

# Appropriation, Activation and Acceleration: The Escalatory Logics of Capitalist Modernity and the Crises of Dynamic Stabilization

**Hartmut Rosa**

Friedrich Schiller University

**Klaus Dörre**

Friedrich Schiller University

**Stephan Lessenich**

Ludwig Maximilians University

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## Abstract

The paper starts by identifying *dynamic stabilization* as a defining feature of modern societies. This term refers to the fact that such a society requires (material) growth, (technological) augmentation and high rates of (cultural) innovation in order to reproduce its structure and to preserve the socioeconomic and political status quo. The subsequent sections explore the mechanisms and consequences of this mode of social reproduction, proceeding in three steps. First, three key aspects or ‘motors’ of dynamization are identified, namely the mechanisms of (socio-economic) *appropriation*, (socio-cultural) *acceleration* and (socio-political) *activation*. In the second step, we argue that this ‘Triple-A-Mode’ of dynamic stabilization necessarily entails a logic of incessant escalation which eventually threatens to undermine itself, leading to a multifaceted process of destabilization. Unmistakable signs of this can be seen in the current financial, democratic, ecological and psychosocial crises. The third and last part briefly and very preliminarily sketches out the possible contours of a ‘post-growth’ society which could move beyond the current mode of dynamic stabilization.

## Keywords

acceleration, activation, appropriation, dynamic stabilization, growth

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**Corresponding author:** Hartmut Rosa. Email: [hartmut.rosa@uni-jena.de](mailto:hartmut.rosa@uni-jena.de)

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## Introduction

When can a society be called modern? This question has been one of the constitutive problems for sociology as a discipline since the time of its founding fathers. Authors like Weber, Durkheim, Marx or Simmel struggled, each in their own way, to identify the distinctive traits that distinguish 'modern' from so-called traditional societies. And indeed, as the ongoing debates about multiple or entangled modernities and about *late-* or *post-*, *liquid* or *radical* modernity vividly illustrate, the point has never been settled. The issue remains haunted by the problem of normative and Eurocentric or 'Western' biases. Most accounts of modernity either are directly normative, as in the case of the 'project of modernity' identified by authors like Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor, or, albeit in a critical sense, by Michel Foucault, too; or at the least they are clearly inspired by Western conceptions of progress and development, like, for example, the neo-Parsonian tradition of modernization theories. On the flipside of this, the complementary conceptions of 'traditional' society are no less biased and normatively laden, of course, depicting non-Western societies as sluggish, backward and conservative.

Contrary to this, in this contribution we suggest a very simple, but quite consequential definition. Judged from a formal perspective, modern societies appear to be extremely dynamic with respect to their high rates of growth, innovation and change, on the one hand, and quite robust and stable in terms of their basic socioeconomic structures on the other hand. On closer inspection, there seem to be good reasons to assume that these two fundamental features are in fact intrinsically connected. Hence, we suggest that a society can be called modern when its mode of stabilization is dynamic, i.e. when it *needs (material) growth, (technological) augmentation and high rates of (cultural) innovation in order to reproduce its structure and to preserve the socioeconomic and political status quo* in terms of its functionality and its basic institutional and distributional order.

In what follows, we want to take a closer look at the mechanisms and consequences of this mode of social reproduction. It is most obvious in the logic of capitalist economies. Without expansion, innovation and accumulation, companies close down, jobs are lost, and, by consequence, public revenues decrease and expenditures increase, and the ensuing monetary and fiscal crisis can put political legitimation at risk, too. All of this can be observed at present in the evolving economic and political crisis in Greece. Thus, capitalist economies do not need growth or innovation to achieve some new goal or progressive state, but just in order to keep the status quo and to reproduce their structure. Without it, they lose their economic competitiveness and their social stability.

It is important here to note that 'dynamic stabilization' in this sense involves more than just permanent processing or continuous operation. It is intrinsically tied to the logic of increase, i.e. stability – albeit an

oftentimes shaky and rather temporary form of stability – derives from growth, augmentation and efficient innovation, not just from processual reproduction.

It might be debatable whether the capitalist engine is the only motor for this mode of dynamic stabilization. In fact, it can be observed in the way science, politics, and art are conceived, conducted and reproduced in modern societies, too. Thus, modern science is no longer about the preservation and tradition of (ancient, holy, etc.) knowledge, but about perpetual ‘progress’ toward new questions, projects and answers, while modern art is bent on innovation and transgression (Groys, 2014) instead of imitation or approximation. Similarly, legislation has become a perennial task of innovative adaption, and democratic governmental rule by definition requires dynamic renewal and confirmation to keep the system stable.

But for this essay, we can safely leave aside the question of whether or not the logic of capitalism is the (sole) driving force behind these other evolutions. Capitalist societies, in any case, can only stabilize dynamically in all spheres of production and reproduction. This dynamism, in turn, entails an intrinsic logic of escalation which in the end inevitably threatens to undermine the stability, sustainability and viability of modern society. *Stabilization through escalation* is the formula for its success as well as for its downfall. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the mechanisms as well as the limitations and dangers and eventually the alternatives to this mode of social stabilization – and hence to ‘modernity’ as we know it. With the emphasis on escalation, we locate our approach against other positions in social theory which do acknowledge the dynamic character of modern social reproduction without recognizing its transgressing and transformative tendencies, such as the systems theoretic approach by Niklas Luhmann (2013), ‘neoliberal’ interpretations of economic stabilization through market equilibria (Datta, 2011), or even neo-Marxist approaches like the one advocated by Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), who, in our view, does not pay sufficient attention to the dynamizing tendencies in the realms of politics and culture.

We will develop our argument in three steps. First, we will identify three key aspects or ‘motors’ of dynamization, namely the mechanisms of (socio-economic) *appropriation*, (socio-cultural) *acceleration* and (socio-political) *activation*. In the second step, we will argue that this ‘Triple-A-Mode’ of dynamic stabilization necessarily leads to a logic of incessant escalation which eventually threatens to undermine itself, leading to a multifaceted process of destabilization. Unmistakable signs for this, we will argue, can be seen in the current financial, economic, democratic, ecological and psychosocial crises. In the third and last part, we will briefly and very preliminarily sketch out the possible contours of a ‘post-growth’ society which could move beyond the current mode of dynamic stabilization.

## **Appropriation, Acceleration and Activation: The Triple-A-Theory of Dynamic Stabilization**

There can be little doubt about the fact that modern capitalist societies so far have proven to be spectacularly robust, adaptable and stable. Beyond all changes and variations in their modes of production and regimes of regulation, they tend to restabilize after all sorts of crises and to even benefit and thrive from almost all forms of contestation and critique (cf. e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Yet, what is often overlooked and ignored in the analysis of capitalist economies is the fact that this stability crucially hinges on their capacity to grow, expand and innovate. All known capitalisms to date could only establish themselves as relatively stable formations when they managed to integrate the systemic imperative of dynamization into their specific ‘social orders’ (Streeck, 2009). Capitalism, therefore, does not simply denote a type of society that relies on the market as a mechanism of coordination, on the self-valorization of value or on bureaucratic rationalization. Capitalist systems in all varieties resemble a bicycle that gains in stability with the speed of its forward motion, while it easily tips when slowing down or coming to a halt. However, this structural need for growth and escalation entails a social, psychological and ecological price. Dynamization is achieved only through the constant and progressive socio-economic appropriation of land, resources and capacities (i.e. a progressive ‘Landnahme’, to use a concept introduced by Burkart Lutz following Rosa Luxemburg, cf. Dörre, 2009, 2013), by cumulative social, technological and cultural acceleration (Rosa, 2010, 2013) and by incessant political and ‘gouvernemental’ activation of the population (Lessenich, 2008, 2011). In our view, any proper sociological analysis of contemporary societies, their current crises and the difficulties to overcome them requires an adequate understanding of these three systemic imperatives of dynamization (Dörre et al., 2015). In the following, we will briefly outline the basic characteristics of each of these analytical key-concepts one by one.

First, *Landnahme* (appropriation), originally a socioeconomic concept, primarily describes the spatial-temporal as well as sectoral expansion of capitalism into non-capitalist environments. The category of *Landnahme* is essential for theories that analyse and criticize capitalism as an expansive system. What unites these theories is their common assumption that capitalist societies cannot reproduce exclusively from within. Capital accumulation constantly remains tied to the ability to draw on ‘non-capitalist milieus’ (Luxemburg, 1975: 303, 314). Capitalist development thus occurs as a complex internal-external movement. It always involves the internalization of externals, the occupation of a non-capitalist or non-market (-like) ‘other’. What is appropriated and commodified by the capitalist ‘machine’ is not just new territories, resources and new markets, but also spheres of life and forms of human activity that have

as yet not been subject to market exchange, and ever new segments of our personality structures like emotional needs or social relationships. Hence, according to this theorem, the valorization of capital is always dependent on the occupation or, if necessary, the ‘active creation’ (Harvey, 2005: 139) of a non-capitalist ‘other’.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, appropriation in this sense always implies processes of ‘land abandonment’ (*Landpreisgabe*), too. It is therefore never to be understood as a linear, purely economic process or as a one-dimensional ‘real subsumption’ under capital (Lutz, 1984).

The reformulated concept of appropriation as it is used here has been decoupled from theories of inevitable economic breakdown (Dörre, 2009, 2012). For the post-Fordist era, it instructs the diagnosis of a market-driven, competitive dynamic that establishes itself (albeit filtered by institutional systems and mediated through social conflict) even within fully developed capitalisms (Streeck, 2005). Institutions and organizational forms that previously served to contain the market are being hollowed out and remodelled, spatial and temporal fixes of capital are being broken up in order to mobilize creative destruction for a revitalization of capitalist accumulation – an accumulation that is, in part, forcefully driven by dispossession in the sense of David Harvey, i.e. by a renewed *Landnahme* of formerly public property (Harvey, 2004). Despite the predictions of classical industrial location theories, this does not lead to a harmonic equilibrium; indeed, processes of *Landnahme* are facing new limits. The revision of the concept of *Landnahme* originally focused on the social limits of financial capitalist expansion, on the explanation of historically new forms of precarity, on modified regulations of class conflict and on a new synthesis of sociology and social critique. Yet the predominantly ‘female’ face of precarization soon showed that the analysis of *Landnahme* had to be more thoroughly related to the question of the reproduction of capitalist societies.

As the *Landnahme* theorem is open to gender-sensitive analyses of social transformation, it also offers a possibility to systematically relate the social and ecological questions to one another. It currently seems likely that the economic and ecological double crisis (see below) marks a historical turning point at which a cycle of appropriation has come to an end. At this point, the historical ‘fall of man’ (Arendt, 2006: 335) that is the breaking of economic laws by political action must repeat itself. Perhaps the ‘perpetuum mobile’ (Luxemburg, 1975: 16) of extended capital reproduction can be temporarily reactivated by projects such as a state-driven (Schimank, 2009) Green New Deal. But even in such a case the structural imperative of growth enacted by processes of capitalist appropriation will probably provoke social conflicts over distribution and ecological conflicts over progress (Foster et al., 2010). These in turn will then act as immanent limits of such a project.

Second, this process of constant and incessant appropriation of a non-commodified 'other' is accompanied by, and inherently intertwined with, processes of social *acceleration*, i.e. the setting-in-motion of the material, the social and the cultural world at an ever increasing speed (see, e.g., Glezos, 2012, who, following Deleuze and Virilio, also notes the escalatory tendencies of modern political economy). Acceleration is a concept inspired by cultural sociology that focuses on the temporal structure and the time regimes of modern (and currently: capitalist) societies. It postulates that capitalist formations (and modern societies in general) are characterized by the simultaneous appearance of three (logically independent) processes of acceleration that mutually reinforce each other in a self-amplifying circular movement (Rosa, 2013; Rosa and Scheuerman, 2009): the intentional acceleration of goal-directed processes (technical acceleration, mainly of transport, communication and production), the increasing rate of sociocultural transformation (acceleration of social change) and finally the rising number of episodes of action and/or experience per unit of time (acceleration of [the speed of] life).

While French writer Paul Virilio has stressed the significance of speed in social and political life for several decades (Virilio, 1998; Redhead, 2004), it has only been in recent years that these processes of social acceleration have received an increasing amount of attention in the social sciences. Thus, whereas authors like Jonathan Crary (2014), John Tomlinson (2007) or Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2001) have stressed the pervasive effects of speed on everyday life and even sleep, others, like William Scheuerman (2009) or William Connolly (2009), investigate the consequences of social acceleration for democratic political decision-making. Furthermore, a most interesting debate has evolved around the role of digital information and communication technologies in the speeding up of social and cultural life (cf. Wajcman, 2010; Hassan, 2010).

The principle of acceleration can be identified as a shared essence of all capitalisms, whereby intra-capitalist changes of formation (for example to Fordism and later to post-Fordism) can be reconstructed as being based on the logic of escalation of speed (Harvey, 1990, 2010). The inherent connection between processes of growth and acceleration manifests itself economically (especially at the level of production and distribution) as well as culturally (for example in consumption patterns; see Rosa, 2013: ch. VII). In fact, the most comprehensive definition of social acceleration formulates this connection straightforwardly in that in all three realms of speed, acceleration figures as an *increase in quantity per unit of time* (Rosa, 2013: ch. 3).

For the points of transition from an intergenerational to a generational and finally to an intra-generational speed of social change, the theorem of acceleration identifies fundamental cultural rifts concerning subject formation and political governance. Central to this diagnosis is the dialectic of dynamization and congealment that currently expresses



itself in a widespread cultural and political perception of high-speed standstill, or ‘polar inertia’ (Virilio, 1998) consisting in a tendency towards a hardening and solidification of social structures and processes that takes place behind the façade of high rates of material and substantial change and growth.

Third, the processes of appropriation and acceleration that drive the capitalist logic of growth and dynamization, however, do not run on their own. An ever increasing amount of social, political, cultural and natural energy is required to keep the engines going, and this energy is mustered by ever more sophisticated forms of social and political *activation*. Activation, in the way it is used here, is an analytical concept that aims at updating and extending Claus Offe’s theory of ‘late capitalism’ (Offe, 1984) by integrating it into a sociology of knowledge and linking it to the research methods of Foucauldian governmentality studies (Burchell et al., 1991; Bröckling et al., 2011). At the centre of this analytical perspective are the forms, mechanisms and effects of permanent political and social intervention by welfare state institutions. Modern capitalism, with its specific constitutional and reproductive logic, can only be understood as a ‘politicized’ economic structure whose innate crisis-prone tendencies demand ever new adaptations and innovations to the set of regulatory instruments available to the modern state in exercising its steering and control functions.

In this sense, ‘activation’ not only represents the most recent stage of the metamorphoses of capitalism’s regulation through the welfare state; it is a virtually transhistorical structural principle of its dynamization. In the wake of the most recent change of formation towards ‘flexible capitalism’ (Sennett, 1998), the intervention patterns of welfare state policies increasingly aim at the advancement of, demand for and formation of mobile and active subjects. This entails a momentous reinterpretation and relocalization of social responsibility for the creation and safeguarding of ‘the social’ in (and of) capitalism. It is no longer the state (as the institutionalized general public), nor the market with its mechanisms of spontaneous coordination, that weaves the ‘social bond’ integrating flexible capitalist society. Instead, this task is politically assigned to the citizens of the ‘active society’ (Dean, 1995; Walters, 1997; Lessenich, 2011), who are called upon as economic (self-interested) and moral (community-oriented) actors at the same time. In this process, the late-modern individual becomes a ‘perpetuum mobile’ of its own kind: an actor who not only cares for him-/herself but also for the economic and social reproduction of the system, and who can never be sufficiently active and mobile nor ever show sufficient initiative. In this figure of the ‘active citizen’, the imperative of growth and expansion inherent to late capitalist modernity is effectively privatized. What, in the heyday of the ‘Keynesian welfare state’, had been a task of direct political intervention – prevention of health hazards, environmental protection,

even social redistribution – is now entrusted to the subjects themselves by the ‘activating welfare state’. Even though these changes may be interpreted as a ‘depoliticization’ of statehood, such a strategy of relieving the state of its responsibilities nonetheless goes hand in hand with new forms of the ‘politicization’ of subjectivity, which in turn are likely to generate historically new sorts of legitimation problems for the state in the wake of the economic and ecological double crisis.

The ‘Triple-A-Theory’ of dynamic stabilization we seek to propose here suggests that it is the interplay between these three mechanisms or motors that structurally anchors the imperatives of growth, augmentation and innovation in modern capitalist societies. They interlock in the institutional arrangements of modern economies and their political regulations, in patterns of education and consumption, in the mechanisms of the leisure industries as well as in the logic of individual self-optimization, in the functional dynamics of the media just as much as in the workings of care institutions and the health system. For example, when new instruments of physical self-monitoring or quantification with respect to data of *input* (of food or sunshine, etc.), *state* (like blood-pressure, heartbeat, mood) or *performance* (such as number of steps taken or stairs climbed) hook up with modified insurance policies and tariffs, the ensuing changes can be understood as forms of a new ‘Landnahme’ of physical processes as well as instances of unparalleled activation which lead to yet another level of social acceleration. This does not mean, of course, that the requirements of appropriation, acceleration and activation do not encounter obstacles and resistances. Quite to the contrary, there inevitably appear to be external – e.g. ecological or psychosocial – limits to the ensuing logic of escalation as well as internal contradictions that both tend to undermine the stabilizing capacity of this mode of stabilization in the long run. It is to these that we will turn now.

### **The Logic of Escalation and the Late-Modern Crises of Dynamic Stabilization**

In order to understand the current state of economic, social and political affairs in late-modern societies, it is crucial to realize that dynamic stabilization does *not* just mean that capitalist systems need to be kept in permanent motion. Rather, the point here is that this motion follows the principle of incessant increase, i.e. the logic of growth, augmentation and innovation. This, by consequence, leads into a spiral of escalation. No matter how high the gross domestic product has been this year, it needs to be even higher next year, no matter how fast processes (for example in the production of goods and services) or the rates of innovation already are, they need to become even faster – for if they do not, there will be an economic slow-down, followed by a whole array of economic, social and



political crises. Thus, if the rates of increase are to remain about steady, the ensuing substantive growth curves will be exponential. Of course, such curves are well known from graphs that depict the historical growth of the domestic product, the use of raw-materials or the production of waste and emissions. Thus, for example, the Total Real GDP is said to have risen from less than \$1 billion in 1850 to more than \$40 billion in 2010, while at the same time global water use has increased by a factor of five, paper consumption by a factor of 10, the damming of rivers by a factor of 25, transport by a factor of 250, etc. (cf. Steffen et al., 2011).

No doubt, this logic of escalation in the realms of growth, efficiency, technological and scientific innovation and the dynamization of social and cultural life was (and in part still is) closely bound up with the notion of 'progress' as it developed in the Western world since the 18th century. Clearly, something like a 'promise' of dynamization is at work here that itself serves as a motivational attractor in the spiral of escalation, even though the forces of dynamization have always caused a lot of victims among vast segments of the population – at home as well as abroad. Nevertheless, the logic of escalation turns out to be increasingly problematic and crisis-prone the longer it is in operation. This is for at least three reasons.

First, as a matter of mere physical and logical necessity, the higher the level of dynamization achieved, the more energy it takes to raise it even further. This means that the motors of economic appropriation (which includes, of course, the appropriation of natural resources), of cultural acceleration and political activation need to increase their efficiency and output year by year, too. By consequence, it literally gets more and more difficult each year to realize further growth, accumulation and innovation in contexts which already follow an escalatory pace. The energy that needs to be invested to keep the engines going, in the late-modern stage of dynamization, is enormous, and it is at least threefold. First, the machines of growth need to be fed with physical energy. Even a fleeting glance at the amounts of oil, gas, coal, etc., used up – or appropriated – each year in capitalist production will convince everyone that modern societies have reached a level here that might tip the balance soon (Foster et al., 2010).

Also, political collectivities – such as nation-states or the EU – increasingly appear to be monomaniac in their focus on the mustering – or activation – of social energy for the single purpose of dynamization in the sense developed here. From educational policies through labour-market reforms to the recalibration of pension systems, the dominant goal behind investing political and collective energy is always the increase of the domestic product, the securing of competitiveness, the stimulation of innovation, the increase of returns on investment in human capital, and the attraction of capital investment that circulates faster and faster.

Finally, individuals also need to run faster and faster each year 'just to stay in place' (cf. Rosa, 2010: 28f). For them, too, the need to remain competitive in the dynamization-spiral comes at the ever-increasing price of social acceleration. Thus, to sum up, the spiral of dynamization demands an ever higher investment of natural, political and individual energy.

Second, obviously, even when and where late-modern societies are successful in mustering the energy for growth and dynamization, they increasingly run the risk of creating crises or pathologies for those spheres or systems that cannot be appropriated, activated and/or accelerated to the same degree or without damage. This can be seen, first and foremost, in the realm of the ecological crisis, which obviously can be interpreted as a crisis of over-appropriation. The raw materials and natural resources that keep the engines running are not inexhaustible. Quite to the contrary, they are inevitably limited. Even though many of them reproduce, they do not reproduce at the same (and increasing) pace at which we use them up. This is true for trees, fish, oil, etc. What's more, the natural environment *can* dispose of the waste and pollution modern societies produce, but it cannot do so at an ever increasing speed. Thus, the environmental crisis clearly is caused by the fact that nature cannot be dynamized at will – resource depletion, the exhaustion of sinks, pollution and the negative effects of climate change figure as external limits to the social logic of capitalist appropriation and escalation.

This, by mere logic, creates what we would like to call the economic and ecological double crisis of late-modernity. It proves hard enough to keep the appropriating machine, the economic growth engine going – the current financial, debt and economic crises on a global scale are an undeniable testimony for this – but the better capitalist societies are at solving this problem, the worse the consequences for the eco-spheres. As all available figures show clearly enough, it is only when the economy slows down that some very modest steps of progress with respect to ecological sustainability are made (Stern, 2007), and vice versa. Whenever the economy picks up, the ecological problems intensify. Thus, it seems almost inconceivable to solve the ecological and the economic crises simultaneously, for precisely those strategies that aim at overcoming the economic crisis tend to aggravate the ecological crisis.

However, the ecology is not the only realm that appears to suffer 'desynchronization' in the dynamization spiral. All available data suggests that there is a significant and multifarious increase in diseases and somatoform disorders such as burnout, anorexia, etc. These may be read as symptoms of a stress-reaction against the excessive demands impinging on individuals caught in a dynamization-spiral driven by incessant (neoliberal) sociopolitical activation. Thus, the WHO expects that stress-related forms of depression and burnout will be number two among the most widespread diseases worldwide by the year 2020 (see, e.g., Stoppe

et al., 2006). Even now, estimates suggest that more than 20 million people suffer from depression and burnout in Europe alone, with numbers rising, while even those who are not (yet) depressed increasingly turn to psycho-pharmaceutical means of human enhancement (Wittchen and Jacobi, 2006). In other words: the psychological as well as the ecological price to be paid for further dynamization appears to be approaching a crucial tipping-point rather soon. Political activation, so it seems, just as much as economic appropriation, is about to hit certain limits in the psychosocial and physical fabric of human beings.

Third, while it seems to be getting more and more expensive, difficult and problematic to keep the growth-engines going, this is not the only problem. For even where and when the dynamization spiral is still robust, there are unmistakable signs suggesting that it progressively fails to secure societal stabilization. In effect, we can observe new forms of dynamization *without* stabilization. These obtain in places where growth, augmentation and innovation lead to disintegration and exclusion instead of cultural integration and social inclusion. One instance of this, obviously, is the phenomenon of jobless growth, where unemployment figures and precarization of large segments of the workforce rise despite robust growth. However, forms of dynamic social *destabilization* also exist where poverty increases for major segments of the population and where new forms of scarcity arise (and old ones persist) despite a rising gross national product. This is a phenomenon that can be observed in advanced 'Western' societies as well as in the BRICS countries, for example.

In addition, on a global scale, stabilization in some parts of the world, predominantly in the Global North, very often is connected to large-scale destabilization in other parts of the world, usually in the Global South. One striking example of this is the production of smart-phones which play a significant role in late-modern technological, cultural and economic dynamization but which require materials extracted from African soil in a most bloody and brutal manner that is intrinsically built on political and social destabilization. In short, dynamic stabilization is in danger of failing where the mechanisms of social integration and distribution of wealth and labour are significantly distorted despite or, in some cases, even *because of* persistent growth, augmentation and innovation.

In sum, in its late-modern stage, dynamic stabilization has turned fragile in that it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, in that it causes ever more massive external costs (and even pathologies), and in that dynamization fails to stabilize society. Thus, in many respects, the mode of reproduction in late-modern capitalism appears to shift towards *dynamic destabilization*. If this diagnosis is correct, the mode of dynamic stabilization through appropriation, acceleration and activation appears to be in an insurmountable crisis. This calls for a massive overhaul or

transformation of the modern social formation not out of political will or frustration but out of sheer structural necessity. The most pressing question is whether or not the ‘project of modernity’ (Habermas, 1990; Taylor, 1989), in the sense of a liberal, pluralistic, democratic society that values the self-determination and autonomy of individuals as well as political communities, can be saved through a transformation aimed at founding modern society on a non-escalatory mode of stabilization. Such a transformation obviously requires a ‘pacification’ of the engines of economic appropriation, cultural acceleration and political activation in the first place. These engines eventually will be shut off anyway – the only question left open then is whether this will happen by design or by (natural or social) disaster. It is this question we now turn to in the closing section of this contribution.

### Contours of a Post-Growth Society

It might surely be debatable whether or not it is a legitimate undertaking for social scientists to not confine themselves to the analysis of the existing social and cultural fabric but to think of possible alternatives. Yet, it is part of the ‘Jena Project on Dynamic (De-)stabilization’<sup>2</sup> – which forms the shared background from which we are writing – to construct a ‘complex and counterfactual external position’ (cf. Boltanski, 2010: 25) from which the dimensions and the extent of the social transformations needed to overcome the current crises of dynamic stabilization may be identified and assessed. We take this to be a valid and even desirable goal for a contemporary sociology that intends to accept its share of social responsibility (Dörre et al., 2015).

As we implicitly suggested in the closing paragraph of the last section, the real problem of the modern mode of stabilization is not so much its dynamic character but its escalatory tendency. For a *non-dynamic* social formation in the sense of a ‘static’ or ‘stationary’ society (that actively resists and rejects change, innovation and growth) hardly seems attractive from the perspective of late modern societies, let alone from the normative background of the ‘project of modernity’. Hence, what is needed is not a social formation that refuses on principle to grow, expand or innovate (which would be sheer madness in the face of the scarcity that still persists in many parts of the Global South, or in face of the desirability of medical advances or innovations in the field of sustainable technologies, etc.). However, what we are looking for are the contours of a society that *does not need* to grow, augment and innovate *just to maintain the status quo* or to secure its structural reproduction.<sup>3</sup> Putting the challenge this way makes it obvious that we do not mean to contrast dynamic modern society with inert ‘traditional’ societies. For on the one hand, many or even most of the so-called traditional societies were highly dynamic and adaptive without operating in a mode of

dynamic stabilization. Therefore, a lot of inspiration for possible post-growth institutions might be gained from them (cf. Simpson, 2011 or Alfred, 2009). Furthermore, since escalation in modern society is the dominant mode of maintaining the status quo, there is a deep-rooted structural inertia behind the apparent dynamism of modern institutions (Virilio, 1998; Rosa, 2013). In this perspective, again, flexibility might be regained through inspiration from so-called indigenous societies.

Looking for the contours of a post-growth society, therefore, is not to deny the possibility or desirability of dynamic developments whenever there is a social need (or desire) for it. That is why we speak of *post-growth* rather than *degrowth* society. Whether or not a society actually achieves economic growth or high levels of innovation and augmentation conceptually is completely independent of whether or not it functions in the mode of dynamic stabilization.

Thus, it certainly is no valid objection against our sociological undertaking to point to the multiple pathologies that ravage the contemporary Greek or Spanish societies as consequences of factual economic degrowth. What these countries witness right now are the crises of degrowth in societies based on the mode of dynamic stabilization. The challenge is to explore the basic institutional structures of a new social formation beyond that mode, i.e. beyond the escalatory logics, and of the transformations needed to get there. As a first and most significant step, obviously, this involves understanding and tackling the mechanisms of economic appropriation, cultural acceleration and political activation, for as long as these 'motors' keep operating in their current mode, alternative forms of stabilization are unthinkable.

The Jena Project is based on the conviction that such a transformation is only possible when it comes as a complex reform simultaneously enacting a multidimensional revision (if not revolution) of several basic structural features of the current social formation that aims precisely at slowing down these three engines driving the spiral of escalation. As a very preliminary sketch of such a reform, we propose that these revisions ought to encompass the following points.

First, as we have argued above, all known varieties of capitalism are growth-dependent, and they operate through the logic of incessant appropriation of hitherto non-commodified areas of life. Capital accumulation, so far, inevitably necessitates all three elements of escalation, i.e. growth, augmentation and innovation. Hence a post-growth society necessarily requires a reform of the economic system that turns appropriation from a mandatory necessity into a socioeconomic possibility by 're-embedding' the economy within the cultural and political world. Something of this sort was suggested, for example, by Karl Polanyi (2001), whose ideas are taken up now by, among others, Nancy Fraser (2011). For it is only through such a re-embedding that the desirability (or not) of growth, expansion, enhancement or innovation can be

evaluated. This, in turn, requires the realization of new forms of *economic democracy* (Meiksins Wood, 1995) which do not completely renounce markets and competition but which are capable of putting their escalatory tendencies on a leash. We are far from being able to present a coherent and viable model of economic democracy at this point, but we are capable of presenting some of its essential elements.

First and foremost, economic democracy requires workers and citizens to have a say in strategic investments as well as in the forms and ends of production (and consumption). Obviously, such forms of participation need to be enacted on at least four levels of the social fabric. First, workers need to be empowered to participate in decisions *at their immediate workplace*. Second, economic democracy implies that workers have a chance to participate in decision-making at the level of companies and enterprises as a whole. Furthermore, the possibility of putting the brakes on the engine of capitalist appropriation requires democratic control of economic governance at the national and regional level – and finally, of course, new democratic institutions capable of steering economic rules and regulations on the global level as well.

If participatory economic democracy is to become a real possibility, it necessarily involves some enhanced forms of public control – or ownership – of specific economic sectors such as banks and finance or energy, but it also requires the ‘de-precarization’ of large segments of the labour force. For those who are excluded from the labour markets altogether, or who are at the verge of (partial or temporary or social) exclusion, hardly find the time and the means and the freedom to participate in emancipatory forms of economic democracy. And furthermore, it might well turn out that the distributional patterns of wealth and work, including care work (between social classes and between the sexes), need to become much more egalitarian for economic democracy to become a viable option. But by all means, what is needed for participatory economic democracy to function is a sufficient time budget for individuals to embark on democratic decision-making. If one of the key elements of ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch, 2004) is the chronic shortage of time for political decision-makers vis-à-vis the markets as well as for individuals to politically participate altogether (Rosa and Scheuerman, 2009), then the securing of a solid time budget for workers and citizens that is resistant against the demands from economic competition must be one of the key concerns for any form of economic democracy.

Secondly, what is needed is a complete overhaul of the social policies and the welfare-state institutions of modern societies. In fact, their whole vocabulary and their embedded logics are based on the principle of capitalist accumulation which produces the added value that can then partly be redistributed. This accumulation process, in turn, is based on a relentless process of political activation of individual and collective actors through institutions, programs and regulations geared towards the



continuous enhancement of human productive forces. If there is one common denominator of the worldwide ‘neoliberal’ restructuring of welfare institutions and programs, it would surely be the logic of political activation through individualized economic and social responsibility. In order to cut off the productivistic logics of activating policies that fuel the growth engine of late-capitalist societies, one widely discussed possibility is the introduction of an unconditional basic income (Van Parijs, 1995). This idea, albeit being only one element of a multi-faceted anti-productivist reform agenda in social policies, would be a fundamental step on the way towards eliminating a fundamental force of societal dynamization: individuals’ structural compulsion to opt for the commodification of their labour force, the imperative for people to engage in an ever increasing market competition in order to generate a steady return on their investments in ‘human capital’. Together with the complementary project of an unconditional ‘basic time’ – i.e. the social right, warranted by a radical reduction of working time, to individually command and sovereignly dispose of one’s own use of (life) time (Schäfer, 2011) – the concept of a basic income could be a cornerstone for the social constitution of a post-growth society: its guiding idea and its institutional foundation.

Thirdly, a social transformation towards a non-escalatory mode of stabilization is inconceivable as long as the social, political and cultural yardstick for well-being and prosperity remains tied to the manifestations of quantitative and economic growth and of increases in the range of options and opportunities. In fact, the *cultural* program of social acceleration is driven by the subjective as well as collective desire to increase one’s ‘share of the world’, or one’s reach over the world’s potentialities, and to maximize one’s command of resources (cf. Blumenberg, 1986; Rosa, 2013: ch. VIII.2). What is needed, therefore, is a new debate about the social preconditions of the ‘good life’ and the obstacles hindering subjects from having one. One suggestion we are pursuing in this respect is the idea of reviving the concept of alienation to pinpoint acceleration-based causes for a *bad life* in late-modern societies. The enforced logics of incessant increase and acceleration, so the argument goes, inevitably produces experiences of a silent, non-answering, even hostile (competitive) world, while non-alienated, positive modes of experience are characterized by responsive relationships towards the social, the material and the natural world. Alienation’s ‘other’, then, is no longer ‘human nature’, ‘true needs’, ‘authenticity’ or autonomy, but moments of ‘*resonance*’ (Rosa, 2012a, 2012b).

Resonating relationships with other human beings, but also with nature, or in work, however, are *time-demanding* relationships. It takes time to truly appropriate segments of the world and to establish and maintain ties that can serve as ‘axes of resonance’. An axis of resonance, then, is a non-alienated relationship that is truly significant for the

subject; a relationship that ‘speaks’ to him or her. Late-modern individuals tend to find such axes in their families or in intimate friendships, but also at the workplace, in art or in nature. *Burnout*, by contrast, appears to be a psychological state which is marked by a significant absence of any form of resonance. The world turns deaf, mute and cold. Thus the concept of resonance could provide a viable pathway for the conceptual decoupling of well-being and growth, and hence for shutting off the motor of social acceleration, and it has the advantage of being compatible with the current debate on ‘*buen vivir*’ emanating from Latin America.

Finally, the envisioned transformation towards a post-growth society needs to be accomplished by democratic means, if such a society aspires to stick to the value-horizon of the project of modernity. This, though it might seem to be obvious, is perhaps the most difficult of all the points listed here, for on the one hand, it is hard to see a democratic political subject that could accomplish such a complex (and simultaneous) reform. As Colin Crouch (2004) and others have argued, there are unmistakable signs of a decline in the legitimacy and efficiency of democratic institutions in the contemporary Western world. At least in part, this decline appears to be due to the logic of dynamic stabilization itself, since the imperatives of appropriation and activation appear to spiral out of democratic control by taking on the guise of ‘TINA’ principles – those to which ‘There Is No Alternative’ – but also since democracy functions by its own, inherent time structures that cannot be accelerated at will, or perhaps not at all (Rosa and Scheuerman, 2009).

On the other hand, it is unlikely that democratic constituencies would be inclined to follow such a path given the vast social inequalities that persist between the so-called ‘developed countries’ and many countries of the Global South – and *within* rich as well as poor societies, too. Not tackling inequality, therefore, obviously would mean that a transition towards a sustainable, non-escalatory mode of stabilization will remain a utopia (Jackson, 2009). Re-distribution under conditions of (involuntary) degrowth or (deliberate) post-growth, however, will be an enormous challenge for all possible forms of democracy. An analytic point of departure here could possibly be found in the ongoing structural transformation of democratic public spheres (Fraser, 2010). It remains to be investigated whether social conflicts over the escalatory logic of capitalist socialization could possibly set the stage for the emergence of counter-publics and movements that in turn could become catalysts of a new social order and possibly even a more far-reaching democratization of social relations (Chavel, 2006).

Obviously, it is hard to see how such an agenda for social transformation could be enacted in the face of globally interconnected economies and technologies. Surely, no national society could overcome the

escalatory capitalist tendencies on its own, while at the same time there is a marked absence of supranational or global instruments to counterbalance them, too. Nevertheless, there is a growing global understanding of the need for change – and a multitude of social movements and experiments setting out to explore the potential of alternative ways of living and producing. For example, 25 years after the publication of Philippe van Parijs's seminal paper 'Why Surfers Should Be Fed' (1991), the idea of an unconditional basic income, of an unconditional autonomy allowance, or of an extensive social infrastructure free for everyone to use has gained hold in many social groups and movements all over the world up to a point where it has entered the minds of politicians in mainstream parties in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America (Widerquist et al., 2013). It is discussed and proposed in many variants, and very often connected to movements for *decroissance*, *degrowth* and *decreisement*, and it often connects to protest-groups like Occupy or the Spanish *Indignados* or the French *Convivialistes* who seek new forms of democratic political participation, too. Furthermore, ideas and movements such as this link up with new conceptions and new practices of share economy and experiments with new forms of property and commonality. These are by no means confined to Europe or North America. Quite to the contrary, movements, ideas and discourses emanating from various indigenous groups inspire political programs, for example, in Latin America, where conceptions of *buen vivir* have entered governmental policies in Ecuador or Bolivia (Acosta, 2013), or in Bhutan, where the idea of gross national happiness trumps the requirements of the gross national product (Bates, 2009) – at least ideologically.

Thus, it seems, social practice in many ways is ahead of discourse in the social sciences. What is dearly needed by any means, however, is an attractive vision of what the shape of a post-growth society could look like; a vision that could provide something like a motivating beacon for all those movements and experiments. To be sure, we are very far from having a clear outline either of the structures and institutions of a post-growth society or of a viable path for the transformations needed to get there. Yet, what is striking in the preliminary and still very vague suggestions outlined so far is that they all seem to converge in the dimension of *time* as a starting point for the 'pacification' of the incessant engines of appropriation, acceleration and activation and the ensuing logics of escalation. Future discussions will have to explore the possibilities and the limits of a corresponding new politics of time. The sole purpose of the present paper was to point out the necessity of overcoming the current mode of dynamic stabilization through appropriation, activation and acceleration for modern societies to survive in the long run – and to start the sociological discussion about the ways and means of getting there.

## Notes

1. One important analysis of capitalist Landnahme comes from Karl Marx. In his reflection on the so-called original accumulation of capital (Marx, 1973: 741 ff.) he reconstructs the emergence of capitalism in a non-capitalist environment. According to Marx, the formation of capitalist property and class relations historically precedes the capitalist mode of production. The dispossession of the peasantry is the pivotal precondition for the genesis of the free 'wage worker' who is free in a twofold sense, with no ties to land or guilds. Marx describes this process, which is complemented on its downside by the monopolization of the means of production in the hands of a small group of owners, as an utterly brutal process involving peasant clearances, violent expropriation of community lands, the theft of church property, colonial oppression, and the slave trade. Although Marx polemically aggravates this brutality (Thompson, 1980), his deliberations continue to be valuable for a heuristics of contemporary processes of Landnahme.
2. Or, to put it in the terms of Margret Archer: What we are looking for are the contours of a society that does not hide its fundamental *morphostasis* behind a veil of frenetic *morphogenesis* (Archer, 1995, 2012).
3. The authors jointly direct an international Research Group, 'Landnahme, Acceleration, Activation: Dynamics and (De)stabilization of Modern Growth Societies', financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation – DFG). Its funding has just been renewed for another four years, at the end of which the authors propose to deliver a compass for possible transformations into a post-growth society where the *Triple-A-Engines* will be pacified.

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**Hartmut Rosa** is a Professor of Sociology at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, and Director of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Study at Erfurt University.

**Klaus Dörre** is a Professor of Sociology at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena. He specializes in the sociology of labour as well as industrial and economic sociology.

**Stephan Lessenich** is a Professor of Sociology at Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, Germany, and President of the German Sociological Association. Jointly, the authors run a Research Consortium on Post-Growth Societies in Jena and have published *Sociology, Capitalism, Critique* (Verso, 2015).