HIGH-SPEED SOCIETY
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SOCIAL ACCELERATION, POWER, AND MODERNITY

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SOCIAL ACCELERATION: ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF A DESYNCHRONIZED HIGH-SPEED SOCIETY

Hartmut Rosa

I. Social Acceleration in the Process of Modernization

In 1999, James Gleick, exploring everyday life in contemporary American society, noted the “acceleration of just about everything”: love, life, speech, politics, work, TV, leisure, etc.¹ In this observation he certainly is not alone. In popular as well as scientific discourse about the current evolution of Western societies, acceleration figures as the single most striking and important feature.² But despite the noticeable increase in the discourse about acceleration and the shortage of time in recent years, the feeling that history, culture, society, or even “time itself” in some strange way accelerates is not new at all; it seems to be a constitutive trait of modernity as such. As historians such as Reinhart Koselleck have persuasively argued, the general sense of a speedup has accompanied modern society since at least the middle of the eighteenth century.³ And indeed, as many have observed and

3. Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). Koselleck demonstrates that complaints about the overwhelming speed of modern history start well before the French Revolution and long before there is a noticeable development of technological speed. The discourse on acceleration then periodically peaks again and again during the following centuries. For example, in 1877 W. G. Greg observed
empirical evidence clearly suggests, the history of modernity seems to be characterized by a wide-ranging speedup of all kinds of technological, economic, social, and cultural processes and by a picking up of the general pace of life. In terms of its structural and cultural impact on modern society, this change in the temporal structures and patterns of modernity appears to be just as pervasive as comparable processes of individualization or rationalization. Like them, it seems, social acceleration is not a steady process but evolves in waves (most often brought about by new technologies or forms of socioeconomic organization), with each new wave meeting considerable resistance as well as partial reversals. Most often, a wave of acceleration is followed by a rise in the “discourse of acceleration,” in which cries for deceleration in the name of human needs and values are voiced but eventually die down.4

However, contrary to the other constitutive features of the modernization process, which have all been the object of extensive analysis—individualization, rationalization, differentiation (both functional and structural), and the instrumental domestication of nature—the concept of acceleration still lacks a clear and workable definition and a systematic sociological analysis. Within systematic theories of modernity or modernization, acceleration is virtually absent, with the notable exception of Paul Virilio’s “dromological” approach to history, which, alas, hardly amounts to a theory. This surprising absence in the face of the empirical and discursive omnipresence of processes of acceleration is arguably a reflection of the neglect of the temporal dimension and processual nature of society in twentieth-century sociological theory—a neglect noted by many authors, most famously perhaps by Anthony Giddens and Niklas Luhmann.5 In the history of sociology, modernization has mainly been analyzed from four different perspectives,
prevalent, for example, in the works of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and Marx, respectively: culture, social structure, personality type, and relation to nature. From these perspectives, or material dimensions, the process of modernization is identifiable as a process of rationalization, differentiation, individualization, or instrumental domestication, respectively (fig. 1).

My claim here is that we cannot adequately understand the nature and character of modernity and the logic of its structural and cultural development unless we add the temporal perspective to our analysis. Of course, the temporal dimension runs across the four material dimensions of society and cannot neatly be separated from them in phenomenological terms; there is no “social time” independent of these dimensions. The dominant changes in them are closely linked to the cardinal change in temporal patterns (acceleration), which alternatingly appears as their cause or their effect. In fact, it can be argued that many instances are actually driven by the logic of acceleration. As I will briefly try to demonstrate in the closing section of

6. This conceptualization of sociological attempts to grapple with processes of modernization is suggested by Hans van der Loo and Willem van Reijen in Modernisierung. Projekt und Paradox, 2nd ed. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1997), loosely adhering to Talcott Parsons’s (notoriously static) outline of a “general system of action.”
this chapter, the drive toward social acceleration in modern societies might
in fact be so overriding that we might actually find phenomena of de-
differentiation and deindividualization in cases where differentiation and
individualization have become hindrances to social acceleration.

Interestingly, Van der Loo and Van Reijen state that for each of the four
central processes of modernization there is a paradoxical flipside that has
also frequently been the focus of social analysis. For example, individual-
ization goes hand in hand with the evolution of “mass culture,” the result
of rationalization could be imprisonment in a thoroughly irrational “iron
cage” (doomed to economic growth even when the only scarcity is the scarcity
of scarcity), and the instrumental control and domination of nature could
lead to a backlash in which manmade natural disasters wipe out our entire
civilization. And sure enough, such a flipside is evident for social accelera-
tion as well. Hence, no analysis of social acceleration will be complete
unless it takes into account those strange corresponding phenomena of
social deceleration and slowdown that have become particularly visible toward
the turn of the twenty-first century, with the rise of theories of “hyperac-
celeration,” “turbo-capitalism,” and the “digital speed revolution” on the one
hand, and conceptions of “polar inertia,” the “end of history,” the “closing
of the future,” and the sclerotic inescapability of the “iron cage” on the
other. From the latter perspective, all the apparent speed and transforma-
tion of society appear to be only changes on the “user surface,” beneath
which processes of paralysis and sclerosis predominate.

But what is social acceleration? Does it refer to an acceleration of society
itself, or does it only capture accelerating processes within (a static) soci-
ety? In what sense can we talk of social acceleration in the singular, when
all we see is a host of possibly unrelated processes of acceleration, such as
in sports, fashion, video editing, transport, and job succession, as well as
some phenomena of social deceleration? In the following I present an ana-
lytic framework that will allow, at least in principle, a theoretically thorough

well, 1998), 117–33; Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Free
Press, 1992); Jean Baudrillard, The Illusion of the End (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Charles
Taylor, “Marx statt Tocqueville: Über Identität, Entfremdung und die Konsequenzen des
11. September: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa and Arto Laitinen,” Deutsche Zeitschrift für

8. Lothar Baier, Keine Zeit! 18 Versuche über die Beschleunigung (Munich: A. Kunstmann,
2000). This sense is strongly expressed in the novels of Douglas Coupland too. I have explored
this at length in “Am Ende der Geschichte: Die Generation ’X’ zwischen Globalisierung und
Desintegration,” in Neustart des Weltlaufs? Fiktion und Faszination der Zeitenwende, ed. Karsten
Fischer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).
and empirically justifiable (or at least contestable) definition of what it could mean for a society to accelerate and of the ways in which Western societies can be understood as acceleration societies.

II. What Is Social Acceleration?

It is obvious that contrary to Gleick’s observation of the “acceleration of just about everything,” there is no single, universal pattern of acceleration that speeds up everything. To the contrary, many things slow down, like traffic in a traffic jam, while others stubbornly resist all attempts to make them go faster, like the common cold. Nevertheless, there are certainly a great many social phenomena to which the concept of acceleration can properly be applied. Athletes seem to be running and swimming faster and faster, computers compute at ever-higher speeds, transport and communication need only a fraction of the time they took a century ago, people appear to sleep less and less (some scientists have found that the average sleeping time has decreased by two hours since the nineteenth century and by thirty minutes since the 1970s9), and even our neighbors seem to move in and out of their apartments more frequently.

But even if we can prove these changes are not accidental but follow a systematic pattern, is there anything these very different processes have in common so that they can be brought under the one concept of social acceleration? Not directly, I want to claim. Rather, when we look more closely at this range of phenomena, it becomes apparent that we can separate them into three analytically as well as empirically distinct categories, which I will present in the rest of this section. In the next section, I will explore the connection between the different spheres of acceleration and the mechanisms or motors that lie behind them. In the fourth section, I will discuss some problems for the sociological analysis of “acceleration societies” that arise from the fact that we have to account for a range of social phenomena that remain constant or even decelerate. I will then discuss some of the most pressing and transformative political and ethical consequences of social acceleration before returning in the conclusion to the problem of the proper conceptualization of the process of modernization.

1. Technological Acceleration

The first, most obvious, and most measurable form of acceleration is the speeding up of intentional, goal-directed processes of transport, communication, and production that can be defined as “technological acceleration.” Although it is not always easy to measure the average speed of these processes, the general tendency in this realm is undeniable. Thus, the speed of communication is said to have increased by $10^7$, the speed of personal transport by $10^2$, and the speed of data processing by $10^6$.\(^\text{10}\)

It is predominantly this aspect of acceleration that is at the center of Paul Virilio’s “dromology,” a narrative of historical acceleration that proceeds from the revolution in transport to that in transmission and finally to the “transplantation” revolution dawning in the emergent possibilities of biotechnology.\(^\text{11}\) The effects of technological acceleration on social reality are certainly tremendous. For example, the “natural” (that is, anthropological) priority of space over time in human perception (rooted in our sense organs and the effects of gravity, which allow for an immediate distinction of “above” and “below,” “in front of” and “behind,” but not “sooner” and “later”) seems to have been inverted: in the age of globalization of the Internet, time is increasingly conceived as compressing or even annihilating space.\(^\text{12}\) Space, it seems, virtually “contracts” and loses its significance for orientation in the late modern world. Processes and developments are no longer located, and locations become “non-lieux,” without history, identity, or relation.\(^\text{13}\)

2. Acceleration of Social Change

Whereas phenomena of the first category can be described as acceleration processes within society, the phenomena of this second category can be classified as accelerations of society itself. When novelists, scientists, and journalists since the eighteenth century have observed the dynamization of Western culture, society, or history—and sometimes of time itself—\(^\text{14}\) they

have been concerned not so much with the spectacular technological advancements as with the (often simultaneous) accelerated processes of social change that rendered social constellations and structures as well as patterns of action and orientation unstable and ephemeral. The underlying idea is that rates of change themselves are changing. Thus, attitudes and values as well as fashions and lifestyles, social relations and obligations as well as groups, classes, or milieus, social languages as well as forms of practice and habits, are said to change at ever-increasing rates. This has led Arjun Appadurai to replace the symbolization of the social world as consisting of stable social aggregates that can be localized on maps with the idea of fluid, flickering screens representing cultural flows that only occasionally crystallize into “ethno-, techno-, finan-, media- and ideoscapes.”

However, empirically measuring rates of social change remains an unresolved challenge. There is little agreement in sociology as to what the relevant indicators of change are and when alterations or variations actually constitute a genuine or “basic” social change. Here sociology might avail itself of approaches developed in social philosophy. The German philosopher Hermann Lübbe claims that Western societies experience what he calls the “contraction of the present” (Gegenwartsschrumpfung) as a consequence of the accelerating rates of cultural and social innovation. His measure is as simple as it is instructive: for Lübbe, the past is defined as that which no longer holds/is no longer valid, while the future denotes that which does not yet hold/is not yet valid. The present, then, is the time span for which (to use an idea developed by Reinhart Koselleck) the horizons of experience and expectation coincide. Only within these time spans of relative stability can we draw on past experiences to orient our actions and infer conclusions from the past with regard to the future. Only within these time spans is there some certainty of orientation, evaluation, and expectation. In other words, social acceleration is defined by an increase in the decay rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by the contraction of

17. See chapter 9 of this volume.
the time spans definable as the “present.” Now, according to Lübbe, we can apply this measure of stability and change to social and cultural institutions and practices of all kinds: the present contracts in the political as well as the occupational, the technological as well as the aesthetic, the normative as well as the scientific or cognitive dimensions—that is, in cultural as well as in structural respects.

But how could we verify this empirically? There seems to be fairly general agreement in the social sciences that the basic structures of society are those that organize the processes of production and reproduction. For Western societies since the early modern period, these have essentially included the family and the occupational system. And in fact, most studies of social change focus on exactly these domains, along with political institutions and technology. I will later turn to the question of how technological and social change, and hence technological acceleration and the acceleration of social change, are interrelated. For the moment I want to suggest that change in these two realms—family and work—has accelerated from an intergenerational pace in early modern society to a generational pace in “classical” modernity to an intragenerational pace in late modernity. Thus, the ideal-typical family structure in agrarian society tended to remain stable over the centuries, with generational turnover leaving the basic structure intact. In classical modernity, this structure was built to last for just a generation: it was organized around a couple and tended to disperse with the death of the couple. In late modernity, there is a growing tendency for family life cycles to last less than an individual lifespan: increasing rates of divorce and remarriage are the most obvious evidence for this.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, in the world of work, in premodern societies the father’s occupation was inherited by the son—again, potentially over many generations. In classical modernity, occupational structures tended to change with generations: sons (and daughters) were free to choose their own profession, but they generally chose only once, that is, for a lifetime. In late modernity, occupations no longer extend over the whole of a work life; jobs change at a higher rate than generations.\textsuperscript{19}

If we try to formulate the argument more generally, the stability of social institutions and practices could serve as a yardstick for the acceleration (or deceleration) of social change. In the work of authors like Peter Wagner and Beck, Giddens, and Lash, theoretical as well as empirical support can

\textsuperscript{18} Laslett, “Social Structural Time,” 33.
be found for the thesis that institutional stability is generally on the decline in late modern societies. In a sense, the whole discourse about postmodernity and contingency hinges on this idea, although for now it is only meant to serve as a starting point for future empirical research.

3. Acceleration of the Pace of Life

Interestingly, there is a third type of acceleration in Western societies that is neither logically nor causally entailed by the first two, but rather seems, at least at first glance, paradoxical with respect to technological acceleration. The “acceleration of the pace of (social) life, which has been postulated again and again in the process of modernity (e.g., by Simmel or, more recently, by Robert Levine), is the central focus of much of the discussion about cultural acceleration and the alleged need for deceleration. Now, if we assume that the “pace of life”—an admittedly fuzzy concept—refers to the speed and compression of actions and experiences in everyday life, it is hard to see how it relates to technological acceleration. Since the latter describes the decrease of the time needed to carry out everyday processes and actions of production and reproduction, communication and transport, it should entail an increase in free time, which in turn would slow down the pace of life. If less time is needed, time should become abundant. But if, quite to the contrary, time becomes more and more scarce, this is a paradoxical effect that calls for a sociological explanation.

But first we must be able to measure the pace of life. In my view, attempts to do so could follow a subjective or an objective approach, with


22. For a very interesting economic explanation, see Staaden B. Linder, The Harried Leisure Class (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970). I take up some of his arguments in the following.

23. American sociologist Robert Levine and his team recently conducted a cross-cultural comparative empirical study in which three indicators for the speed of life were used: the speed of walking in inner cities; the time it takes to buy a stamp in a post office; and the exactness of public clocks. For a number of reasons I have discussed at length elsewhere, this approach can at best serve as a very rough preliminary attempt. See “Temporalstrukturen in der Spätmoderne: Vom Wunsch nach Beschleunigung und der Sehnsucht nach Langsamkeit: Ein Literaturüberblick in gesellschaftstheoretischer Absicht,” Handlung, Kultur, Interpretation 10, no. 2 (20001): 335–81. It certainly remains very unsatisfactory as an instrument in a thorough sociological analysis of the temporal structures of late modernity.
the most promising route probably being a combination of the two. On the subjective side, an acceleration of the speed of life (as against the speed of life itself) is likely to have effects on individuals’ experience of time: it will cause people to consider time as scarce, to feel hurried and under time pressure and stress. Typically, people will feel that time goes by faster than before and they will complain that “everything” goes too fast; they will worry that they might not be able to keep up with the pace of social life. Hence, the fact that this complaint has accompanied modernity ever since the eighteenth century does not prove that the speed of life was high all the time—in fact it does not help to determine the speed of life at all—but it does hint at its continuous acceleration. As we might expect, recent studies indicate that in fact people in Western societies do feel under heavy time pressure and they do complain about the scarcity of time. These feelings seem to have increased over recent decades, making plausible the argument that the “digital revolution” and the processes of globalization amount to yet another wave of social acceleration.

On the objective side, an acceleration of the speed of life can be measured in two ways. First, it should lead to a measurable contraction of the time spent on definable episodes or “units” of action like eating, sleeping, going for a walk, playing, talking to one’s family, etc., since acceleration implies that we do more things in less time. This is a domain where time-use studies are of the highest importance. And in fact, some studies have found plenty of evidence for this: thus, for example, there appears to be a clear tendency to eat faster, sleep less, and communicate less with our families than our ancestors did. Nevertheless, one needs to be very careful with such results—first, because the data for longitudinal time-use studies are extremely limited; second, because we always find counterinstances (such as that the time fathers spend with their children in at least some sections of Western societies is clearly increasing) without being able to adequately determine the significance of these findings; and third, because it is frequently unclear what drives the measured accelerations (for example, that people on average sleep less today than previous generations might simply


25. It thus remains rather doubtful that John P. Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey’s diagnosis of the beginning of “The Great American Slowdown” can be confirmed by further investigation. See *American Demographics* 18, no. 6 (1996): 42–48. In January 2002, Robinson confirmed to the author by personal communication that he didn’t yet have conclusive evidence in either direction.

be attributable to the fact that they reach an older age and don’t work as hard physically). The second way to objectively explore the acceleration of the pace of life consists in measuring the social tendency to “compress” actions and experiences, that is, to do and experience more within a given period of time by reducing the pauses and intervals or by doing more things simultaneously, like cooking, watching TV, and making a phone call.\textsuperscript{27}

III. What Drives Social Acceleration?

When we look for the social forces that drive the wheels of acceleration, it becomes necessary to rethink the connection between the three spheres of acceleration discussed so far. The major problem here lies in the paradox of the simultaneity of technological acceleration (1) and the increasing scarcity of time (3). If free time decreases in spite of technological acceleration, the only possible explanation is that the quantum of work itself has changed, or, more precisely, has risen faster than the corresponding technological rate of acceleration. Thus, free time is produced when the technological acceleration rate is above the rate of growth, where “growth” refers to all kinds of time-consuming actions and processes. Conversely, time becomes scarce when growth rates are higher than the acceleration rates. For example, when between two points in time (t1, t2) the speed of transport increases by the factor 4, and the average distance crossed in a given period of time rises by the factor 2, half of the time used for transport at t1 is available as “free time” at t2. However, if the speed rate only doubles between t1 and t2 whereas the distance crossed rises by the factor 4, twice as much time is needed for transport; hence, at t2 twice as many time resources are needed: time gets scarce. The same holds for processes of production, communication, and so on. It is important to note that growth and acceleration are neither logically nor causally interconnected, since only the acceleration of constant processes logically entails a corresponding augmentation, whereas processes of transport, communication, or production are not necessarily constant. Hence, we should apply the term “acceleration society” to a society if and only if technological acceleration and the growing scarcity of time (that is, an acceleration of the pace of life) occur simultaneously, that is, if growth rates outgrow acceleration rates.

\textsuperscript{27} See also Friederike Benthaus-Apel, Zwischen Zeitbindung und Zeitautonomie: Eine empirische Analyse der Zeitverwendung und Zeitstruktur der Werktags- und Wochenendfreizeit (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 1995).
Now this, interestingly, is one way in which the acceleration of the pace of life and technological acceleration are interconnected: technological acceleration can be seen as a social answer to the problem of scarce time, that is, to the acceleration of the pace of life. Examining the causal relations between the three spheres of social acceleration reveals a surprising feedback loop: technological acceleration, which is frequently connected to the introduction of new technologies (like the steam engine, the railway, the automobile, the telegraph, the computer, the Internet), almost inevitably brings about a whole range of changes in social practices, communication structures, and corresponding forms of life. For example, the Internet has not only increased the speed of communicative exchange and the virtualization of economic and productive processes; it has also established new occupational, economic, and communicative structures, opening up new patterns of social interaction and even new forms of social identity.\(^{28}\) Hence, it is easy to see how and why technological acceleration is prone to go hand in hand with the acceleration of change in the form of changing social structures and patterns, orientations, and evaluations of action. Furthermore, if the acceleration of social change entails a contraction of the present in the sense discussed above, this naturally leads to an acceleration in the pace of life. The explanation for this is to be found in the “slippery-slope” phenomenon, well known in the realm of capitalist production: the capitalist cannot pause and rest, stop the race, and secure his position, since he either goes up or goes down; there is no point of equilibrium because standing still is equivalent to falling behind, as Marx and Weber pointed out. Similarly, in a society with accelerated rates of social change in all spheres of life, individuals always feel that they stand on a slippery slope: taking a prolonged break means becoming old-fashioned, outdated, anachronistic in one’s experience and knowledge, one’s equipment and clothing, one’s orientations, and even one’s language.\(^ {29}\) Thus, people feel pressed to keep up with the speed of change they experience in their social and technological world in order to avoid the loss of potentially valuable options and connections (Anschlußmöglichkeiten). This problem is aggravated by the fact that in a world of incessant change it gets increasingly difficult to tell which options will eventually turn out to be valuable. Hence, accelerated social change will in turn lead to an acceleration of the pace of life. And finally, as we saw


29. Thus, elderly people in Western society are frequently unable to understand the “technobabble” the young use when talking about their Game Boys, e-mails, DVDs, etc.
at the outset, new forms of technological acceleration will be called for to speed up the processes of productive and everyday life. Thus, the acceleration cycle is a closed, self-propelling process (fig. 2).

Yet the acceleration cycle by itself is not sufficient to explain the inherent dynamics of Western societies, or to understand its origins and the specific ways in which the logic and dynamic of speed and growth are interwoven. When looking for the driving forces of acceleration beyond the feedback cycle itself, one finds that there are three (analytically independent) primary factors that can be identified as the external key accelerators behind the three dimensions of social acceleration. In each of them, the logics of growth and speed are connected in a particular way characteristic of one of the dimensions of social acceleration.

1. The Economic Motor

The most obvious source of social acceleration in Western societies is, of course, capitalism. Within a capitalist economy, labor time figures as a crucial factor of production, such that saving time is equivalent to making (relative) profit, as expressed in Benjamin Franklin’s famous equation of time and money. Also, time leads over competitors in the introduction of new technologies or products are a key element of market competition because they allow for crucial extra profits before competitors catch up. Finally, the accelerated reproduction of invested capital is crucial with respect to what Marx called the “moral consumption” of technology and to the credit system. As a consequence, the circle of production, distribution, and consumption constantly accelerates. This certainly explains the restless competition for technological acceleration in capitalist societies. In short, the functioning of the capitalist system rests on the accelerating circulation of goods and capital in a growth-oriented society. Thus, the logic of capitalism connects growth with acceleration in the need to increase production (growth) as well as productivity (which can be defined in terms of time as output per unit time).

It is therefore not surprising that many authors concerned with the problem of social acceleration have attributed not only technological but all forms of acceleration to capitalism.30 However, this assumption of enforced

capitalist acceleration by itself seems insufficient to explain a whole range of acceleration phenomena in dimensions two and three (see fig. 2), some of which reveal that processes of acceleration are by no means always or even usually enforced by competition, but are frequently associated with eudaimonistic or even eschatological undertones.\footnote{This is where the cultural motor of acceleration comes in, a motor that seems indispensable for explaining the very success of capitalist forms of production.}

2. The Cultural Motor

The acceleration of social change in Western societies is indissolubly linked to the dominant cultural ideals of modernity. These have gradually shifted the balance between tradition and innovation toward the priority of change, such that “real life,” as Friedrich Ancillon observed in 1828, is to be sought in “change for the sake of change.”\footnote{Now, without denying that the evolution of industrial and capitalist forms of production and the accompanying social practices played a key role in the institutionalization of this idea, it is important to see that its roots reach further back. The ideal formulated by Ancillon is the consequence of a conception of life in which the good life is the fulfilled life, a life that is rich in experiences and developed capacities. This dominant modern cultural ideal evolved in the secularization of time and of conceptions of human happiness, analyzed at length by Hans Blumenberg and more recently by Marianne Gronemeyer and Gerhard Schulze.\footnote{The idea of the fulfilled life no longer supposes a “higher life” waiting for us after death, but rather consists in realizing as many options as possible in this world.}} Now, without denying that the evolution of industrial and capitalist forms of production and the accompanying social practices played a key role in the institutionalization of this idea, it is important to see that its roots reach further back. The ideal formulated by Ancillon is the consequence of a conception of life in which the good life is the fulfilled life, a life that is rich in experiences and developed capacities. This dominant modern cultural ideal evolved in the secularization of time and of conceptions of human happiness, analyzed at length by Hans Blumenberg and more recently by Marianne Gronemeyer and Gerhard Schulze.\footnote{The idea of the fulfilled life no longer supposes a “higher life” waiting for us after death, but rather consists in realizing as many options as possible in this world.}

31. The clearest expression of the “eudaimonism of speed” is probably Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto, where speed is celebrated as a glorious new, omnipresent, and immortal goddess. See chapter 2 of this volume.

32. “Everything has begun to move, or has been set in motion, and with the intention or under the pretense of fulfilling and completing everything, everything is placed in question, doubted, and approaches a general transformation. The love of movement in itself, without purpose and without specific end, has emerged and developed out of the movement of the time. In it, and in it alone, one seeks and sets real life” (quod in Koselleck, Futures Past, 251). It is remarkable how closely these observations resemble Marx and Engels’ famous passage from the Communist Manifesto, where “all that is solid melts into air.” However, whereas in the Manifesto this transformation appears to be simply an unintended by-product of economic relations, Ancillon (and Koselleck) point out that it is also driven by cultural currents. The question of the “prime mover” can safely be set aside at this point.

as possible from the vast possibilities the world has to offer. To taste life in all its heights and depths and in its full complexity becomes a central aspiration of modern man. But, as it turns out, the world always seems to have more to offer than can be experienced in a single lifetime. The options offered always outgrow those realizable in an individual’s life; or, in Blumenberg’s terms, the perceived time of the world (Weltzeit) and the time of an individual life (Lebenszeit) dramatically diverge for individuals in the modern world. Acceleration of the pace of life appears to be a natural solution to this problem: if we live twice as fast, if we take only half the time to realize an action, goal, or experience, we can double what we can do within our lifetime. Our “efficacy,” the proportion of realized options to potentially realizable options, doubles. It follows that in this cultural logic, too, the dynamics of growth and acceleration are intricately interwoven.

Now, by this cultural logic, if we kept increasing the speed of life, we could eventually live a multiplicity of lives within a single lifetime by taking up all the options that would define them. Acceleration serves as a strategy to erase the difference between the time of the world and the time of our life. The eudaimonistic promise of modern acceleration thus appears to be a functional equivalent to religious ideas of eternity or eternal life, and the acceleration of the pace of life represents the modern answer to the problem of finitude and death.

However, due to the self-propelling dynamic of the acceleration cycle, the promise of acceleration never is fulfilled, for the very same techniques, methods, and inventions that allow for an accelerated realization of options simultaneously increase the number of options (of “world time” or “world resources,” so to speak) at an exponential rate. For example, the Internet not only speeds up information and communication, it also opens up wholly new domains of exchange, service, communication, and entertainment. Hence, whenever we surf the Net, we could potentially surf hundreds and thousands of other sites that might even better serve our purposes. The same holds true for cable TV: whereas thirty years ago we missed only two or three other programs by watching one channel, we now miss hundreds. This, of course, has created the cultural phenomenon of “zapping.” As a

34. Famous literary illustrations of this idea can be found in the work of Goethe, such as in Faust or Wilhelm Meister.

35. Of course, this multiplication of options is only a cultural problem if the options are considered to be (at least potentially) valuable. An increase in uninteresting options would not affect the pace of life. However, as we will see in Section 4 of this chapter, one problem of “acceleration societies” is that the (future) relevance of present options becomes increasingly unpredictable. We don’t know what we will need, like, own and use tomorrow.
consequence, our share of the world, the proportion of realized world options from potentially realizable ones, decreases (contrary to the original promise of acceleration) no matter how much we increase the pace of life. And this is the cultural explanation for the paradoxical phenomenon of simultaneous technological acceleration and increasing time scarcity.

3. The Structural Motor

Apart from the economic and the cultural explanations for the dynamics of modern Western acceleration, some sociologists have identified a third external engine in the social structure of modern society. According to this view, which is advocated predominantly in the context of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, social change is accelerated by modern society’s basic structural principle of functional differentiation. In a society that is not primarily segregated into hierarchical classes but rather structured along the lines of functional systems, such as politics, science, art, the economy, and law, complexity increases immensely. As a result, the future opens up to almost unlimited contingency and society experiences time in the form of perpetual change and acceleration. Now, increasing complexity and contingency create an abundance of options and possibilities. Since these cannot be handled simultaneously, Luhmann argues that complexity in modern societies is “temporalized” in order to enable the sequential processing of a higher number of options and relations than could be processed simultaneously. The ensuing needs for synchronization and selection of increasing (future) options can in turn only be satisfied if the processing itself is accelerated. Thus, we find a surprising structural duplication or “reflection” of the cultural dilemma outlined in the preceding paragraph (or vice versa). Here, too, we find a variant of the internal dialectics of growth and acceleration that is characteristic of modern societies, here as a driving motor for (structural) social change (fig. 2).

IV. The Form and Relevance of Social Deceleration

Even if we find convincing evidence for acceleration in all three spheres defined above, it is crucial not to be drawn into a logic of subsumption

where every social process or phenomenon is seen as determined by the dynamics of acceleration. Hence, before we can adequately determine the sense in which we can speak of the acceleration of Western societies, we need to understand the status, function, and structure of those phenomena that escape dynamization or even represent forms of slowdown and deceleration. Analytically, we can distinguish five different forms of deceleration and inertia, which cut across the spheres of acceleration identified so far.

1. Natural and anthropological speed limits. Some things cannot be accelerated in principle. Among these are most physical processes, like the speed of perception and processing in our brains and bodies or the time it takes for most natural resources to reproduce.
2. Territorial as well as social and cultural niches that have not yet been touched by the dynamics of modernization and acceleration. They have simply been (totally or partially) exempted from acceleration processes, although they are accessible to them in principle. In such contexts, time seems to be “standing still,” as the saying goes: forgotten islands in the sea, socially excluded groups or religious sects such as the Amish, or traditional forms of social practice (like producing whiskey in the famous Jack Daniels commercial). Arguably, these “oases of deceleration” come under increasing pressure in late modernity unless they are deliberately protected against acceleration, and thus they fall under category 4.

3. Slowdown as an unintended consequence of acceleration and dynamization. This frequently entails dysfunctional and pathological forms of deceleration. The best-known version of the former is the traffic jam, whereas recent scientific findings identify the latter in some forms of psychopathological depression that are understood as individual (deceleratory) reactions to overstretched pressures of acceleration. This category could also include the structural exclusion of workers from the sphere of production, which is often a consequence of their inability to keep up with the flexibility and speed required in modern Western economies. The excluded thus suffer extreme deceleration in the form of long-term unemployment. Economic recessions—called economic slowdowns—could also be interpreted along these lines.

4. Intentional forms of (social) deceleration, contrary to the unintentional forms of slowdown. These include ideological movements against modern acceleration and its effects. Such movements have accompanied more or less every new step in the history of modern acceleration, and in particular of technological acceleration. Thus, the steam engine, the railway, the telephone, and the computer were met with suspicion and even hostility; in all cases, the oppositional movements eventually failed. Hence, within this fourth category, we need to distinguish between two forms of deliberate deceleration:

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37. Cf. Levine, A Geography of Time; several articles in Psychologie Heute 26, no. 3 (1999); or Baier, Keine Zeit! 147–62.
(a) Limited or temporary forms of deceleration that aim at preserving the capacity to function and further accelerate within acceleratory systems. On the individual level, we find such accelerating forms of deceleration as people taking time out in monasteries or taking yoga courses, which promise a rest from the race; these have the purpose of allowing a more successful participation in acceleratory social systems afterwards. Similarly, there is a huge self-help literature suggesting a deliberate slowdown in work or learning in order to increase the volume of overall work or learning in a given period of time, or recommending pauses in order to increase energy and creativity. On the social and political level, too, moratoria are sometimes suggested to solve technological, political, legal, environmental, or social obstacles that stand in the way of modernization.

(b) Diverse, often fundamentalist, antimodernist social movements for (radical) deceleration. This is hardly surprising given that acceleration appears to be one of the fundamental principles of modernity. Among these we find radical religious as well as “deep ecological” or politically ultraconservative or anarchist movements. Thus, for German politician and scholar Peter Glotz, deceleration has become the new ideological focus of the victims of modernization. However, to straightforwardly dismiss the cry for deceleration as ideological is dangerously simplistic, for the more important arguments for intentional deceleration are those that follow the lines of thought of the first form, 4(a). The central insight here is that the enormous processes of acceleration that have shaped modern society were firmly grounded and enabled by the stability of some central modern institutions like law, democracy, the industrial work regime, and the standardized or institutionalized biographies or life trajectories of modernity. Only within

40. For such accelerating forms of deceleration, see Lothar J. Seiwert, Wenn Du es eilig hast, gehe langsam: Das neue Zeitmanagement in einer beschleunigten Welt, 5th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000).
41. Cf. Matthias Eberling, Beschleunigung und Politik (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1996).
a stable framework formed by such institutions can we find the necessary preconditions for long-term planning and investment and thus for long-term acceleration. Furthermore, as Lübbe argues, the preconditions of cultural reproduction in an accelerating society are such that flexibility is only possible on the basis of some stable and unchanging cultural orientations and institutions. Institutionally as well as individually—or structurally as well as culturally—there seem to be certain limits to flexibilization and dynamization that may be in danger of erosion in late modernity.\textsuperscript{44} Hence, it is quite possible that, much more than the antimodernist radicals, it is the very success and ubiquity of acceleration that undercuts and erodes the preconditions for future acceleration. In this sense, deceleration in some respects could be a functional necessity of acceleration society rather than an ideological reaction to it.

\textbf{5.} Finally, we find the perception that in late modern society, despite widespread acceleration and flexibilization (which create the appearance of total contingency, hyperoptionality, and unlimited openness), real change is in fact no longer possible: the system of modern society is closing in and history is coming to an end in a “hyperaccelerated standstill” or “polar inertia.” Advocates of this diagnosis include Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, and Francis Fukuyama. They claim that there are no new visions and energies available to modern society, and hence the enormous speed of events and alterations is a superficial phenomenon barely covering up deep-rooted cultural and structural inertia.\textsuperscript{45} For a sociological theory of acceleration society, it is vital to account for this possibility of (extreme) paralyzation in its very conceptual scheme.

The fundamental question that arises at this point is the relationship between processes of social acceleration and deceleration in modern society. Two general possibilities are conceivable. First, the processes of acceleration and deceleration are by and large in balance such that we find both types of changes in the temporal patterns of society without a clear and sustained dominance of one or the other. Second, the balance in fact shifts toward the powers of acceleration such that the categories of deceleration

\textsuperscript{44} See chapter 9 of this volume. See also above, section II.2 and below, section IV.2.

\textsuperscript{45} Fukuyama, in fact, takes part in the discourse on “post-histoire” that follows a long tradition going back to Kojève and Hegel. For Lothar Baier (\textit{Keine Zeit}), acceleration and change only happen on the “user interface” of modern societies while their deep structures remain unchanged.
have to be interpreted either as residual or as reactions to acceleration. I would suggest that the second is in fact correct, though this is rather difficult to prove empirically. My claim rests on the supposition that none of these forms of deceleration amounts to a genuine and structurally equal counter-trend to modern acceleration. The phenomena listed under categories 1 and 2 merely denote the (retreating) limits of social acceleration; they are not counterpowers at all. The decelerations of category 3 are effects of acceleration and as such derivative of and secondary to it. Category 4(a) identifies phenomena that, on closer examination, turn out to be either elements of acceleration processes or enabling conditions of (further) acceleration. The intentional resistance to the speedup of life and the ideology of deceleration 4(b) clearly are reactions to pressures of and for acceleration; as pointed out above, all of the main tendencies of modernity have met considerable resistance, but so far all forms of resistance have turned out to be rather short-lived and unsuccessful. Thus, the only form of deceleration that seems not to be derivative or residual is category 5. This dimension seems to be an inherent, complementary feature of modern acceleration itself; it is the paradoxical flipside characteristic of all the defining forces of modernity (individualization, differentiation, rationalization, domestication, and acceleration).

V. Ethical and Political Implications

For the analysis of the temporal structures of society, it is of central importance to realize that the speedup of processes frequently amounts to more than a mere quantitative change that leaves the nature of those processes untouched. To the contrary, just as speeding up a sequence of images can bring them to life in the transition from photography to film, or the acceleration of molecules can transform ice into water into steam, changes in the temporal structures of modern societies transform the very essence of our culture, social structure, and personal identity (and, of course, our experience of nature, too). Thus, the much-discussed but little-agreed-upon distinction between modernity and post- or late modernity may in fact be best captured with reference to the temporal dimension: we can say that late modernity is nothing other than modern society accelerated (and desynchronized) beyond the point of possible reintegration. I would like to show this by exploring two major and related transformations: the transition in personal identities and the decline of politics in late modernity.
1. Situational Identity and the Detemporalization of Life

Of the three dimensions of social acceleration, the acceleration of the pace of life is most directly linked to personality. Since the notion of “personality” has become rather obscure in the social sciences and humanities (probably owing to its essentialist ring), the relevant changes are instead most often discussed in terms of shifting patterns of identity.\(^\text{46}\)

From the model developed above, the acceleration of the pace of life could be explained by two different factors. On the one hand, individuals could feel pressed to speed up in response to the social change around them, because of what I have called the “slippery-slope” phenomenon. Acceleration in this sense would be enforced by the fear of losing out in light of the speed and flexibility demands of the social and economic world. On the other hand, speeding up the pace of life could be a (voluntary) response to “the promise of acceleration,” that is, a consequence of people’s conception of the good life. Of course, fear and promise might well both be driving factors of acceleration (as they are, following Max Weber’s famous Protestant ethic thesis, the driving factors of capitalism).\(^\text{47}\) Common parlance might serve as a guide for testing the slippery-slope hypothesis: even a casual look at how people explain or justify their use of time is puzzling in light of the dominant ideology of individual freedom. In a strange opposition to the idea that individuals in Western societies are free to do whatever they please, the rhetoric of obligation abounds: “I have to read the newspaper, exercise, call and visit my friends regularly, learn a second language, scrutinize the market for job opportunities, have hobbies, travel abroad, keep up with contemporary computer technologies, etc.”\(^\text{48}\) However, we have to be careful to scrutinize the source of this kind of “must”—it might well stem from an underlying cultural ideal as well as from social and economic pressures. Interestingly, we find an analogous semantic slip in contemporary politics: whereas in early and classical modernity processes and technologies of acceleration were legitimized in the rhetoric of “progress,” which mirrored the promise of acceleration, in late modernity political language has adopted

46. See my Identität und kulturelle Praxis: Politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1998).
48. For an impressive list of such “musts,” see Horst W. Opaschowski, Freizeitökonomie: Marketing von Erlebniswelten, 2nd ed. (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 1995), 85–86.
the terminology of “inherent necessity” and “unavoidable adjustment” (to a fiercely competitive world)—a clear indication of the felt pressures of the slippery slope.

However, common parlance might serve as an indicator of the nature of subtle connections between the different spheres of social acceleration in yet another sense. The acceleration of rates of social change to an intra-rather than intergenerational pace is mirrored in language that avoids identity predicates and uses temporary markers instead. People speak of working (for the time being) as a baker rather than being a baker, living with Mary rather than being Mary’s husband, going to the Methodist Church rather than being a Methodist, voting Republican rather than being a Republican, and so on. This use of language indicates that the awareness of contingency has increased even where the actual rates of change have not yet done so: things (jobs, spouses, religious, political commitments) could be otherwise, they could change at any time because of either my own or other people’s decisions. Although increased contingency is not equivalent to acceleration, it surely contributes to the perception of slippery slopes and time pressure. The introduction of temporary markers in identity statements (I was a Methodist, I am married to Mary, I will be a consultant after my next degree) reflects a temporal contraction of identity reflecting the contraction of the present identified above. It is measurable, to some degree, by indicators for the deinstitutionalization of biographies and life trajectories.

Accordingly, a number of recent studies suggest a significant change in the time perspectives by which people organize their lives. As Martin Kohli has convincingly argued, modernity was characterized by a “temporalization of life”: people were no longer absorbed with handling their life on a day-to-day basis but started to conceive their lives along the lines of a thre-tiered temporal pattern (the modern standard biography of education, work life, retirement or childhood, adult life, old age) that defined an institutionalized, reliable structure and orienting perspective around which individuals could plan their lives.49 Classical modern identities were consequently long-term projects supposed to evolve like a bildungsroman. In late modernity, however, this pattern no longer holds: neither work nor family life can be foreseen or planned for a lifetime. Instead, people develop a new perspective that has been oddly termed the “temporalization of time”: time spans and the duration of activities or commitments are no longer planned ahead.

but left to evolve. Such a temporalization of time, however, is equivalent to the detemporalization of life: life is no longer planned along a line that stretches from the past into the future; instead, decisions are taken from time to time according to situational and contextual needs and desires. As Richard Sennett argues, stability of character and adherence to a time-resistant life plan are incompatible with the demands of the late modern world. Thus, a conception of the good life based on long-term commitments, duration, and stability is thwarted by the fast pace of social change.

But even when this new perspective is depicted in neutral or even positive terms, it is evident that a new form of situationalism is replacing the temporally extended identity characteristic of classical modernity. This new situationalism in a way resembles premodern forms of existence in which people had to cope with unforeseeable contingencies on a day-to-day basis without being able to plan for the future; however, whereas the dangers, events, and contingencies that threatened the earlier forms of life (natural disasters, wars, diseases, etc.) were exogenous to society, the new situationalism is an endogenous product of social structures themselves. However we evaluate this phenomenon, the incompatibility of situational identities with the modern ideal of individual ethical autonomy is apparent. The ideal of the autonomous and reflective leading of a life requires adopting long-term commitments that bestow a sense of direction, priority, and “narratability” to life.


51. See, e.g., Hörning, Ahrens, and Gerhard’s characterization of the late modern figure they term “the gambler”; this character resembles the “drifter” described by Richard Sennett, although Sennett is much more critical with respect to the desirability of such a time perspective. For a philosophical critique of such a “reduced” sense of time that exclusively focuses on the present, see Dieter Sturma, “Die erweiterte Gegenwart: Kontingenz, Zeit und praktische Selbstverhältnisse im Leben von Personen,” in *Die Wiederentdeckung der Zeit: Reflexionen, Analysen, Konzepte*, ed. A. Gimmler, M. Sandbothe, and W. C. Zimmerli (Darmstadt: Primus, 1997), 63–78. For a further discussion of the causes and consequences of the “temporalization of time,” see Rosa, “Temporalstrukturen in der Spätmoderne.”


54. Interestingly, the findings of some authors suggest that there is a tendency toward a “new fatalism” that assumes that we cannot control or plan the conditions of our lives (e.g., Garhammer, *Wie Europäer ihre Zeit nutzen*). This, too, could be read as evidence for the increasingly “situational” instead of “temporal” perspective. Hörning, Ahrens, and Gerhard also point out that the incapacity to develop a persistent sense of relevance, direction, and priority is a serious problem for the late modern “gambler” personality type. See *Zeiträume*;
The incapacity to engage in long-term commitments and to develop a frame of time-resistant priorities and long-term goals frequently seems to lead to a paradoxical backlash in which the experience of frantic change and temporalized time gives way to the perception of “frozen time” without (a meaningful) past and future and consequently of depressing inertia. German philosopher Klaus-Michael Kodalle has tried to explain this phenomenon philosophically, while Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X* illustrates it metaphorically in the stories of “Texlahoma,” a place in which time is eternally frozen in the year 1974—making for a nice contrast with the book’s subtitle: “Tales for an Accelerated Culture.” Finally, Peter Conrad observes that historically, the problem of *l’ennui* (boredom) became vexing precisely at the moment when the Industrial Revolution “increased velocity in all areas of human experience” and created a climate of “hectic, propulsive dynamism” in which history itself was imagined as a fast-running railway.55

In sum, the individual’s reaction to social acceleration in late modernity seems to result in a new, situational form of identity, in which the dynamism of classical modernity, characterized by a strong sense of direction (perceived as progress), is replaced by a sense of directionless, frantic motion that is in fact a form of inertia.

2. The “End of Politics” and the Detemporalization of History

Interestingly, an exactly analogous phenomenon can be observed in late modern politics. Here we have the same constellation of a political temporalization of time that results in a detemporalization of politics. Politics in classical modernity had a temporal index in the very labels “progressive” versus “conservative” (or left versus right), while history was perceived of as (directed) progress: progressive politics sought to accelerate progress, whereas conservative politics was “reactionary” in opposing the forces of change and acceleration. Today, ironically, if the distinction between left and right has retained any discriminatory power at all, “progressives” tend to sympathize with the advocates of deceleration (stressing locality, political

control of the economy, democratic negotiation, environmental protection, etc.), whereas “conservatives” have become strong defenders of the need for further acceleration (embracing new technologies, rapid markets, and fast administrative decision making). This is yet another example of how the forces of acceleration have outgrown the very agents and institutions that set them in motion: bureaucracy, the nation-state, the strict time regime of the factory, democratic politics, stable personal identities—all of these institutions historically played a key role in enabling social acceleration by providing stable and calculable background conditions, but are now in danger of being eroded by the very forces of acceleration they set in motion. In late modernity, they have become obstacles to further acceleration. The very idea of an “institution,” whose Latin root indicates its static, durable character, is incompatible with the idea of total acceleration (table 1).

As a result, politics, too, has become situationalist: it confines itself to reacting to pressures instead of developing progressive visions of its own. Very often, political decisions no longer aspire to actively steer (acceleratory) social developments, but are defensive and deceleratory. It seems that just as it has become virtually impossible to individually plan one’s life in the sense of a life project, it has become politically impossible to plan and shape society over time; the time of political projects, it seems, is also over. Individually as well as politically, the sense of a directed movement of history has given way to a sense of directionless, frantic change. For Armin Nassehi, a German author in the systems-theoretic tradition, this loss of political autonomy (corresponding to the loss of individual autonomy discussed above) is an inevitable consequence of the temporal structures of modern society:

The present... loses its capacity for planning and shaping. As the present of action it is always oriented toward the future, but it cannot shape this future because of the dynamics, risks, and vast amount of simultaneity within the present, which it cannot control at all. Early modernity promised the capacity to shape and control world and time and to initiate and historically legitimate future progress. But in late modernity, time itself has come to destroy the...
The structural problem at the heart of this disappearance of politics is the political system’s fundamental inability to accelerate. Here we touch on a central structural feature of late modern societies: the desynchronization of social and functional spheres, which takes two forms. First, there is a desynchronization of different groups and segments of society. Not all social groups accelerate equally: some, like the sick, the unemployed, the poor, or, in some respects, the elderly, are forced to decelerate, while others, like the Amish, refuse to adopt the temporal structures and horizons of modernity. This desynchronization entails an increasing “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous”: high-tech and stone-age methods of warfare, transport, or communication persist side by side, not only between different countries, but even within the same society, and fast and slow paces of life can be

<table>
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potential for any form of social or substantial control, influence, or steering.”57

57. Nassehi, Die Zeit der Gesellschaft, 375. Similarly, Baudrillard holds that history has lost its sense of (linear) progression: it is no longer moving toward an imaginary end point (which is why Baudrillard argued the “symbolic year 2000” would never be reached), but rather “is disintegrating into its simple elements in a catastrophic process of recurrence and turbulence” (The Illusion of the End, 11). Cf. Baier, Keine Zeit! 17–18.
observed on one and the same street. The result of this “multitemporality” is likely to be a progressive disintegration of society. At first, the desynchronization of various segments might aggravate the problem of ghettoization, transforming society into a mosaic of temporal ghettos. Some of these ghettos may resist the forces of acceleration, but wherever these forces are in operation, they will eventually enforce the dissolution of the boundaries between groups and segments, since these boundaries are effective speed limits (the increasing irrelevance of state borders is just the most striking example of this tendency). The resulting postmodern dedifferentiation, however, may lead not to reintegration, but to a fast-paced, atomized, kaleidoscopic social amalgam in which highly volatile associations and lifestyle milieus replace the mosaic of ghettos.

This, in turn, may aggravate the political problem of desynchronization in its second form. Contrary to a widespread opinion, modernity has not just established a single, unitary form of abstract, linear time that synchronizes its various subsystems. Rather, the process of functional differentiation has resulted in a series of almost autopoietic subsystems like the economy, science, law, politics, the arts, and so on, all of which follow their own temporal rhythms, patterns, and horizons. Just as there is no unifying social or substantial center governing the subsystemic operations, there is also no integrating temporal authority, and this, in turn, results in increasing temporal desynchronization.

For the political system, this entails truly paradoxical temporal horizons. On the one hand, the time needed for democratic political decision making is not just hard to accelerate, since processes of deliberation and aggregation in a pluralistic democratic society inevitably take time; it is actually increasing for a number of reasons. First, the less consensus there is within society, the less conventionalist the legitimating principles of society are, the longer it takes to reach consensus—and disintegrated modern acceleration societies tend to become both more pluralistic and less conventionalist.

58. Of course, the acceleration thesis presented in this chapter can only be upheld if it can be shown that the predominance of processes of deceleration and time abundance (if they can be found at all) is a phenomenon characteristic of socially excluded or underprivileged groups like the old, the unemployed, and the poor or sick rather than the trend-setting elites. Deceleration, then, is a sign of deprivation and exclusion and thus plays a dysfunctional rather than a functional role in modern societies, which can partially be explained as an unintended effect in the sense of category three above.

59. See Scheuerman, “Liberal Democracy and the Empire of Speed,” 56–63. Scheuerman points out that there is a long-standing trend in politics toward shifting political powers from the legislative to the executive branches of government in order to accelerate decision-making processes and retain political control in the “empire of speed.”
making it hard to know in advance even which social groups or associations are going to be relevant for negotiations. Hence, in a volatile political world, the time needed for the effective organization of collective interests increases.\textsuperscript{60} Second, the less certainty there is about future conditions, the longer it takes to plan for the future and to make decisions.\textsuperscript{61} Due to the acceleration of social change and the contraction of the present, background conditions become increasingly contingent; instead of providing yardsticks for decision-making process, they become complicating factors. Third, the effects of political decisions tend to extend further and further into the future—most visibly in the area of nuclear power or genetic engineering, where decisions seem to be irreversible. The longer the temporal range of a particular decision, the more time it takes to make it rationally. Here, perhaps, the paradoxical nature of policy making today is most visible: the effects of crucial decisions extend in time just as the time available for making them shrinks.

On the other hand, contrary to this need for more time for political decision making, the acceleration of the surrounding systems—especially economic circulation and technological-scientific innovation—decreases the time given to politics to decide an issue. If politics aspires to steer and control the basic conditions of technological and economic development, it must either keep up with their accelerating pace or seriously infringe on their autonomy, virtually ending functional differentiation. At present, policy makers are always in danger of making completely anachronistic decisions: when, after years of deliberation and negotiation, they finally pass a law regulating the use of, say, some forms of stem-cell research or cloning, technological progress may already have made it obsolete.\textsuperscript{62} Second, because of the contraction of the present and the increase in contingency, not just the rate, but also the number and range of social issues in need of political regulation rise, leaving less time for each decision.

\textsuperscript{60} “How can a public be organized, we may ask, when literally it does not stay in place? . . . Without abiding attachments associations are too shifting and shaken to permit a public readily to locate and identify itself,” John Dewey noted in 1927 in The Public and Its Problems (Chcago: Swallow Press, 1954), 140–41; cf. Scheuerman, “Liberal Democracy and the Empire of Speed,” 60–62.

\textsuperscript{61} Thus, it might be difficult to develop a good pension plan even in the face of stable demographics when the proportion of old-age pensioners to working people is known. But this task is almost impossible when it is uncertain (a) how long future generations will live, (b) how long they will work, (c) what percentage of the population will work at what time, (d) whether the insurance system will be privatized anyway, (e) whether the nation-state will lose its power to decide over pension schemes altogether, etc.

\textsuperscript{62} This was the argument of the supporters of a Swiss proposition called the Beschleunigungsinitiative (acceleration initiative), which sought to reduce democratic processes in order to speed up lawmaking. It was rejected in a March 2000 referendum.
Third, since, as we have seen, background conditions change quickly and the temporal horizon for which political effects can be rationally planned and controlled continuously contracts, fewer and fewer things can be durably and effectively regulated. Instead, politics shifts to “muddling through” (described by Luhmann as the primacy of the short term) with increasingly temporary and provisional solutions, which ensure that issues keep reappearing on the agenda. The result of these contradictory and incompatible time pressures seems to be consistent with our finding above: politics not only becomes situationalist and loses its sense of direction; it also tends to shift the decision-making process toward other, faster arenas: the legal system (juridification), or the economy and individual responsibility (privatization and deregulation). Thus, precisely at a point in history where the human power to steer and control its own fate seems to reach an unprecedented technological zenith (foremost, of course, in the shape of genetic engineering), society’s political capacity to do so reaches its nadir. The deliberate and democratic political shaping of our society and form of life, the political project and promise of enlightened modernity, may be becoming obsolete in the late modern “acceleration society” (fig. 3).

As a result, the inability to control social change has brought about an overwhelming sense of directionless change in an “iron cage” that itself has become fundamentally inert. Within its structures, parallel to the individual experience of time and life delineated above, the frantic pace of political events covered in the news can barely cover up the virtual standstill of the history of ideas—or of history itself. As Baudrillard puts it:

This is the most significant event within [our] societies: the emergence, in the very course of their mobilization and revolutionary process (they are all revolutionary by the standards of past centuries), of an immense indifference and the silent potency of that indifference. This inert matter of the social is not produced by a lack of exchanges, information or communication, but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges.... It is the cold star of the social and, around that mass, history is also cooling. Events follow one upon another, canceling each other out in a state of indifference. The masses, neutralized, mithridatized by information, in turn

neutralize history and act as an *écran d’absorption*. . . Political events already lack sufficient energy of their own to move us. . . . History comes to an end here, not for want of actors, nor for want of violence . . . , nor for want of events . . . , but by deceleration, indifference and stupefaction. . . . It is being buried beneath its own immediate effect, worn out in special effects, imploding into current events. Deep down, one cannot even speak of the end of history here, since history will not have time to catch up with its own end. Its effects are accelerating, but its meaning is slowing inexorably.

Figure 3. Paradoxes of political time
It will eventually come to a stop and be extinguished like light and time in the vicinity of an infinitely dense mass.\textsuperscript{64}

VI. Conclusion

At the outset of this chapter, I tried to pinpoint the relevance of the logic of acceleration for the overall process of modernization. I noted that in the sociological tradition, modernization has been analyzed from four different perspectives, relating to society’s structure, culture, personality type, and relation to nature. Now, when we try to reconceptualize the acceleration process along the lines of these four dimensions, it appears that change in the temporal structures is relevant to each of them (fig. 4). While all segments of the world’s population are certainly not equally affected by social acceleration—to the contrary, in some parts of the world and some segments of Western societies many processes in fact appear to decelerate—the logic of social acceleration is decisive for the structural and cultural evolution of contemporary society. Thus, it is evident that technological acceleration is a crucial feature of modern society’s relation to nature, while the acceleration of the pace of life is of overriding importance for the late modern personality. Furthermore, the overall acceleration of social change is intimately related to both cultural and structural transformation.

With respect to social structure, two distinct but related aspects of acceleration were identified. On the one hand, if we take functional differentiation to be the main structural feature of modern societies, there clearly is a speedup of (sub)systemic processing: financial transactions, economic production and distribution, scientific discoveries, technological inventions, artistic productions, and even lawmaking\textsuperscript{65} have unmistakably sped up following their own logics without much outside interference. This has led to desynchronization, since not all subsystems are equally capable of acceleration.\textsuperscript{66} On the other hand, if we take the basic structure of society to be the

\textsuperscript{64} Baudrillard, The Illusion of the End, 3–4.


\textsuperscript{66} It remains an open question whether at some point in the future the drive for further acceleration will cause an eventual dedifferentiation, as some advocates of postmodernity argue, since strict systemic boundaries might eventually become obstacles to “total” acceleration. If this should happen, functional differentiation could be a further feature in the dialectics of acceleration and stability (fig. 3): it accelerated social processes in “classical” modernity but comes to function as a decelerator in late modernity. Some authors suggest that postmodernity
structure of its associations, groups, and collectivities and the corresponding role structures—as suggested, for example, by Parsons\textsuperscript{67}—then processes of social acceleration have clearly increased the speed of social change; family and occupational structures as well as associations and milieus have become highly volatile, shifting, and contingent, making it difficult to identify politically and socially relevant and stable associational structures at all. This, as we have seen, further aggravates the problem of social integration for late modern societies.

With respect to the cultural dimension, the contraction of the present—that is, the shortening of the time spans within which action orientations and social practices remain stable—is the most important effect of social

acceleration. Lifestyles, fashions, practices, occupational, familial, territorial, political, and religious commitments all change at a faster pace and become increasingly contingent and revisable. Late modern culture thus clearly appears to be highly dynamic.

However, as pointed out throughout this chapter, in at least three of the four dimensions (structure, culture, and personality) we also find complementary signs of deceleration or inertia—the paradoxical flipside of social acceleration. Thus, individuals at times, despite the frantic pace of events, experience their loss of direction, priorities, and narratable “progress” as “frozen time” or virtual inertia, just as the entrenched logics of subsystemic operations appear to be so reified that notions of the “end of history,” the “exhaustion of utopian energies,” and the “iron cage” abound amidst the discourse of permanent and total social change. Similarly, with respect to culture, what from one perspective appears to be a vast contingency of value orientations and lifestyles in which “anything goes” can be interpreted from another perspective as an entrenchment of the basic value orientations of modernity, that is, as strict adherence to the values of activity, universality, rationality, and individuality.

From the deceleratory perspective, Western societies’ apparently fast pace of change is only a surface phenomenon beneath which we find inertia. Only with respect to nature does there seem to be no complementary deceleration. Here, only the looming possibility of environmental disaster figures as a potential for (exogenous) deceleration.

A final question concerns whether acceleration really is an independent feature of modernity or just a perspective from which its core processes (individualization, domestication, rationalization, differentiation) can be reinterpreted. After all, all four processes traditionally associated with modernization are intricately connected with increases in speed: thus, individualization can be a cause as well as an effect of acceleration, since individuals are more mobile and adaptive to change and faster in making decisions than collectivities. Similarly, one of the main reasons for, as well as a consequence of, organizational differentiation is the speeding up of systemic processes, and the same holds true for rationalization as the improvement of

68. Even if there is eventually a postmodern dedifferentiation of social subsystems, this will, in my view, not alter the perception of inertia and powerlessness, since the resulting “kaleidoscopic chaos” will be even less controllable. The operative blundering of systemic borders will not reverse the uncontrollable, nonintentional functioning of systemic processing.

means-ends relationships and domestication as an improvement of instrumental control. Nevertheless, I would suggest that we regard modernization as a process of social acceleration for at least three reasons. First, individual as well as collective human existence is in its very essence temporal and processual; changes in temporal structures are changes in individual and social existence. Hence, it is only with respect to the significant changes in its temporality that the nature and impact of modernization become fully visible. Second, social acceleration reveals the unitary logic underlying all four dimensions of modernization. And third, it is only from a temporal perspective that we can fully understand the fundamental transformations in contemporary society, which are the result of social acceleration within the unaltered framework of modernity but beyond the limits of individual and social integration and autonomy. As such, they amount to a silent but sweeping qualitative social revolution by a mere quantitative change in the realm of speed.

70. "The self is process; the temporal dimension is fundamental. To neglect the temporal dimension is to neglect the essence. We shall never understand the human by simply analyzing the individual as a stable configuration of traits, qualities, or attitudes," argues, Robert Lauer, reminiscent of Heidegger, in *Temporal Man: The Meaning and Uses of Social Time* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 56. He convincingly adds that exactly the same is true for social interactions and society as well (86–88).