

Chapter 2

A Speeding Up of the Rate of Social Change? Power, Technology, Resistance, Globalisation and the Good Society

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Society, it is often said and seemingly felt, is accelerating. According to James Gleick (1999) in his *Faster: The Acceleration of just about everything* this acceleration applies to love, life, speech, politics, work, TV, leisure and, well, everything.

Gleick is not alone in this sort of apprehension. Summarising the literature on the topic, in an article entitled *Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronised High-Speed Society*, Hartmut Rosa (2003) finds that “In popular as well as scientific discourse about the current evolution of Western societies, acceleration figures as the single most striking and important feature” (p. 77). And along with William Scheuerman, Rosa later insists that “the concept of social acceleration is an indispensable tool for contemporary social and political analysis” (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009, p. 3).

But what exactly is social acceleration? Applied to the realm of social phenomena the idea of acceleration must at best be a metaphor. But, still, what might it mean? The change in question presumably refers in the main *not* to spatial positioning but to something like the *ways* given things are done, or to the *sorts of things* that are done. If acceleration is a relevant metaphor then directionality is presumably involved, most likely a fairly consistent reduction in the time-gaps between any such changes, where the changes are all of a kind.

Is this the sort of thing that is meant by accelerating social change? Perhaps. But I suspect that even if so, and even if social life is in this sense accelerating, there is more to ongoing developments. After all, acceleration, so understood, would not necessarily be inconsistent with smooth and even predictable change; nor does it follow from the notion itself that current time-gaps between significant changes need, at this point in time, be especially short, unmanageable, overwhelming,

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threatening or otherwise especially destabilising. Yet, as we shall see, feeling threatened, or feeling a need to take appropriate action, or, perhaps more commonly, feeling overwhelmed by the nature of change, does seem to be a feature of the current situation as observers experience it. Moreover, the phenomenon that is felt is seemingly not confined to particular workplaces or other very specific communities but is said to be fairly widespread.

That such acceleration is underway at all is a speculation that, as noted, is based in large part on the intuitions of many commentators. I have to admit that I do not myself actually share such intuitions; but then again nor do I experience the opposite; I am just not sharing the same experiences. In other words, if social acceleration is insufficient for on-going experiences I am wondering too if it is actually necessary. The social world is certainly open, subject to continuous transformation, conflicted and marked by significant uncertainty. But is it really accelerating in the noted sense? Because many commentators clearly do *feel* that the rate of societal change itself is somehow speeding up, I focus here on factors that could give rise to such feelings. My question, indeed, is what kinds of changes must be underway such that feelings of the speeding up of the rate of social change are a commonplace result. My suspicion is that such feelings may be engendered by *a type of change* that is underway as much any supposedly general acceleration of social life.

This paper is written as a contribution to a project concerned with studying social change. In particular, it is a project concerned with processes of social morphogenesis, with changing social forms, turning especially on positive feedback. Although notions of societal acceleration are not a necessary feature of social morphogenesis so understood, the idea that society is accelerating, if meaningful, is clearly an interesting, related and fundamental one to study in this context.

However, the writing of it is somewhat unusual in that I embark upon it a little uncertain even as to the real nature of the explanandum. Is the objective to explain (or to address questions bearing upon) a speeding up of the rate of social change or is it concerned only with widespread intuitions that there is such a development underway? Of course the former acceleration, if in fact the case, would explain the latter intuitions; but it may not be necessary. This essay is consequently somewhat exploratory and speculative, though I do seek to examine various issues that I take to be pertinent to the questions before us.

2.1 Instability and Loss of Control

A survey of the literature quickly reveals (or convinces this observer at least) that there is no consensus on what the expression *social acceleration* means; indeed the literature on the topic seems to offer almost no helpful definition at all. Additionally,

whatever social acceleration may be, attempts to achieve empirical measurements of it, or of related notions, have not met with noted success.¹

If there is a feature that regularly recurs in analyses of the topic, it is the detection of a widespread felt loss of control and stability in life. It is the recording of a widely experienced unexpected and unprecedented inability to acquire or maintain stability, and in particular an inability to form time-resistant life plans or even medium term projects (see e.g., Richard Sennett 1998).

Armin Nassehi (1993) writes that the present “loses its capacity for planning and shaping”, where the “present of action [...] cannot shape this future because of the dynamics, risks, and vast amount of simultaneity within the present, which it cannot control at all”.² Nassehi adds that whereas “Early modernity promised the capacity to shape and control world and time and to initiate and historically legitimate future progress [...] in late modernity, time itself has come to destroy the potential for any form of social or substantial control, influence, or steering”.

Rosa talks of a “new situationalism” which “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”. This current situationalism is designated ‘new’ in that the contingencies involved are no longer largely exogenous to society but, to the contrary, an “endogenous product of social structures themselves”. The situation is thus viewed as inconsistent with “the ideal of the autonomous and reflective *leading* of a life [which] requires adopting long-term commitments which bestow a sense of direction, priority, and ‘narratability’ to life”.

If stability, facilitating a degree of control and planning in life, is seemingly being undermined, thereby giving rise to feelings of social acceleration, it seems appropriate and is likely essential, that before I go about questioning the cause of its loss, I first enquire into its nature and how it arises in the first place where it does. For, we will see, stability has always been a contingent achievement. So I turn first of all to elaborate a little upon the nature of relevant aspects of social reality.

2.2 The Social Domain

I take the category *social reality* (or social world or domain or realm) to denote the set or totality of all phenomena, if any, whose existence necessarily depends on human interaction.

¹Or as Rosa (2003) puts it: “However, empirically measuring (rates of) social change remains an unresolved challenge” (p. 7). He adds: “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”.

²Quoted in Rosa (2003, p. 22).

It is clear that most putative examples of phenomena designated as social in this manner – from language, to money and all other human artefacts *qua* social objects to embodied personalities – are not only brought into being through human interaction, but in part or whole remain dependent on human interaction for any continuing existence.

Of course human artefacts usually have a (mind-independent) physicality, including physical capacities, that once formed may be thought to continue in existence largely independently of human interaction. But the specific (always social) identities of these objects always depend on use, and can be transformed even if or when certain physical capacities remain the same throughout. Thus many of the intrinsic physical capacities of a human construction may remain in place even though the latter may serve first as a church or a barn and later as a family home or a market place; its social identity is always dependent on human interaction and interpretation.³

This is the case of all social phenomena; their continuing existence as specific social items depends, whether in part or whole, upon their being reproduced through human interaction. It follows that they, or aspects of them, are always inescapably contingent as well as processual in nature. Because human interaction is always potentially transformative in nature there is usually some change in continuity, even for social phenomena that turn out to be relatively enduring; all such social reproduction is liable simultaneously to involve some transformation. Each local market, university, home, embodied personality, industrial dispute, football team or game, grocer shop, factory, industrial region, etc., is, to the extent it is identified as some entity that is reproduced over time, never identical in every detail from one day/moment/event to the next. Change is not (or not just) something that happens to such phenomena but rather is an essential feature of each instance in this category.

So, if and where social stability occurs, it must, as already noted, usually be seen as something of an achievement and as inherently contingent. But what precise form does stability take, especially the form that concerns us here, one that affects human plans and co-ordination? Here I briefly sketch certain relevant features of social reality that I have defended at length elsewhere, which ultimately bear on the question posed. The fundamental categories are those of social system, collective practice, right and obligation.

³Thus although I agree with Margaret Archer (2014) that the object that we now call the Rosetta Stone retained its dispositional capacity to be intelligible, including to serve as a translation manual, throughout the period since it was first made, its identity was not that of a translation manual during the period that it was used as building material in the construction of Fort Julien (near the town of Rashid [Rosetta] in the Nile Delta), and nor even was it interpreted/constituted as such when the stele of which it was originally a part was erected in 196 BC following the coronation of King Ptolemy V (and inscribed with the decree that established the divine cult of the new ruler).

2.2.1 *Social Systems*

By a system I simply mean a set of elements that have an integrity considered together as a whole or totality, where the latter is composed out of the (clearly more basic) elements, but, in contrast to an aggregate or a mere collection, is formed via an organisation of the basic elements. The organising structure of any system emerges simultaneously with the emergent totality that comprises the system as a whole, and both renders the (organised) basic elements *components* of the system and also accounts for any emergent causal powers of the emergent system or totality. A further feature is that this organising structure connects a subset of components to features of the environment; a system always exists in some context.

Consider the construction of a bridge. Here various items or materials may be brought together to form components of a totality, including, perhaps, pieces of wood, brick, stone, cast and/or wrought iron, mild, high-tensile and/or alloy steel, aluminium, steel-reinforced and/or pre-stressed concrete, glass-reinforced plastic, and so forth. These are organised or assembled,⁴ in a specific environment, and in a manner such that the resulting totality allows the crossing of a space, perhaps containing a river (whilst the resulting totality itself can survive potential stress caused by such factors as bending, compression, impact, oscillation, pressure, tension, torsion, vibration; contraction, corrosion, erosion, expansion, fatigue, friction, rain, river flow, sea-water, scouring, temperature changes, tidal flow, turbulence, waves, wind erosion, wind gusts, wind pressure etc.).

The totality that is the bridge clearly emerges simultaneously with the organising relational structure of the materials enlisted as components, and, significantly, the latter organising structure makes a (causal) difference to the emergent causal powers of the totality. Were the resulting bridge to be taken apart again and the various materials assembled blindly, it is unlikely that any resulting outcome would possess the causal properties of a bridge. The arrangement matters; it is a type of *formal* causation (see Lawson 2012, 2013).

Over time, of course, the physical composition of the bridge has to be maintained, and this is an activity that is typically quite separate from its use. As already noted, however, aspects of all social phenomena, *qua* social phenomena, are not only produced by human interaction, but continually reproduced by it. Most of these, and certainly the more interesting, social *systems* are, *qua social* systems, not only produced and reproduced by human interaction, but continually reproduced precisely through the everyday human interactions which they facilitate. In these

⁴Of course, assembly is more than a matter of simply connecting the parts in an additive fashion. Welding produces high temperatures, which produce expansion and distortion; so that management of the cooling process is vital (poor quality control of welding may allow changes detrimental to the properties of the metal). And the weight distribution of a structure can change during assembly, requiring precautions such as adjustable jacking. Forcing two parts into alignment produces unforeseen stresses that can lead to cracking.

systems human individuals are amongst the components. And it is through the sum total of their activities, qua components, that the system is (where it is) reproduced.

Think in particular of local communities, firms, markets, seminars, financial centres, workplaces, motorway networks, and so on. Each is an emergent form of organisation or social system, possessing novel emergent causal powers at the level of the emergent totality, albeit causal powers that can only ever be realised through the actions of its organised members. Each system possesses an organising structure that both facilitates certain individual actions of system components, at least where these are human individuals, and is subsequently reproduced (or transformed) through those very actions.⁵

All social systems can clearly be nested and/or overlapping. And, of course emergent social systems typically include as components not merely human individuals but also material constructs or artefacts that for the most part at least pre-existed the systems in which they are positioned (even if the latter material elements were designed and constructed – typically as systems – with precisely the intention of their functioning as components of the larger totality).

At an abstract level, then, a relevant notion of social stability seems to mean something like the relative durability of (always contingently reproduced, typically nested or overlapping) social systems. Primarily this appears to occur in at least two forms, the first of which relates to an environmentally closed, or system-in-equilibrium, and the second of which relates to an environmentally open, or far-from-equilibrium, system. Briefly put, an equilibrium system obtains when there are no disturbances from the outside environment; a far-from-equilibrium system in contrast requires perpetual inputs from the environment in order to endure and be stable. Naturalistic examples of the former include the atom, and of the latter a home fire or a garden bonfire, which needs constant inputs of oxygen and fuel, the latter possibly varying in form.

Notice, that there is no reason in principle why a far-from-equilibrium system cannot evolve in a relative stable fashion over time, due to a (possibly gradual) transformation in its manner of organisation or/and to variation (possibly systematic) in the necessary stability-facilitating external inputs. If stability is to be found in the social world it must clearly be of the latter far-from-equilibrium form.

2.2.2 *Collective Practices*

Fundamental to actually existing social-system stability, I elsewhere argue (see especially Lawson 2012), is the prevalence of conventions or what I prefer to term *collective practices*. A collective practice is simply a specific way of going on that is

⁵And of course even the bridge *qua bridge* (rather than some unidentified material object) is continually reproduced through human interaction.

recognised within some identifiable community as the *accepted* way of proceeding with regards to achieving a particular outcome. The idea of acceptance or collective acceptance here implies no necessary approval. It is, rather, effectively a status, carrying, and resting upon, community-wide recognition, and serving to constitute a way of proceeding as the done way. Driving on a particular (fixed) side of the road might be a simple example of a way of proceeding that is recognised within a community. Notice that there is always a range of behaviours consistent with any given collective practice.

Collective practices, however they originate, can be, and very often are (in being so 'accepted'), functional in the sense of serving to co-ordinate social interaction, by indicating to all would-be (and/or permitted-to-be) participants within a specific community, how, amongst various conceivable ways of proceeding to a certain end, things are in fact done by members of a community. In this way they facilitate relative stability and, thereby, a degree of predictability. For this reason the idea of acceptance bound up with collective practices not only expresses the done thing (or things), but usually also carries connotations of normativity. Indeed, collective practices are often referred to just as norms.

Normativity arises because, or when, the noted indicative aspect of any collective practice is also interpreted as stipulative, as indicating how an individual *ought* to proceed. Collective practices, in order to facilitate coordination and stability, etc., need to persist, and this usually *requires* that relevant individuals conform to (various interacting sets of) them.

The normative aspect of collective practices thus gives rise to the notion of *obligation*, a category that, along with the associated category of *right*, will be seen to be central to the conception of reality being developed. Obligations are accepted ways in which relevant community members are expected to proceed; rights are accepted ways of going on in which relevant individuals may proceed. If we are a part of, or wish to 'enter', or 'join', a community, then, when appropriate, we are under the obligation to adhere to its norms or collective practices. At the same time, when we are part of a community, we are permitted to enter into at least some of the community's collective practices and where this is so these must be seen as rights. Parenthetically, expressions of the content of acceptances under their purely indicative aspect, understood as stipulations, can be called social rules (see Lawson 1997a, chapter 12, 2003, chapter 2).

So social interaction is structurally organised, and is so through a generalised reliance upon collective practices involving rights and obligations. The latter ultimately are a reproduced condition of stability in social affairs.

Notice that the role of rights and obligations in structuring social life presupposes the human capacities of being able to be trustworthy and to be trusting of others, of being willing and able both to make and to keep promises and other commitments, and to believe that others can and will also do so. It should be clear that these human capacities are necessary conditions for the interactions involved to occur, for obligations in particular to be efficacious. As such these capacities of trusting and being trustworthy, etc., qualify for being considered as the glue of social reality, as the adhesive that enables the organisational structure to achieve a degree of binding.

2.2.3 *Organisation in Process*

So community life is organised; amongst other things it is organised or arranged by way of emergent collective practices and their inherent rights and obligations that structure human interaction. Taken together, human beings, their trusting capacities and their interactions, along with the structural features of collective practices that organise the interactions, amount to a social totality or set of totalities. And the latter have causal powers. A motorway system for example, structured by rules of the highway-code, has powers of co-ordinating motoring practices that are irreducible to those of any of its various motoring components; and a language system has powers to facilitate communication that are irreducible to those of any individual communicator.

Collective practices, though providing structure, do however remain inescapably processual in nature; it is important to avoid reification here. The network of existing collective practices is a condition of individual practices, and the sum total of individual practices, each a token of a collective practice, serves to reproduce and/or transform the total network of collective practices. Collective practices are both conditions and consequences of the individual practices they facilitate. Their mode of being is precisely that of being reproduced and/or transformed through the individual practices or activities that they facilitate; they are inherently processual. The overall conception then is one of organisation-in-process.

Thus although community stability is achieved through a reliance upon given sets of collective practices along with associated rights and obligations, all stability remains *relative* and *contingent*. Collective practices are indicative of how it is possible to go on in ways that are currently accepted within a community, but it is only through individuals participating in available collective practices that the latter are reproduced (when they are). Equally, through such participation, whether by design or by accident, practices or aspects of them are frequently (and sometimes continuously) transformed.

2.2.4 *Division of Practice, Process and Events*

Within any community there is also a division of collective practice. It is accepted that certain practices can be followed by some but not by others. In order to follow some practices it is necessary to belong to a specific sub-group within a community.

In addition, practices that are accessible only to some community members are always oriented to, and indeed are constituted in relation to (that is, are *internally-related* to) different practices accessible only to others. Thus the collective practices followed by students are constituted in relation to those followed by teachers; those followed by employers, landlords/ladies, seminar presenters, sellers, etc., are constituted in relation to those followed, respectively, by employees, tenants, seminar participants, buyers; and so forth. All collective practices then cohere and interrelate with others, and are constitutively interdependent.

In all of this, the framework of acceptances remains fundamental. In any community there are accepted ways of proceeding for each group, oriented to the collective practices of other groups. Similarly, there are usually accepted ways of allocating individuals to any particular group, processes of allocation that are themselves each a form of collective practice. Thus the appointment of a particular individual as a university professor, say in the UK, will proceed according to university and nationally accepted ways of making such appointments, and so on.

2.2.5 *Positions*

A category bound up with these different groupings is that of *social position*.⁶ A position, or rather position occupancy, is an accepted status that confers a

⁶I am aware that where I use the category *social position* that of *social role* is employed by some and notably by Margaret Archer (see especially Archer 1995, 2000). Although there is seemingly little disagreement over the nature of the features of social reality that the competing terms are used to designate, I stick with the term social position, not just (and not least) because this is the terminology I have adopted throughout my contributions, but also because, on balance, I continue to think it the more appropriate.

In the text I shall argue that associated with (the status that I am calling) social position are sets of rights and obligations.

Archer's reason for preferring the category role is that she associates the term position with various groupings such as the downtrodden or poor or homeless or nouveaux riches where the individuals included are not the bearers of any associated rights and obligations. These, Archer argues, are heterogeneous categories that do not correspond to social identities, as outlined above.

I agree that the downtrodden, the poor, the homeless as well as nouveaux riches are not the sorts of categories that indicate social status of a sort that carries associated rights and responsibilities (though heterogeneity itself is not a problem *per se*; there are many types of UK citizen but still UK citizenship brings [positional] rights and obligations). But I would not refer to these sorts of categories (poor, downtrodden, homeless, etc) as social positions either. For sure, in describing an individual as, say, poor one might interpret this statement as meaning that the income of the individual is associated with a 'position' (or more likely a range of positions), on some considered-to-be relevant income distribution, and so on. But here the word position has a different meaning, and referring to being poor as a position is really an imprecise short hand.

Role too can be given different, including loose, meanings as in 'accepting to take on the role of X (or even a poor person) in some play'; or 'acknowledging that everyone at the football club played some role in the team's defeat and relegation'; or X likes to act the role of a fool.

The reason I prefer the term position on balance is that it has the connotation of existing beyond simply individual choice, being ultimately a community property. In all cases, even in the loose usages just discussed, we speak easily of individuals *taking on* roles, whereas individuals are more often said to be *allocated to*, placed in, or finding themselves in, positions. Although, individuals may indeed chose to apply for, or work to achieve, certain positions, most cannot be taken on just like that, whereas roles, it seems to me, do very often carry this individualistic connotation, and for that reason does seem to me to express far more subjective and temporary designations. Ultimately of course the meaning will be clear from, and perhaps determined only in, context. Anyway readers should be aware that the category social position as utilised here is much the same as social role as employed by Archer and others.

social identity; to be allocated to a specific position is to acquire the social identity of being so positioned. For example, an individual allocated to the position university professor, acquires the social/positional identity of (is accepted within the community as possessing the status of) university professor.

Rights and obligations are now clearly seen to be associated with positions and thereby group membership *within* a wider community. If some positional practices *may* be participated in by a specific set of appropriately positioned individuals, being the content of positioned *rights*, a subset of those same practices *should* be undertaken by these positioned individuals, being the subject of positioned *obligations*.

Thus in the contemporary UK, an individual positioned as a university professor may have the right to borrow books from several libraries, to work in an office at all hours, to attend seminars in various departments. These rights are not available to all members of the wider UK community. But the individual is typically not only allowed, but additionally required, to give lectures and set and mark examinations, etc; these are included amongst the employment obligations of the position.

Wherever positioned rights are to be found there are always *accompanying* and *matching* obligations. Focussing on a *given position*, any rights from which the occupier benefits are always *accompanied* by obligations. Indeed, a position is essentially a locus of a set of specific rights and obligations, where occupants of an accepted position are agents or bearers of these rights and obligations and typically possess a status or identity associated with them.

But any given position is always constituted in relation to *other positions*. And the rights of individuals in one group over individuals in another are *matched* by obligations of the latter group members with respect to the former. If university teachers have the rights to set exams, students have the obligation to sit them, just as students have the right to expect the exams to be marked, and fairly, and teachers have an obligation to undertake this. Even the rights of university professors to use offices, and libraries etc, are matched to obligations of other positioned individuals or groups to ensure there are processes in place serving to fund, facilitate and maintain university offices, libraries, lecture halls, and so forth.

2.2.6 *Power and Social Relations*

If positional rights and obligations ultimately relate to ways in which certain positioned individuals can influence the behaviours of others, it follows that rights and obligations are in effect positional *powers*, respectively positive and negative powers. For the agents of rights (positive powers) have the causal capacity intentionally to get others, the subjects of those rights (those with relevant obligations, or negative powers) *to do something, whether or not the latter want to do that something*. Obligations give reasons for action, and power exists so long as the 'subjects' in question are willing (and able) to fulfil their obligations.

Now if individuals are organised through being positioned as components of a system, and if the various positions are interrelated by way of connecting rights and obligations, then it is the latter powers that most qualify as the content of the category *social relation*. In other words a *social relation* just is (or is first and foremost) an accepted set of (matching) rights and obligations holding between, and connecting, two or more positions or occupants of positions. Social interaction can be understood as the contingent actualisations of such social relations. And because rights and obligations are forms of power, there is a sense in which all social relations are power relations.

So a fundamental feature of modern social reality is a multitude of interrelating multi- component collective practices, processes and events bound up with an emergent structure of positional powers, comprising rights and obligations or social relations, always in process.⁷ If relative stability is to be a feature of social reality allowing a degree of control such that meaningful, reasonably time resistant, life plans can be formed, this seems to suppose durability at the level of positions and the associated positional rights, obligations and collective practices.

In all this, if to repeat, the glue that renders these social relations as binding as they are is comprised of the human capacities to be trustworthy and to trust, to enter into and to keep to commitments, and to accept that others are able and willing, to do so as well.

2.3 Seeking the Source of Feelings of Significant or Accelerating Social Change

On the basis of this conception, how might social instability emerge in a manner or extent as to constitute, or at least impart a widespread impression of a significant speeding up of the rate of social change?

Given the framework outlined above the answer is presumably through the play of mechanisms that somehow work to undermine, in an unprecedented manner, accepted positional collective practices and associated rights and obligations of a sort that have grounded a degree of medium to long term planning of projects, and so non-insignificant control in our lives.

What sort of mechanisms could bring about such a situation? It seems to me that two in combination are likely largely responsible, or anyway carry this potential. The first is the impulse imparted by perpetual technological change made

⁷Parenthetically, inanimate objects also, in effect, acquire their social identities (a feature discussed in the introductory section on 'The social domain' above) through being positioned within a social system. Various objects when suitably positioned take on the identity of cash, passports, identity cards, deeds of ownership, wedding rings, and so forth. And once more this all depends on community acceptance. Of course, when inanimate objects are so socially positioned, the capacities or powers most closely associated with their positioning take the form *not* of rights and obligations but of system functions.

possible by continuous advances in science. The second is the relentless pursuit of power (always over others) under capitalism, in particular by those who seek novel opportunities in technological developments for advancing their power. Let me briefly elaborate these suggested mechanisms for change, starting with the latter, namely the (technologically grounded) pursuit of power.

2.3.1 Power and Its Pursuit

Unlike components of non-social systems, human individuals can reflect on their own positioning or positional options (as components of systems) and seek to change (or defend) them. It is thus a none-too surprising feature of the social realm that much human endeavour is oriented to the pursuit and/or control/influence or creation of system-positional powers over others.

Clearly if community sanctioned power (over others) mostly takes the form of positional rights (and obligations), it follows that much of the intentional *pursuit* of power in modern societies takes the form of human activities whereby those involved seek either (1) to acquire occupancy of existing relatively powerful positions, (2) to transform (or defend) the rights and obligations associated with existing positions already occupied, or (3) to create and then occupy (or have allocated to associates, etc.), novel positions with emergent associated rights.

All three forms of activity can conceivably be linked to questions of stability. But before considering how, let me first elaborate a little on the nature of the latter path of seeking to create novel sets of positions. The former paths both of individuals seeking entry to established powerful positions, and also of positioned individuals and groups concerned to improve/defend existing positional rights and obligations, are familiar enough topics of social theory, especially within the literature on industrial relations, human resource management, labour market and gender studies. But the manner in which particular individuals and groups are able, often with relative ease, to increase their power over others merely by creating *novel* positions which they then frequently themselves occupy, perhaps deserves more attention. It is also a path or strategy that is especially relevant to the mechanisms of social destabilisation that I come eventually to discuss below.

This third path for increasing power is usually achieved via the process of creating additional social systems, perhaps via the device of declaring novel 'legal entities' or some such (for example, a firm or a new academic society based around a journal), employing established procedures and/or collective practices of the relevant community. The creation of these novel systems of formal entities tends to disguise the fact that basically what is pursued and created is a new structure of power relations. Indeed the creation of a novel system or entity is often, and perhaps usually, derivative of, and subservient to (and tends to work either to legitimise or to mask), the power aspirations of the individuals involved; the point of forming and maintaining devices like companies and other formal bodies is precisely to establish a novel structure of power relations between people.

Of course this has been the pattern throughout human history. Whether or not it was the intention, empowerment through the formation of systems arguably characterises the emergence of tribes, castes, nations, institutionalised religions, political parties, trade unions, the institution of marriage, research groups, and pretty much every other form of self-recognising social community.

Sometimes the objective of transforming the structure of power (over others) is or has been explicitly stated. The formation of trade unions, for example, has always been a self-conscious, and explicit attempt to alter the distribution of industrial power between employer and employee, in order to reduce the disadvantages of the latter. The formation of trade unions or combinations of waged employees, has allowed the creation of positions of worker-representatives, with associated powers for those so positioned to initiate programs of collective resistance or 'industrial disobedience', with the result that workers are usually better able to defend themselves against immediate threats to standards of pay and work conditions.

Possibly the most powerful emergent social system at any point in time takes the form of a national or regional government, or an equivalent. The latter, through its functionaries, usually has the capacity to control the land of the relevant community, to monopolise 'legalised' violence, to print money, collect taxes, make laws, and so forth. Of course no matter how powerful a specific community sub-system such as a governmental body might be, it is dependent ultimately on members of the relevant community adhering to, that is meeting the obligations that structure accepted collective practices, which maintain the existing distribution of power, conditions that, as current and recent events in, for example, the Middle East, North Africa and Western Asia reveal, cannot always be taken for granted.

To return, however, to the more general point, modern societies are characterised by social relations that are constituted in terms of positional rights and obligations, representing forms of positional powers (always over others). The community based opportunities available to us all depend upon the positional powers we can access. Thus, not surprisingly, a significant feature of social life in modern communities is the prevalence of activities oriented to getting access to, and/or transforming (or just maintaining/defending), and/or creating novel forms of, positional powers (over others). However we look at it, a feature of social reality is the continuous formation, transformation, expansion and dissolution of social-systemic entities, with an attendant continuous expansion, contraction, shaping and reshaping, reproduction and transformation of the distribution of societal power, affecting us all at some level.

If perceptions of instability are rife these likely reflect in part the loss of expected access to particular positions, say as salaried worker, or a mortgage holder, as well as in part the emergence of novel opportunities in the form of unprecedented positions. But it seems that the most likely source or ground of *perceptions* of such instability is any loss of previously occupied positions and/or rights and obligations already possessed that govern associated collective practices. For it is the reproduction of given positions and associated collective practices, rights and obligations that most immediately ground the forming of individual projects and life plans, and condition the development of stable personal identities.

But if this potentially destabilising loss is considered undesirable, how could it occur? After all, the nature of rights and obligations are matters usually subject to negotiation. So how could unwanted change occur, including the undermining of rights of negotiation?

The traditional answer to any such question is usually held to be bound up with the issue of developments in technology; for the latter clearly frequently do afford opportunities for restructuring. However it is essential to avoid assuming a technological determinism here, whereby opportunities afforded by technological developments are automatically taken on board. Rather, the nature of technological change and how it impacts (and on whom or on what) is something that always warrants elaboration. Let me consider this issue.

2.4 The Question of Changes in Technology

The term technology can mean both (a) the *study* of arts, skills and crafts involved in the making, modification, and usage, of methods, tools, machines, techniques, systems or organisations to be positioned in a manner as to extend human capabilities (usually by solving a problem, improving upon a pre-existing solution to a problem, achieving a goal or performing a specific function), as well as (b) the collection of appropriately positioned tools, machinery, modifications, arrangements and procedures, *resulting* from such a study, and *servicing to extend human capabilities*. Here I mainly use the term according to the latter meaning.

Technology, so interpreted, and specifically the appearance of new forms can affect social change in as much as it allows existing products and practices to be transformed or ushers in new products and/or practices, requiring a transformation in the nature of social systems or the emergence of new ones. The fact that developments in technology so understood can carry the potential to bring about a rapid change in society is hardly new and has been observed at least since the Medieval Ages. Under capitalist competition, producers, *qua* capitalists, have incentives to seek constantly to revolutionise aspects of their products or instruments (techniques, processes, and organisation) of production either to steal an advantage over others or merely to avoid falling behind. Marx and Engels (1848 [1975]) express the situation as follows:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.

Many have read this passage as advancing a form of economic determinism. It need not be so read, of course, if interpreted as describing only a definite tendency, as I suspect it should be. There are always countervailing tendencies to any given one, as Marx repeatedly emphasised, with countervailing tendencies to that described in the above passage unpinning the very Marxian idea of uneven development.

2.4.1 *Technological Innovation*

Consider how countervailing tendencies can arise. A fundamental feature of all technological innovation and diffusion is a two stage process of first *assembly* (or *intrinsic organisation*⁸) and second *positioning* (or *enrolment within a wider system*). Let me consider each stage in turn.

Any technological product itself takes the form of an emergent system, whereby existing products (mostly themselves also [technological] systems) with given powers are *assembled* or *organized*. That is, they are essentially combined as components of the novel system, and in a manner such that the novel emergent system possesses emergent powers not possessed by any of its components. It is easy to see that this is the form of cars, engines, mobiles, computers and ultimately of all human contrivances (see Clive Lawson 2012).

The second stage in the process of technological innovation is the *positioning* or *enrolment* of new technological products within community systems (again see Clive Lawson 2012).

Where the latter community systems are already in place, enrolment will usually involve a change in the practices of some individuals. Indeed technical change is often designed precisely with the intention of reducing the reliance of various production processes on fallible or non-fully controllable human beings.

Thus, in the workplace at least, the positioning or enrolment of new technology tends usually to impinge upon existing rights and obligations of some, and perhaps of very many, individuals or groups, where these rights and obligations have typically resulted from various sets of negotiations. Proposed changes will thus themselves very often be subject to negotiation. In these negotiations various revised rights and obligations may be agreed; others will be contested in due course. Either way, wherever positional powers are involved, some positioned individuals stand to lose out (or at least perceive themselves to be liable to lose out) from impending change, whatever its form. Consequently there is always the potential for change to be *resisted* where the ability to do so exists or is developed. Thus, any actual change will depend not just upon the causal capacities of new technological products, or even upon the ingenuity with which they are handled, but also, and especially, with how they are received in specific communities.

⁸A stage that Clive Lawson (2012) describes as one of 'isolation'.

A fundamental category of social interaction bound up with social change and instability is thus that of *resistance*, not least in the context of processes of positioning or enrolment of technology. Yet as far as I can see, outside industrial relations research (and very often within it) the importance of resistance is overly neglected.

Elsewhere I have contributed to the literature that seeks to document in detail how changes in the workplace have been resisted at different times and places with varying degrees of success (Lawson 1980, 1981, 1997a, chapter 18, 1997b). Generally speaking, it is found that there are, as noted, almost always reasons for some groups to resist the dissemination of any developments in technology and, where resistance is feasible, there has been a tendency everywhere for it to be manifested in some form. Of course which group has the power and/or incentive to resist depends always on context. Even where it occurs in the workplace it may not be the workforce itself that resists; it may even be undertaken by the owners and/or management of a firm, as I have also explored elsewhere (Lawson 1981, 1997b).

2.5 So What Has Changed?

This then is the backdrop to the emergence of generalised perceptions or feelings of social acceleration. Yet something must be significantly different for these feelings of helplessness and so forth to have emerged. Specifically, if traditionally resistance or its potential has been key to understanding the speed of social change, in particular to preventing it happening faster than is deemed desirable, what explains the observation that those affected by the current situation of social change widely experience it as characterised by, or grounding, a generalised loss of autonomy and control?

A fundamental ingredient of the answer, it seems to me, is that the most recent spate of technological advance has taken the form of imparting to instruments of production an unprecedented mobility, meaning ease of transportability, across contexts. This applies especially to information technology. In short, a very significant feature of ongoing developments lies in the nature of new technology: it is, to repeat, highly mobile across contexts, and these include continents.

Let me be clear what I am *not* saying. Specifically, if perhaps controversially, I am not claiming that the capacities of technological objects that we regard as in some way most essential (to the way any such objects come to be identified) are somehow invariable in relation to context whilst the capacities of *human beings that are drawn upon in their positioned activities are not* (even though some seem to take a relative invariability of causal capacities in different contexts to be almost definitional of technology).

As I say this claim may be controversial. Let me attempt to unpack and elaborate it by way of considering the following reasonable sounding though contrary position:

The capacities of artefacts, such as say hammers, chairs, televisions, and mobiles can function in many different contexts, whereas those of, say, judges, princesses, witchdoctors and cricketers are far more restricted; in short the capacities of artefacts are far more impervious to, or invariable across, context than those of human individuals.

A sentence such as the italicised one, I believe, is, if perhaps consistent with widespread apprehensions, not only wrong but masks several confusions. However, a consideration of it usefully allows me to identify various factors that I take to be significant to the issues under discussion.

First, it is clear that the causal powers of a (object positioned as) a hammer to crack a nut, or of (an object positioned as) a chair to facilitate someone sitting down, can be exercised in any context, whereas the causal powers of, say, a (individual positioned as a) judge to imprison, or of a (individual positioned as a) princess to act royally, are highly restricted to a specific community. It may seem then that we have a real contrast between the positioning of people and of artefacts.

But a comparison of this sort is misleading, not least because a hammer and a chair are not typical of artefacts. Certainly, a hammer and a chair are somewhat different from, say, a television and a mobile in that the causal powers possessed by the latter objects cannot be activated by a single user without the participation of others. In the latter examples there has to be a network of providers of signals and energy resources and so forth. Where such participation is involved there may be resistance to the introduction of technological objects, even when the supporting material (technological) conditions for the artefacts' capacities are in place. The Amish for example limit (or have limited) the use of such technological products as televisions and mobiles in their communities.

If then we compare the social causal powers of, say, judges with those of more typical artefacts such as televisions we find that in each case enlistment in community systems is involved, that people and technological artefacts alike need to be positioned, and in neither case need this be straightforward. Just as I earlier argued that the allocation of individuals to positions is a matter of power play, so, I am suggesting, is the enrolment of technological products, particularly within the workplace. And the kinds of mechanisms involved in each case have a lot in common.

An appropriate human comparator to the causal power of a hammer to crack a nut would be, say, the causal power of a human individual to use the hammer in this manner, or to run and jump. The latter too are not especially tied to context, nor are they typically subject to community negotiation.

Second, it may be thought that, whether or not their powers can be activated, a hammer is a hammer, a chair is a chair and a television is a television whatever the context whereas an individual is a judge in only in a specific context. So, once more, it may seem that we have here a real contrast between the positioning of people and of artefacts.

But again the claim is erroneous, particularly in the misleading manner in which the former part of the suggested contrast is stated. For although the causal capacities of an object to crack a nut, or to facilitate sitting down, may exist independently of context, the *identity* of an object as hammer or as chair does depend on community positioning. Whilst, say, a (object positioned as a) small sacred bronze statute may

have the causal powers to crack a nut, or a larger object positioned as a work of art may afford the possibility of being comfortably sat upon, there may well be objections within any community in which the objects reside to their being positioned/identified as hammers or chairs. However strange it may seem, the same is true of an object initially designed to eventually serve as, say, a television. If a boat transporting the latter object sinks and the object itself is washed up on an isolated island (perhaps with no electricity) and used/positioned as, say, a household ornament, then the latter is precisely what it is. Identity is always community dependent, and turns on community positioning.⁹ In parallel, of course, whilst I may be able to use a hammer or run and jump whatever the context, that does not mean that my community is ready to identify me as a builder or an athlete.

Finally, and being careful to ensure that the two errors just noted are avoided, it may yet be held that there is at least a real difference between the positioning of, on the one hand, objects as televisions and mobiles, and, on the other hand, individuals as judges and princesses, in that the former objects have the capacities that we associate with televisions and mobiles whatever the context (i.e., however they are actually identified and irrespective of whether the other enabling [technological] conditions are in place), whereas the latter individuals do not have the capacities to function as judges and princesses etc. except in specific communities.

But even this statement is not correct, and in particular the latter part of the contrast is erroneous. For, *in both cases* where the relevant capacities are possessed, they are so independent of context, backup conditions and identity. Here it is essential to maintain a distinction between human capacities and positional powers. Capacities can be impervious to context even where positional powers are not. Human individuals gain powers in the forms of rights and obligations though being allocated to community positions, or having the latter allocated to them.¹⁰ But the capacities exercised in these positions, when drawing on rights etc, are typically (though of course not always¹¹) already held. Thus specific individuals are usually found to possess the capacities to do the physical acts involved in, say, passing sentences, being a figurehead, giving lectures, arresting people, or playing in a team sport, before being appropriately positioned as a judge, princess, university lecturer, police constable, Manchester United footballer, etc. But, without being appropriately positioned, these individuals do not have the right to undertake the

⁹At first sight this claim may seem to be contradicted by the idea that museums often seek to 'identify' an object correctly. But this is not so. The museum is itself a part of some community. In the context of this community, the object is positioned and so identified as a museum piece. Those described as seeking to identify it are really seeking to determine how it was (possibly differently) positioned in one (or perhaps in several different) formerly existing community(ies).

¹⁰Of course, some may so *allocate themselves*, through, say, invasion and replacing a current incumbent, or creating a novel post and in effect allocating it to themselves (though often via a ceremony where some other appointed person does the anointing etc).

¹¹Some capacities may be realised only on the job, i.e., after being appropriately positioned. But when these capacities were undeveloped they were so for all contexts, and once developed they thereafter exist (to the extent they do endure) whatever the context.

relevant physical acts, or at least to perform them in a context where they would carry specific meanings, and in particular they cannot call upon any required (internally-related) obligatory co-actions of others.

It is the right to use the relevant capacities, or to use them in a specific context, that comes with positioning. But where these capacities are possessed by particular individuals, they are what they are whatever the context. However, if it is the right to utilise these capacities that varies with context, as I have tried to indicate with the examples elaborated above, this feature applies equally to using the capacities of technological products. The positioning of any technological product, as with the positioning of human individuals, involves a process of negotiation.

So with these clarifications (as I hope them to be) to hand, let me repeat my claim regarding the feature of the new technological products that I believe *does* mark them out as significant in the account I am providing.

It is this: the newly developed technological products are far more mobile than before, mobile enough indeed to be easily moved around the globe, and now far more so than their human counterparts. Although both technological products and human beings have the causal capacities to move anywhere and have capacities that can be utilised in any situation where the technologically supporting and positional conditions are right, human beings, for many reasons – desires, contrasting local work conditions, family obligations, immigration controls, nationalism, language barriers, cultural grounding, fear, commitments in general – either chose not to be, or are prevented from being, as mobile in fact as technological products have recently become. There is little doubt that the developments in technology in question do allow increased human mobility, a feature noticeable especially in the everyday life world (a topic to which I turn below). But, for the reasons noted, people are not as mobile as are recently developed technological products.

Fundamental to this mobility of technology, it seems to me, is the advent of the microprocessor that commenced around 1980. Although the development of computer technology had been underway since at least the 1940s, especially in the US and Japan, it was the emergence of the microprocessor that allowed the accelerated evolution and widespread take up of computers. The emerging technology bore huge implications for numerous processes, not least those of calculation, (the activity that we now call) word processing, graphic design, monitoring, controlling and regulating, communication, monetary transmission, and storing and analysing data, all leading, by the turn of the century, to the digital revolution in communications.

The unprecedented mobility of technology afforded by these specific developments is significant not least because it allows in turn a spur to the mobility of capital *per se*. The third strategy for redistributing power noted above is to set up novel (branches of) entities or systems so designed to empower those in control of the novel systems. With mobile technology, capital or firms can now more easily than ever before simply relocate to regions that have little or no history of worker resistance. In this manner potential resistance in the form of renegotiations with previous parties to agreements can simply be by-passed. Thus capital continually relocates to parts of the world where resistance is absent or minimal (and regularly threatens to do so further).

These are developments that are often captured via notions of *globalisation*. I stress, though, that if it makes sense to systematise developments under such a heading, there is no suggestion here that these developments are coherent in the sense of being co-ordinated, integrated and so forth. Just as developments in new technological products are often the accidental results of experimental trial and error – especially in terms of combining existing components and ideas (and frequently recombining the results of those combinations), or the unexpected by-products of some unrelated pursuits – so very often are their practical applications. Whilst the former discoveries and developments are carried out in large part in universities and other research centres concerned with extending basic understanding, applications occur mostly in quite unrelated centres of profit seeking activities. The appearances of order or trends within the process, where they emerge, are usually *a posteriori* and contingent, outcomes.

However, not all applications of information technology occur in centres of profit seeking activities. Reinforcing the effects of technological diffusion via profit seeking activities, is an additional factor, identified by Margaret Archer (Chap. 5 in this volume), namely that scientists as producers of information technology themselves have an incentive for its being diffused, and do act in various ways to encourage that diffusion. If it is not so diffused it does not survive; like all the more interesting forms of social phenomena it is reproduced through use. Of course, some scientists are themselves motivated by profit making; however it is notable that the group also includes those who favour free diffusion, including those seeking to have it deployed for developing the cyber-commons, general licensing, peer2peer reciprocity and the like.

It is also the case, of course, that whatever the mechanisms or goals underpinning the tendencies for technology to be diffused, countervailing tendencies typically emerge, especially where technological mobility is bound up with capital mobility. In particular, wherever capital seeks to (re)locate there will usually be some negotiations dependent on contexts, with local vested interests bearing on the outcome.

Even so, no longer must capital typically negotiate with, or primarily with, a workforce or its representatives concerned to protect rights and conditions that had been hard won and shaped by many years of industrial struggle.

In short, capital can now, in a manner that was far more difficult before, locate (or use suppliers located) in countries and regions with little history of industrial resistance, and specifically without any significant achievement of hard wrought workplace rights of practice to be defended. Countries like China, Brazil and India spring easily to mind as places in which such developments are currently significant.

I repeat that even in such locations, local resistance or other obstacles to employer authority, nevertheless usually emerge. In China, for example, where any opposition to the establishment of workplace employee rights might, perhaps, be thought extremely difficult to achieve, it is important to recognise that the labour process consists not simply of the labouring conditions of indigenous firms but also those of factories that are part of, or work for, major international companies such as Apple, Samsung, Microsoft, Motorola, etcetera. Although it is clear that work

conditions – levels of pay, work organisation and in-house living – maintained by such companies, or by the Chinese suppliers to these overseas multinationals, are of a standard (regularly resulting in workplace suicides) that is no longer typically tolerated (and could not easily be negotiated) in countries with a significantly longer experience of industrialization, as in Western Europe and North America, the companies under the control of non-Chinese multinationals in particular, are especially sensitive to any criticism that occasionally emanates from the West.

For example, when in early 2012 the *New York Times* carried stories drawing attention to appalling work conditions that prevail, and in a matter of days social activism sites Change.org and SumOfUs.org collected over 200,000 signatures for petitions calling for improvements in the working conditions at Apple's Foxconn factory, Apple immediately responded by inviting the Fair Labor Association (FLA) to conduct independent, third-party audits of factory conditions at Foxconn, promising to make radical improvements following the FLA report. So, wherever capital locates obstacles, constituting or facilitating forms of resistance, these can appear from somewhere, and very often do. The application of technology usually encounters obstacles to positioning of sorts.

But, of course, capital still achieves far greater control though locating in newly industrialising countries like China. While there are reasons to distrust the 'promises' extracted from companies like Apple anyway,¹² the sorts of improvements to conditions currently proposed fall way short of the standards that have been hard won over many decades in long-industrialised countries like Britain. Although there are efforts by the current UK coalition government and other state agencies, to roll back such rights and protections as have been achieved, these efforts are occurring in contexts where expectations of reasonable work conditions are strong, and, where feasible, are being met with continued resistance.

The point, to repeat, is that in the circumstances, with capital being unprecedentedly mobile, it is far easier to relocate in places like China than to face up to work-based resistance in most countries in the industrial West. Locating overseas is, of course, precisely what Western based multinational companies have been doing.

¹²Indeed, a thorough investigation by China Labor Watch in 2012 (China Labour Watch is an independent not-for-profit organization, founded in 2000, and based in New York, concerned with investigating the conditions of factories in China that produce for some of the largest companies of the U.S. and elsewhere) significant doubt was cast on the sincerity of these promises, concluding that the "FLA's report presents no new findings; all the problems that the FLA raised have been raised in previous reports". In other words, they warn that because "Apple failed to ensure that many needed reforms would be made before, its new commitment should be treated with scepticism". The 2012 China Labour Watch report also found that problems reported were not exclusive to Foxconn but "exist in virtually all other Apple supplier factories, and in many cases are actually significantly more dire than at Foxconn". Needless to say, the sorts of work conditions uncovered in Apple's supply chain by China Labor Watch and other observers are not restricted to suppliers of Apple. For example, in 2011 China Labour Watch carried out three investigations of the South Korean company Samsung Electronics. The investigation into eight factories revealed a long and detailed "array of serious legal violations and labour abuses throughout" See <http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/pro/show-177.html>.

As these practices are exposed and criticised, and as workers in China and elsewhere seek to develop effective means of resistance conditional upon their central positioning in the productive process, the conditions of work will no doubt improve. Yet, most of the world has yet to be industrialised. Africa, in particular, awaits significant industrialisation. As long as capital can keep changing location easily, and this acquired facility of mobility will presumably be maintained, then lasting resistance will be difficult, and so certain conditions for social stability remain undermined.

2.6 Governmental Resistance in the Face of Financial Mobility and Financial Globalisation

Needless to say, the mobility of new technology affects not merely decisions as to where to locate labour processes but also, and perhaps especially, the movement of financial capital. This in turn undermines the abilities of governments either to regulate financial practices or control the flows of funds. That is, technology-driven developments in financial systems, those often systematised in terms of economic or financial globalisation, notably the fiat dollar system, the ending of capital controls, and the free entry and exit of the major banks or operators in other financial systems, have undermined the capacity of most states to underwrite and control their own financial systems.

In particular, the volatility of foreign exchange markets following the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreements, along with financial liberalisation, especially the abandonment of credit controls and the opening up of national financial systems to US operators, afforded an opportunity for a large and profitable expansion of Wall Street trading. Notably, from the mid 1980s these developments allowed investment banks (traditionally companies that merely assisted other companies in raising financial capital, through such means as the issuing of stocks and bonds) increasingly to switch from trading securities on behalf of clients, to proprietary trading, that is to actively trading various financial instruments with their own money as opposed to their customers' money, so as to make a profit for themselves.

Through a series of 'financial innovations', involving the creation of new products and processes, institutional restructuring and oversight structures, Wall Street investment banks have been largely able to escape regulatory constraints and significantly to expand their activities and profits. A shadow banking system has even emerged in London alongside the regulated sector, one that has eventually pushed aside the local agencies and come to dominate the square mile.

The result has been unprecedented instability in financial practices throughout the globe. Often this has been manifested by financial (or asset-price) bubbles. The latter are situations where borrowing and investing are fuelled by expectations of rising prices, only to be met by (a set of events causing) a reversal of expectations and indeed price movements, a period in which the offloading of financial assets (often very quickly) occurs, resulting in a movement typically known as a 'crash'.

In recent times at least, it is conceivable, and even likely, that such bubbles have been brought about intentionally. Large and powerful North Atlantic, and in particular Wall Street, investment banks have repeatedly bought and sold financial and real assets to create and exploit price shifts. The stimulation of asset-price bubbles is a form of this 'speculative arbitrage'. Wall Street investment banks have been able to enter and influence specific markets, especially those emergent market economies of Eastern Europe with small bond or stock markets, first making large speculative profits and then bursting the bubbles by withdrawing.

With the later dot.com bubble, these same banks found that they could gain in the same financial way from bubble bursting in home territory.

The ongoing crisis must be seen, I think, as but the most recent bursting of a bubble, although this time with the banks themselves having been caught up in the fall out. The bubble that resulted in the 2007 credit crunch is significant not only for its size, but also for its nature. In previous over-lending, crises induced by both the source and scale of the problems have been easy to identify, allowing remedial steps of sorts to be taken. This was not to prove to be the case in the recent crash, for reasons that I cannot detail here, but employing devices made possible by developments in technology that put the operations in question beyond any governmental control. I cannot elaborate upon these issues (but see Lawson 2009); but merely note that financial capital mobility, made possible by technological developments, and unprecedentedly outside the reach of national government control or regulation, caused the widespread financial instability that we continue to experience worldwide.

2.7 Everyday Breakdown in the Ability to Resist

The unprecedented mobility of technology affects every-day practices throughout the wider community too. It was not so long ago that the technological devices governing household leisure, including communication activities, were relatively immobile. They were thus both under the control of household heads and, being largely fixed in location, also played a fairly predictable and controlled role in structuring the household system. Their properties were fixed and household members invested in a knowledgeability of their functions with household routines adapting accordingly and at a controlled pace.

With highly mobile new technology the latter form of control is impossible. Indeed, with this emergent situation, users of technology have themselves become somewhat more mobile in their usage of it. This has consequences even at the level of community organisation. Individuals are now tied less than before to specific locations determined by fixity of technologies. Thus communities become less static, less structured by enduring traditions; instead they morph into, or are replaced by, mobile and varying forms or versions of association.

In addition the mobility of the technology, and specifically of information technology, allows the properties of related technologies (e.g., the number of

programmes or applications of [or hosted by] computers and/or mobiles) to expand rapidly. A result is that few individuals ever explore more than a small subset of the possibilities afforded by their technological devices. As a consequence, individuals appear to form a reduced and rather more contingent attachment to their technological possessions, as new products come to be seen as disposable, temporary and not worth the investment of time and other resources that would be required to make them a well understood and stable part of the life world.¹³

All this certainly encourages an orientation of reflexivity towards the use of technology.

This is in some contrast to the enduring reliance on long held tacit skills, as has been the case, say, with traditional forms of reading, writing and communication media in general, and many fundamental forms of leisure activity, perhaps especially concerning audio and visual devices.

Such trends, to the extent they are indeed occurring, no doubt contribute to the feeling that long term planning of lives is no longer feasible, or anyway more difficult, that all aspects of life are becoming increasingly less predictable, warranting ever-more reflexivity in all spheres of activity.

No doubt, it is important not to be overly dichotomous here; Archer (2003, 2007), in particular maintains that we can still plan a life, whilst simultaneously contending that reflexivity is progressively replacing routine action, shaping how we all make our way through the world.¹⁴ But whatever the balance or appropriate nuances, the trends identified do amount in total to a situation systematised and/or experienced by many as a felt sense that the rate of social change is increasing, that society is somehow accelerating.

¹³The issues I focus upon in this section at least, do not deal with phenomena that are at all novel under capitalism. If there is any difference in recent developments it is seemingly that the technological innovations under consideration have been of a nature as to impart a leap in possibilities for individual mobility (simultaneously destabilising frameworks for organising individuals), along with a qualitative decline in the possibilities for attachment to objects within the life world. Certainly the trends in question have been observed before. Consider for example the observations of John Dewey, writing the best part of a century ago:

How can a public be organised, we may ask, when literally it does not stay in place? Only deep issues or those which can be made to appear such can find a common denominator among all the shifting and unstable relationships. Attachment is a very different function of life from affection. Affections will continue as long as the heart beats. But attachment requires something more than organic causes. The very things which stimulate and intensify affections may undermine attachments. For these are bred in tranquil stability; they are nourished in constant relationships. Acceleration of mobility disturbs them at their root. And without abiding attachments associations are too shifting and shaken to permit a public readily to locate and identify itself (1927, pp. 140–1).

¹⁴According to Archer reflexivity works through an ‘internal conversation’, of which she identifies three distinct forms. She thus argues for an ultimately more disaggregated or contextualised approach to assessing the responses of human beings to instability, suggesting that it is a group that she identifies as ‘communicative reflexives’ who find instability the most difficult to handle.

2.8 Conclusion

So, to return to the opening discussion, is society accelerating? Is there coherence to the notion that the rate of social change is speeding up? And if so what lies behind it?

Though it is difficult to be categorical, the kinds of developments elaborated above, if correct, are probably better described as expressing significant qualitative changes in specific regions of the world, rather than an increasing rate of (generalised) social change. Fundamental to it all are changes in the possibilities, and indeed actualities, of capital mobility rendered feasible (along with other developments, especially in the daily life world) of changes in the mobility of new technology.

In further support of this assessment is a widely recorded additional experience whereby time seems to pass too quickly. We, all of us, it is said or felt, lack enough time to do properly even many of those things that used to be well done. Yet advances in technology presumably free up time; they should thus allow us all to do the things we want to do at a more leisurely pace.

The fact that so many actually experience the opposite scenario, points to the problem lying more in the *manner* in which developments in technology are impacting rather than their speed. The cause of it all, I am suggesting, is the unprecedented undermining of previously enduring sets of positional obligations and specifically rights that follows in the wake of the increased mobility of capital according to mechanisms described above.

As such, the apparently widely felt sense of social acceleration may be more a manifestation of a repeated loss of existing bases for any significant control or planning experienced by so many, especially in the West. It is a loss that gives way to a perpetual state of alertness to contingent developments, warranting a rather tiring and time consuming increased reliance on processes of reflexivity and perpetual explicit monitoring of conditions in which traditional relational structures are no longer negotiable in the manner of former times.

Finally, I return to another motivating question (for the broader project with which I am involved), namely inferring any implications of the above speculations, should they be correct, regarding likely developments in the *form* of society.

I suppose the obvious conclusion is that the society of the near future, whether or not there is a sense in which it is accelerating, is likely to (continue to) be characterised by flux, reflexivity and uncertainty, and perhaps to a increasing extent.

However, looking to the longer term, the increased mobility of capital, underpinned by unprecedented mobility of technology, presumably provides an additional spur to existing tendencies towards the 'good society' – to the kind of world in which we all can flourish in our differences – or at least to a society in which capitalist forms of oppression specifically can end.

For as long as large swathes of the globe are not industrialised, and with capital everywhere becoming increasingly mobile, resistance to its excesses, not least within the labour process, can be, and increasingly are being, met by capital relocating to areas that lack any history of industrial resistance. But as

capital becomes increasingly mobile, and its owners act on that mobility, these developments presumably hasten the day when the globe is fully industrialised and capital no longer has any new location to which it can run; the conditions are being laid whereby owners of capital find they lose the ability to play off one group against another with ease.

From this perspective, and despite the destruction it can often bring in its wake, globalisation may be seen as a process that ultimately is laying the conditions for eventual human emancipation.

Of course these speculations identify a tendency at best, and many forces can be imagined as being capable of preventing the ‘good society’s’ actualisation. The possibilities of societal evolution are always highly complex, and never predictable. Even so, if the question posed is what sort of society might result from current developments, then, at least on a good day, a vision of one in which generalised human flourishing is at least feasible, does not seem necessarily out of the question.

Acknowledgments For helpful comments on an earlier draft I am grateful to Margaret Archer and Clive Lawson. For generous financial support for this research I am indebted to the *Independent Social Research Foundation*.

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Late Modernity

Trajectories towards Morphogenic Society

Archer, M. (Ed.)

2014, IX, 240 p. 19 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-03265-8