. Finally, in the conclusion this will be approached in terms of "Classification, Critique, and Research Desiderata" (Section 3).*

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“With ‘justice’ and transparency, with ‘equality’ and ‘creativity,’ with ‘movement,’ ‘action,’ and ‘change,’ we promise ourselves all possible things, because in words resonates a vague but undeniable anticipation, decisively rising above all that is concealed in the mere particulars of lexicon. And this sorcery itself, evoked by the *sound* of words, their sheer imposition, is mythical. The magic of speech beguiles us because it is manifested through an overpowering factuality, indisputable in the moment, which demands little more of us than that we open ourselves to receive the message.”

RALF KONERSMANN - *THE DISQUIET WORLD*

## 1. Introduction: Resonance in Sociology

Following Ralf Konersmann, we can agree that the notion of *resonance* possesses a sense of “imposition” lacking in other concepts, whether colloquial or scientific. Yet this has not traditionally been the case in sociology. Structures, system, lifeworld, integration — to name only a few — are more widespread and common concepts/terms in sociological discourse than resonance. We have somewhat better luck if we turn to (social) philosophy. As is so frequently the case with core ideas in social analysis and theory, current interest in the notion of resonance within sociological circles has migrated there from social philosophy.<sup>1</sup> However, those looking

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<sup>1</sup> Here I point, for example, to the concept of “recognition,” which has similarly achieved a widespread currency and concision in the world of sociological discourse/debate, thanks largely to the works of Axel Honneth, Paul Ricoeur, and Judith Butler.

into the concept of resonance in sociology find that while the notion does find some use there, it rarely plays, or has played, an important role. One finds no entry for it in today's sociological lexicons or dictionaries. Of course the term *response* (English, "Antwort") turns up, namely in the behaviorist context as a "sociological description for an organism's external, perceptible behavioral reaction induced by a stimulus such as an external reward" (Hartfield & Hillman, 1982, p. 644). Although the motivational force of "response" is apparent here, resonance cannot in any way be reduced to response, as will be made clearer below.<sup>2</sup> Despite its rather marginal place in sociology, it would be a mistake to confine engagement with resonance to the contemporary works of Hartmut Rosa (in dialogue with Charles Taylor's writings) too quickly. The concept has played an important role in the study of social movements in the US/American content for quite some time, particularly in connection with the notion of frame resonance (cf. Bloemraad, Voss, & Silva, 2014; Connolly, 2005). Similarly, there are social-phenomenological projects that, independently of Rosa, are approaching the concept and idea of resonance (Miller, 2015).

To begin with, another general observation: many works of social theory add superfluous elements to the notion of resonance. The solution to or even rescue from a problem seems right around the corner when the notion is referenced, articulated, brought to bear. In other words,

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<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels's concept of *responsiveness* offers an interesting alternative to such construals of "response." Criticizing the stimulus-and-reaction schema, Waldenfels develops a dichotomy of pathos and response. The pathetic dimension of resonance could be a motive that, seen in the light of social phenomenology, has potency insofar as it rises to the experiential character of being *impelled* to resonate, and thus being unable *not* to respond (Waldenfels, 2006, 2015).

resonance is often found in connection with more than traces of a “mythical superfluidity” (Hogrebe, 2006, p. 332) that does not exactly make it easier to use this glittering idea in a precise and scientific way. But here we run into the basic motivation of my work, which explicitly consists in not merely problematizing any recapitulation of the most important sociological theories of resonance, but also in making a case for their development into a liaison between theory and empirical studies of resonance. At a granular level, the structure of the ensuing text and the progress of my argument proceed as follows.

After a short introduction treating the topical relevance and import of the notion of resonance in and for sociology (Section 1), in the following section I delve further into the sociological concept of resonance (Section 2). Here the following positions/thinkers will be highlighted: Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (2.1.); Hartmut Rosa as representative of more recent critical theory (2.2.); Vincent Miller as an advocate for social phenomenology (2.3.); and my own work, both social phenomenological and empirical.

The purpose of these surveys as well as this article as a whole is essentially fourfold. Specifically, it consists *first* in outlining the boundaries of the notion of resonance (within sociology); *second* in setting forth a foundational, non-normative definition of resonance; *third* in problematizing the ambivalence of the term “resonance;” and *fourth* in illustrating the possibilities of a concise application of resonance in various other research fields. Finally, in the conclusion this will be approached in terms of “Classification, Critique, and Research Desiderata” (Section 3).

## 2. Positions in Sociology

The positions and approaches surveyed in what follows — which explicitly deal with resonance using that term or the concept — perforce represent a range of options.<sup>3</sup> Yet in my view we are dealing with four important sociological positions that, in some ways, stand in direct mutual competition with (and accordingly exclude) each other, but which also complement one another and can be grasped to the extent that they are brought together into productive, critical contact.

### 2.1. Systems Theory: Niklas Luhmann

Niklas Luhmann (1988) uses the metaphor of resonance in a variety of ways in his book *Ecological Communication*. Indeed, in a certain way resonance must serve as the pivotal concept in systems theory, since, according to Luhmann himself, “The notion of resonance illustrates that systems can only react to environmental events in accordance with the constraints of their own structures (p. 269).” Of course, a wide variety of stimuli might elicit resonance from, or reveal a capacity for resonance in, any given system. Yet the sure fact is that the system needs resonance,

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<sup>3</sup> The anthropologist Arnold Gehlen has intensively engaged with resonance in the context of automatism in modern technology: “Thus do the analogous processes of the external world elicit fascination [*for human beings — DW*] in virtue of this ‘resonance,’ processes that so to speak present a kind of inner sense for the unique constitution of the human, pointing to those aspects of the external world that mirror this definitive uniqueness. And when we speak today of the ‘workings’ of the stars, the ‘workings’ of machines, these are not merely superficial comparisons, but rather objective self-understanding of certain definitive traits of humans — who interpret the world after their own image and, likewise, themselves after images of the world” (Gehlen, 2007, p. 16-17).

for otherwise the distinction between system and environment, foundational for systems theory, would be impossible: “If the system lacked this selectivity in resonance or coupling, it would fail to discriminate itself from its environment; it would not exist as a system” (p. 41). In view of the ecological threats that Luhmann examines in his book, an increasingly ecologically aware — and therefore alarmed — society may worry that it makes too little use of resonance, particularly in that dangerous environmental developments are simply ignored and, accordingly, countered with no appropriate measures.

Communicative affordances are strictly what social systems respond to (or these are what they ignore). Broadly, this means that the weaker the capacity for resonance, the more inflexible the system is, and the poorer its *capacity for response* to the environment. A wide variety of systems demonstrate a capacity for resonance, whether organizations, social movements, individual persons, or other functional systems. Emerging from his reflections on the ecological crises, however, Luhmann also sees a danger in too much resonance: “and the system can, without being destroyed from the outside, collapse from internal overload” (p. 220). This resonance overload occasionally gives rise to warning signals whose correspondence to potentially hazardous situations is not easy to verify. The important question becomes: Can a highly functionally differentiated society bring to bear an appropriate responsiveness to ecological disasters and threats, that is to say, one that lies between cynicism and hysteria? On this point Luhmann is thoroughly optimistic, as Reiner Grundmann argues. Falling back on the metaphor of resonance, Luhmann observes that, in “an analogy with the progressive differentiation of the biological organism” (Grundmann, 2012, p. 169), there have arisen “eyes and ears, nervous

systems and immune systems, that for their parts are only capable of resonance within narrow yet evolutionarily proven frequency domains. These specializations can then be mutually counterbalanced through organized adaptivity” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 218).

*Conclusions and Critiques:* The notion of resonance (or more precisely, its use in metaphorical terms) remains prominent in Luhmann largely as a functional-technical element in systems theory. Yet the reference to the different forms of *response*, in the sense of a capacity for resonance, is just as interesting as the strictly relational character that pervades Luhmann’s theoretical work in general as a theoretician of difference. Missing, however, is any conceptual refinement or advancement of the vocabulary of resonance theory, as is developed in Rosa (2016) and Miller (2015).

## 2.2 Critical Theory: Hartmut Rosa

The works of Hartmut Rosa stand in the context of recent critical theory and have philosophical links to Charles Taylor, whose influence on Rosa’s thought and writing can scarcely be overstated (cf. Rossa, 2011).<sup>4</sup> Yet Rosa also attempts to differentiate his work, as he himself emphasizes: although Taylor discriminates between two types of “being-in-the-world,” he has not successfully identified “the ‘resonant’ form of world relations over against the ‘silent’ as the

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<sup>4</sup> It is not within the scope of the present work to offer a thorough survey of Rosa’s scholarly corpus as it relates to Charles Taylor.

epistemological, political, and existentially ‘correct’ form” (Rossa, 2011, p. 40). This in turn has become the paramount project of Rosa’s “critique of resonant relations.” In this he offers

a systematic sociology of world relations, explored and then determined by cultural, structural, and institutional conditions and contexts, and under which both individual and collective subjects experience the world either as resonant or inimical, neutral or silent (p. 43).

His recently published opus *Resonance: A Sociology of World Relations* (Rosa, 2016) centers primarily on an investigation of whether and to what extent resonance might be a solution to hurry, alienation, and objectification. Here the idea of *adaptation* to the world, in contrast to a simple sort of annexation, plays a key role. Thus, resonance is just precisely “the flash of hope for adaptation and response in a silent world” (Rossa, 2016, p. 750). In a preemptive reply to potential critics, Rosa himself unpacks the difficulties of several of the more subtle points of his theory of resonance. I will consider these, offering commentary and explanation, below.