

Introduction to Hartmut Rosa, professor and honorary doctor
by Maria van der Harst, PhD student
Dies Natalis, University of Humanistic Studies, 29 January 2019

Hartmut Rosa is Professor and Chair of General and Theoretical Sociology at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, as well as Director of The Max-Weber-Kolleg for cultural and social scientific studies of the University of Erfurt.

Getting to know Rosas work has inspired me in different ways so far. On a more general level I admire how his analyses span various disciplines with the ease of a genuine polymath. On a more specific level, it has led me to new angles in my current research project.

This research revolves around interactions between local governments and various grassroots initiatives, contributing to e.g. health care and social wellbeing in villages or neighborhoods.

Working on a first research report, Rosas work on social acceleration directed our attention to the temporal aspects within these interactions.

Once we started to focus on temporal themes, we've indeed encountered an abundance of words relating to 'time' and 'speed'. On countless occasions respondents speak about the availability of time, and the need to keep up their pace. Citizens' initiatives, as we came to see, seem to bear a certain promise of being dynamic, spontaneous and fast.

Interestingly, it is not only citizens but also municipal officials who think that bottom-up initiatives should move fast, without getting bogged down in endless conversations. Most admired are those who can escape the 'talking' and rather solve problems through 'action'. Also from a policy and government perspective, an important reason to embrace and support grassroots initiatives (for example by abolishing cumbersome rules and regulations) is said to be an existing "impatience" in society. The idea that "people no longer want to wait for policy decisions or the ballot box, they want to actively solve issues themselves". Facilitating these modern forms of citizen engagement is believed to enrich our democracy.

The dynamics of social acceleration may explain why this type of citizen participation appears to be so attractive. But, following Rosas direction of thought, is it realistic to think democracy will benefit? His work on social acceleration explains how people are pressured to keep up with technological, social and economic changes, while political systems are faced with the fundamental inability to accelerate. Democratic decision making takes time and will even become more time consuming as a consequence of acceleration.

Perhaps the hope is, that these new participation practices may alleviate the political system burdened by what Rosa calls the 'paradoxes of political time'. This means there is a need for *more time* for political decision-making, while the acceleration of the surrounding systems *decreases the time given to politics* to decide on issues. As a consequence, decision-making processes are shifted towards other, faster arenas: the legal system, or the economy and individual responsibility.

Bearing this in mind, the emphasis on grassroots initiatives may be understood as one of the ways in which decision-making is transferred to faster systems. If so, this development isn't so likely to contribute a revitalization of democracy.

The more community groups frantically chase themselves to live up to this promise of being fast and delivering visible results as soon as possible, **the less** they tolerate and support

members that will slow them down. And the less they will explore possibly opposing interests.

I look forward to possible discussions we may have later today or tomorrow about these or other connecting themes in our work.