THE UNCONTROLLABILITY OF THE WORLD

HARTMUT ROSA

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Beyond Control: *A Note from the Author on the Key Term of This Book*

No doubt the title of this book presents a challenge, certainly for all languages other than German. *Unverfügbarkeit*: what does it mean? It is a term that is well established in German, although it is not very widespread. For me, *Unverfügbarkeit* is one of the key elements of every experience of being in resonance with someone or something. Ever since I first used it in an article in German, I have been wondering about how to translate it into English. My first attempt was "elusiveness." With this I wanted to point to the fact that resonance—one of my key theoretical concepts—is something comparable to the moment of falling asleep: we cannot bring it about simply by willing it. The more we want it, the less we get it, at least sometimes. There is something about resonance that evades our grasp. But I ultimately decided against this term, because resonance is not always elusive. It is not a chimera. Sometimes we have strong experiences of true connection and encounter that are not elusive. So I tried "unavailability." But I never liked this one. "We are sorry, this service is temporarily unavailable." Ever since I heard this on my phone, I was convinced that this is not what I mean by *Unverfügbarkeit*. So I turned to "unpredictability." I still like this one, because experiences of resonance are unpredictable in two ways. First, you can try to create a context that makes it likely that you will be deeply touched and transformed by something or someone, and that you will be capable of reaching out and responding to this touch. We buy expensive tickets to a concert, for example, or we arrange a beautiful candlelight dinner with our beloved—but, in both

cases, the evening might still turn out to be deeply frustrating and alienating, whereas on other occasions, when we do not expect anything, all of a sudden we experience strong resonance with something or someone. Hence, when or where resonance will happen is unpredictable. More than this, if you enter into resonance with someone or something, it is impossible to predict what this process of being touched and transformed will mean for you or will do to you.

But *Unverfügbarkeit* actually goes deeper than this. It is not just about non-predictability, but about *nonengineerability*. This term was suggested to me when I gave a lecture at the London School of Economics; and it became my favorite for a long time. There is no way to "fabricate" resonance, to instrumentally bring it about. Similarly, we cannot easily "engineer" falling asleep, or the falling of snow—although nowadays we actually *can* take sleeping pills, just as winter resorts *can* employ snow cannons. This is exactly what this book is about: modernity's incessant desire to make the world engineerable, predictable, available, accessible, disposable (i.e. *verfügbar*) in all its aspects. And it is about the twin paradox that, first, this very desire alters our relationship to the world. Snow shooting out of a snow cannon does not have the experiential quality of a real snowfall. A fully engineerable world eventually would be a "dead world." Second, this desire for control produces, behind our backs, a world that in the end is utterly uncontrollable in all the relevant aspects. We cannot control our late modern world in any way: politically, economically, legally, technologically, or individually. The drive and desire toward controllability ultimately creates monstrous, frightening forms of uncontrollability. *Uncontrollability*: This is the term that Jim, the masterful translator of this book, found to capture all the aspects of *Unverfügbarkeit* discussed here. And,

even if it is not exactly equivalent to *Unverfügbarkeit* in every nuance, it surely is the closest we can get. And Jim, who also translated my big book on *Resonance*, was sensitive enough in his translation to capture all those nuances in the text itself. For this, I am infinitely grateful to him!

Hartmut Rosa, March 2020

Introduction: *On Snow*

Do you still remember the first snowfall on a late autumn or winter day, when you were a child? It was like the intrusion of a new reality. Something shy and strange that had come to visit us, falling down upon and transforming the world around us, without our having to do anything. An unexpected gift. Falling snow is perhaps the purest manifestation of uncontrollability. We cannot manufacture it, force it, or even confidently predict it, at least not very far in advance. What is more, we cannot get hold of it or make it our own. Take some in your hand, it slips through your fingers. Bring it into the house, it melts away. Pack it away in the freezer, it stops being snow and becomes ice. Maybe that is why so many people—not only children—long for it, especially around the holidays. Meteorologists are assailed and beseeched for weeks beforehand. Will it be a white Christmas this year? What are the chances? And of course there is no shortage of efforts to bring snow under our control. Winter resorts advertise “guaranteed snow,” making good on their promises with the aid of machines: these produce artificial snow that holds up even at temperatures above 15° Celsius.

Our relationship to snow reflects the drama of our relationship to the modern world as in a crystal ball. The driving cultural force of that form of life we call “modern” is the idea, the hope and desire, that we can make the world *controllable*. Yet it is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we really experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive. A world that is fully known, in which everything has been planned and mastered, would be a dead world. This is no metaphysical insight, but an everyday experience. Our lives unfold as the

interplay between what we can control and that which remains outside our control, yet “concerns us” in some way. Life happens, as it were, on the borderline. Take a mass phenomenon like soccer. Why do people flock to the stadium? “Because,” as the manager of the 1954 German national team Sepp Herberger once quipped, “they don’t know how it will turn out.” Contrary to the constant complaint that soccer these days is “only about the money,” what makes the game attractive is the fact that victories and defeats cannot be bought or engineered. They cannot be controlled. Soccer remains so exciting for many people—to the point that it constitutes the central focus of their libidinal desire all week long, until the next round of league play begins—precisely because it is inherently uncontrollable. Not *entirely* uncontrollable, of course. Money and training obviously can have an influence on what happens in the game, as every amateur athlete knows—and not just in soccer but also in tennis, basketball, and every other sport. You can improve your chances on the tennis court through good preparation, mental discipline, and relaxation, true, but you can never engineer a victory, or even the next point. Even more: you cannot achieve anything through increased effort alone. The more you try to bring the goal or the next point under your control, the more you try to force it, the less you succeed. That is why so many amateur athletes perform all manner of obscure, would-be magic rituals before the match or their next serve: to try to control the uncontrollable. It is the tension and the struggle along this boundary line that keeps sport so fascinating.[1]

The interplay between control and uncontrollability is constitutive not only of many varieties of sports, but of games in general—card games as well as chess, board games as well as games of chance—although the relation between what is controllable and what is uncontrollable

can vary greatly. It may be easy to predict with confidence the winner and loser in a chess match, less so in parcheesi or in games of chance. This is the case not only with games, either. Our encounter with the uncontrollable and our desire or struggle to bring it under control form a red thread that runs through all areas of our lives. Take sleep: the more we want to fall asleep, the less able we are to force ourselves to do so. And yet there are things we can do to make sleep come easier—taking a walk, for example, or developing a regular bedtime routine. Or take love. “Hold the line,” the band Toto aptly sings: “Love isn’t always on time.” Or our health. Sure, we can try to reduce our risk of catching a cold. We can eat healthier. But whether or not we fall ill, or get cancer, or suffer a herniated disc—these are among the uncontrollable (or should we say only semicontrollable?) aspects of life. From games to love, from snow to death, human life and human experience are defined by uncontrollability. And if we think about modernity’s relationship to the world, that is, how the institutions and cultural practices of contemporary society relate to the world and how we, as modern subjects, find ourselves situated in the world as a result, then the ways in which we relate to uncontrollability—individually, culturally, institutionally, and structurally—would seem to offer a cardinal focal point for analysis. In the following pages I want to try to systematically apply this focus to the everyday practices and social conflicts of contemporary late modern society in order to see what can be learned from this perspective. My hypothesis is this: because we, as late modern human beings, aim to make the world controllable at every level—individual, cultural, institutional, and structural—we invariably encounter the world as a “point of aggressions” or as a series of points of aggression, in other words as a series of objects that we have to know, attain, conquer, master, or exploit. And precisely because of this, “life,” the experience of feeling alive and of truly

encountering the world—that which makes *resonance* possible—always seems to elude us. This in turn leads to anxiety, frustration, anger, and even despair, which then manifest themselves, among other things, in acts of impotent political aggression.

Notes

1. I owe this insight to Anton Röhr, who has written an impressive monograph on the ritual practices of tennis players titled “Ready? Play! Ein Versuch zum Zusammenhang von Ritual und Resonanz im Tennis” (Erfurt: Max Weber Kolleg, 2018).

1
The World as a Point of Aggression

The starting point for my reflections is the insight that human beings are always already situated in a world, always already *au monde*, as the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it. The first glimmer of awareness when we open our eyes in the morning or awake from anesthesia, and presumably even the first conscious impression of a newborn, is the perception that "there is something," that *something is present*.[1] We can understand this presence as the ur-form of what we gradually come to experience, explore, and conceive of as world, although it essentially precedes the distinction between subject and world. From this original impression that "something is present," I have sought to develop a sociology of our relationship to the world that assumes that subject and world are not the precondition, but the result of our relatedness to this presence. Little by little, in the course of our development, we learn from this "something" to distinguish between ourselves as experiencing subjects and the world as that which we encounter. The way in which the two are related is constitutive of both what we are as human beings and what we encounter as world. Hence, whenever I refer in what follows to (experiencing) subjects and (encountered) objects, these are to be understood as the two poles—the "self pole" and "world pole," so to speak—of the relationship that constitutes them.

The fundamental question of a sociology of our relationship to the world is, *how is this something that is present constituted?* Is it benevolent and redemptive, promising and seductive, cold and indifferent, or even threatening and dangerous? In contrast to philosophers, psychologists,