

Paradoxes of “resonance”: uses and abuses of a metaphor

Introduction

In the past decade, the concept of "resonance" has been revitalized in sociological debates, largely due to the work of Hartmut Rosa and McDonnell et al. These scholars have significantly refined the term, striving to transcend the ambiguities of its popular usage and establish it as a rigorous analytical category within scholarly discourse.

The idea of “resonance” strikes at the core of cultural sociology, focusing on how social audiences “decode” culture (Hall, 1973). However, I argue that the way “resonance” is typically conceptualized has led to a disorienting trend. It is often treated as the key metaphor for cultural reception, collapsing some of the various micro-processes that unfold in this dynamic, specifically its moral and the emotional components. We need a clearer approach—one that narrows the scope of “resonance” and tempers its analytical ambitions. Put differently, we need a kind of Copernican shift: instead of placing “resonance” at the center of cultural-sociological inquiry, we must situate it within a larger constellation of interpretive processes, allowing it to play its proper role (important, but modest) in a wider cosmos of cultural reception.

This paper critically examines the uses—and potential misuses—of the metaphor “resonance” in cultural sociology. Rather than providing an exhaustive or systematic review, it identifies key strengths and limitations of the concept, offering resources for its reformulation as a more effective tool for empirical research. The analysis begins with an examination of the “classical” approaches,

particularly within social movement frame theory, before turning to contemporary reformulations—one by American sociologists Terence McDonnell, Christopher Bail and Iddo Tavory, and another by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. Finally, the paper explores efforts to move beyond the concept, particularly among proponents of the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology.

The “classical” approach: definitional ambivalence

While “resonance” is a common metaphor in the studies of cultural reception and even colloquial jargon, there have been few attempts to formalize it as a scholarly concept and prevent it to become a catch-all category. Two of the “classical” attempts, still influential today, occurred by the end of the 1980s: one by Snow and Benford, as part of their social movement frame theory, and the other by Michael Schudson, as part of his sociology of journalism (another example could be Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). These texts epitomize the most pervasive problem with the use of “resonance”: definitional ambivalence. Moreover, I will argue, this ambivalence is the symptom of a deeper theoretical confusion, which can be traced back even to sociology’s foundational times.

Snow and Benford use the concept of “resonance” in two different ways. First, as positive reception: “Framing efforts strike a responsive chord or resonate within the targets of mobilization” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). And second, as alignment between the initial cultural text and the cultural world of the audiences (which they call “narrative fidelity”, inspired by Fisher, 1984): “Framings resonate with cultural narrations, that is, with the stories, myths, and

folk tales that are part and parcel of one's cultural heritage and that thus function to inform events and experiences in the immediate present” (p. 210).

Schudson uses “resonance” in these same two senses, only that he takes a more convoluted path. He first declares that “a rhetorically effective object must be relevant to and resonant with the life of the audience” (Schudson, 1989, p. 167). From this quotation, it may seem that being relevant and being resonant are two complementary processes. However, Schudson treats them as contiguous. Few pages later he will say, “resonance or relevance” (p. 170), suggesting that the two terms are interchangeable. His examples of resonance further corroborate the equation: “People are more likely to pay attention to an automobile advertisement for the car they have just acquired than they are to be influenced by an ad to buy a car” (p. 168). That is to say: finding something relevant is resonance. Furthermore, Schudson assumes that paying attention itself portends favorable appraisal. “After buying, [people who bought a car] read ads to confirm their investment and to find language to be able to defend it to others” (p. 168). Another of his examples of resonance comes from mass media culture: a television show, a book, or a record album that becomes a “hit” (p. 168). For Schudson, resonance means relevance, and relevance, in turn, means positive reception.

This is the first of Schudson’s connotations of “resonance”. The second one is as alignment between the initial cultural text and the cultural world of the audiences. “George Mosse (...) argues in a study of the power of political ideology and ritual that rulers cannot successfully impose culture on people unless the political symbolism they choose connects to underlying native traditions” (p. 167). And some pages later: “What is “resonant” is not a matter of how “culture”

connects to individual "interests" but a matter of how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame" (p. 169).

To sum up: these classical accounts define "resonance" both as the broad social process of cultural acceptance, and as the more specific process of embeddedness in a shared cultural tradition. Various authors, even within the same "framing" tradition (e.g. Ferree, 2003), have shown that such use of "resonance" can lead to a kind of circular reasoning, where cultural objects are said to "resonate" because they connect with audiences, and they connect with audiences because they "resonate" (with cultural frameworks). "Resonance" thus collapses a social process (value correspondence) with the outcome of such process (positive engagement).

Yet, the problem here is not only semantic, logical, or methodological: it is theoretical. It is rooted in the intuition that value alignment is a sufficient for positive engagement. In fact, value alignment is *only* a necessary condition for positive engagement. The "classical" approaches to resonance missed this difference because they didn't distinguish between the moral and the emotional realms of the audiences. Value alignment corresponds primarily to the domain of morality, that is the audience's fundamental sense of wrongness and righteousness, whereas positive reception belongs in the domain of contingent feelings, the emotional raptures that inspire audiences into concrete social action (voting, protesting, striking, etc.).

We should think of audiences as approaching cultural objects with two distinct thirsts: they aspire to be *morally swayed* and *emotionally touched* by it¹. The conflation between morality and emotion that is at the heart of the classical conceptualizations of “resonance” ignores a very basic empirical fact: that even deeply held moral commitments stir fervor only at specific junctures. The rest of the time they remain in the backdrop of experience and exert little affective influence. Nowhere is the divide between moral affiliation and emotional investment so apparent as in the attitudes of many contemporary audiences toward climate change. These audiences accept the catastrophic imminence of global warming and embrace a sense of moral urgency about it, but their concrete motivation to act is still astoundingly weak:

most individuals who believe climate change is a real problem do surprisingly little to change their lifestyles or engage in collective action. This failure is remarkable when contrasted with other global threats, notably, in response to terrorism, nuclear proliferation, toxins, or virus outbreaks like SARS and swine flu. (...) If affluent Americans spent half as much time and energy on reducing their carbon footprint as they spend on protecting themselves from trans fats or perfectly clean tap water, climate activists would have a reason to cheer (Smith and Howe, 2015, p. 68, see also Norgaard, 2011).

A problematic entanglement between morality and emotions can arguably be traced back to Durkheim². Durkheim depicted social morality as organized through a foundational classification system that separates “sacred” from “profane” objects, and such morality was depicted in turn as

¹ By separating the moral and emotional effects of culture I am not reinventing the wheel, but merely reformulating (from the point of view of the audience) a distinction that is present in many works in contemporary cultural sociology (from the point of view of the actor). It roughly corresponds, for example, to Reed’s distinction between “discursive” and “performative” dimensions of power (Reed, 2013, p. 203).

² Note that there is connecting line between the concept of “frame” and Durkheim, via Erving Goffman.

always emotionally laden. Durkheim highlighted the moments of “collective effervescence” arising from the enactment of sacred symbols through rituals (Durkheim, *ibid*). These symbolic actions channeled emotional responses: the associations with the sacred poles of the binaries inspire feelings like awe and joy, whereas the associations with the profane poles inspire feelings like fear and disgust (see Giesen, 2006). As the sacred and profane mediate how the social world comes about for audiences, they have an immense organizing power over collective affect.

The problem with Durkheim’s picture is that he took the idea of “ritual” too far as the model for thinking about symbolic action. In rituals, moments of moral affirmation and high emotional intensity commonly overlap. But if we move beyond “ritual” and see other forms of symbolic action, or even more, if we pay attention to the symbolic as a permanent dimension of all social actions, then the entanglement between morality and emotion becomes less straightforward. In fact, the power of morality over emotion appears very restricted.

Morality may have a shaping incidence over long-term emotional states, such as feelings of belonging, trust, respect, love, as well as hate or resentment (Jasper, 2018). “Solidarity with various collectives—a nation, an organization, one’s family, and so on—consists of positive feelings reinforced by extensive symbols and interpretation” (pp. 102-103). These long-term emotional states have a more stable and subtle influence upon us. In addition, they are often compounded, as in the “shame-pride battery” (p. 138). The same symbolic pattern that creates the conditions for pride (an association with the sacred) also creates the conditions to feel shame (an association with the profane). Now, while moral structures shape the enduring feelings that loom in the background of social experience (e.g., love for the nation, disdain for foreigners), they cannot determine feelings in the short run (e.g., visceral exhilaration about a presidential candidate’s

promise to build a wall (Berezin, 2017, p. 327). Put differently, moral frameworks might succeed in creating or sustaining long-term emotional states but might as well fail to connect with the emotional outbursts, the more discrete and immediate feelings of the audiences. This is why the causal primacy of morality over emotions is only *partial*.

Revealingly, Snow and Benford extract an example from Geertz to illustrate the bond between “narrative fidelity” (what I take to be moral alignment) and positive reception (which I take to be emotional engagement). They claim that it is “a particularly elegant example of the linkage between cultural narratives and the efficacy of the way in which events or issues are framed” (p. 210). In the 1940’s, Geertz comments, the US Democrats framed the Republican labor policies as “slave labor law”, that is, employing a trope allegorically associated with the Bolsheviks. The bottom line is that such frame misfired, i.e., it didn’t have a favorable reception. Snow and Benford approvingly cite Geertz’s conclusion: “the semantic tension between the image of a conservative congress outlawing the closed shop and of the prison camps of Siberia was -apparently- too great” (Geertz, cited in Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 210). This example is fascinating precisely because it demonstrates the opposite of what Snow and Benford intend. They want to underscore the efficacy of “narrative fidelity”. Yet, the failure of the Bolshevik frame rather suggests the insufficiency of narrative fidelity in gaining contingent emotional traction among audiences. The symbolic association of Bolsheviks with existential danger (as well as the corresponding implication that Americans are the existentially good) was a moral trope deeply rooted among a large portion of the US’s public. Therefore, we can presume that the “slave labor law” frame enjoyed a lot of “narrative fidelity”, or in other words, that there existed a strong alignment between discourse and the cultural world of the audience. What went missing in this case was the situated emotional

component: many were morally aligned, but few were affected by it, let alone inspired into action. There was resonance-as-alignment, but not resonance-as-engagement.

We should flag a final implication of the “classical” version of “resonance”. The conflation of the moral and the emotional leads to ignoring the possibility of moral disgust or repulsion as an audience response. Later in his work, Snow refers to the problem of “non-resonance” as a situation in which “the proffered framing falls on deaf ears” (Snow & Corrigall-Brown, 2005, p. 223). But apathy is only one part of the picture. Very often what occurs in the social world are instances of moral rejection or even repulsion, that is, misalignment rather than a non-alignment. In keeping up with the acoustic vocabulary, we could call these reactions “dissonant”. It seems a tacit assumption of the “classical” accounts that the cultural effect of an object is exhausted in resonance or lack thereof, when the possibility of “dissonance” is just as socially consequential.

Dropping morality out

Almost a decade ago, McDonnell, Bail and Tavory published a brief, but sophisticated, critique of “resonance”. I take this to be the most important rendition of the concept in recent American sociology. These authors systematize various known problems with the metaphor, including its tautological uses. They also mention new objections, for example, the seeming inability of the concept in accounting for social transformation: “If cultural objects only succeed when they dovetail with existing shared values, how does cultural change occur?” (McDonnell et al., 2017, p. 2). This is an important point to which I will return.

To salvage the concept, the authors propose a pragmatist reformulation that gets rid of how the symbolic content of culture aligns with the audience's world of significations. "Resonance" should refer, instead, to the fitness of the cultural object in solving contingent practical problems of the audience. This reformulation indeed refutes the assumption, implicit in classical accounts, that moral alignment automatically drives emotional engagement. "The enduring emphasis on the congruence between cultural objects and their audiences (...) weakens the analytic value of the concept" (p. 2). By removing the alignment component, they indeed correct the problem of definitional ambivalence.

However, it is unclear what is the rationale for throwing cultural congruence away from "resonance". After all, they do not claim that alignment is irrelevant to account for cultural influence, they just (rightly) note that it is insufficient. "Without some initial congruence between the cultural object and actors' ways of seeing the world, resonance is not possible. But alignment is not a sufficient condition for resonance" (p. 4). Yet, as problem-solving fit is also an insufficient condition, one is left to wonder: why we should include one as part of the concept and discard the other?

Aside from this explanatory fissure, McDonnell et al's proposal has three more problems, one formal and the other substantive.

First, these authors oversimplify, perhaps to the level of disfigurement, the "resonance" metaphor. They use it to describe favorable reception. In their words: resonance refers to the "success" or "appeal" of cultural objects on audiences (p. 1). It resembles "Aha! moments" (p. 4) and is

important because it can lead to actual motivation: “Resonance captures something intuitively useful—that the quality of the encounter between audiences and cultural object helps us understand propelled how actors are propelled into social action” (McDonnel, pp. 8-9).

The original meaning of “resonance” in physics and acoustics, which serve as the basis for the metaphorical reference, is thus reduced to harmonious response. Yet resonance is not quite that. The concept depicts the following situation: object A (typically represented as a tuning fork) produces a vibration that coincides with the natural frequency of vibration of Object B (another tuning fork), causing B to vibrate –i.e., to resonate. When A’s vibration is different from B’s natural frequency, B doesn’t vibrate –does not resonate. Therefore, “resonance” essentially encompasses the congruence between an initial stimulus and the “vibratory properties” of the receptor. Only this coincidence allows for the emergence of a “positive” relationship between the two, which sometimes amounts to mutual feedback. The second tuning fork will not resonate unless the first fork’s ring oscillates at the same rate, or very close rate, as the first fork’s natural frequency. For resonance to occur there is a characteristic already ingrained in the second fork that the first fork’s ring must share.

Of course, we cannot accept the idea of “natural proprieties” when discussing the social world. What is key, however, is that the conditions of possibility for resonance are not contextual; they preexist the encounter between objects A and B. If A’s vibration metaphorically refers to cultural discourse, then “natural frequency” should metaphorically refer to the belief systems previously internalized by the audience. Just as the “classical” accounts advocated, the metaphor “resonance” is much more fitting to describe the process of cultural alignment, that is the correspondence

between the symbolic background of the cultural discourse and the audience's incorporated symbolic framework.

Secondly, and more substantially, McDonnell et al's proposal contains a questionable presupposition: situated, short-term emotions are created independent from morality. I already clarified that moral templates shape long-term emotions and that they lack this same generative effect over short-term emotions. However, this does not mean that short-term emotions emerge with no reference whatsoever to broader cultural templates.

Sometimes, in realms such as art or sports, the process of cultural reception is purely aesthetic, so that the formation of emotions occurs without any moral mediation. Arguably this same process can take place when societies face shocking experiences, sudden cataclysms like terroristic attacks or natural disasters. Aleida Assman, a memory scholar, refers to this type of events as "impact". She, furthermore, sharply distinguishes "impact" from "resonance", provided that "resonance" entails a cultural mediation:

Resonance refers to a fusion in the process of remembering between a new stimulus and an earlier one that has been deeply incorporated, while impact relates to experiences that stand out because they lack any precognition within the networks of resonance (Assman, p. 46)

Most of the time, however, short-term emotions created in the social world are not unmediated but rooted in morally charged interpretations. Even many of the examples presented by McDonnell et

all corroborate this insight. Let's examine one of those cases in detail, one which is drawn from McDonnell's earlier fieldwork in Ghana.

A group of college-educated Ghanaians debate how to depict individuals carrying HIV/AIDS and reach a deadlock when deciding if they should portray sick individuals to highlight the severity of the disease or depict healthy-looking people to avoid reinforcing stigma. Such deadlock is broken when one participant proposes using red—a color symbolically associated with danger—to mark an outwardly healthy person as carrying the virus. According to McDonnell et al., this suggestion was highly resonant: “the emotional dynamic of the whole group became heightened the moment red was suggested” (p. 4). The reason, according to the authors, is that red provided a solution for a practical problem, facilitating consensus by simultaneously conveying the hidden nature of the disease and its dangers without stigmatizing those living with HIV.

But there is something fundamental absent in this frame: the stringent *moral* surroundings of the situation. It is the moral framework that participants in the debate seemed to share what made them concern about stigma in the first place. The concrete deadlock in the scene could only emerge against a common symbolic background, which included the conviction that stigmatizing HIV individuals was morally repulsive, and furthermore that compassion towards this vulnerable population was desirable, as well as a deep faith in the medical authority that was behind the HIV prevention campaigns in Ghana. All these elements are mentioned (though perhaps not accentuated) in McDonnell's original monography –he even reconstructs competing moral frameworks, including the stigmatizing vision, generally inspired by religious understandings, according to which AIDS was a punishment for having engaged in the sin of promiscuous sexual

activity (McDonnell, 2016). The red suggestion, therefore, was met with collective excitement not only because it solved a practical problem, but because it felicitously enacted a shared moral code about the dignity and worth of AIDS's patients, as well as about the redemptive promise of scientific knowledge.

If "classical" accounts of resonance tended to rely on a total primacy of morality over short-term emotion, this contemporary revision falls in the opposite error: a total independency of short-term emotions from morality. This is a common view within symbolic interactionism. Sociologists within this paradigm rightfully insist that large meaning complexes circulate in minute interactional fields and are shaped by these (Eliasoph & Lichterman; Goldfarb, 2007), emphasizing that "ideology cannot have an impact without being *enacted* [in local terrains]" (Fine, 2012, p. 94). However, some of them push the argument too far as to suggest that emotions at the local level are the building blocks for longstanding moral-emotional commitments. "Ideology expresses the transformation of shared feelings, known through images and metaphors [in local arenas], into [generalized] beliefs about the good self and the ethical social system" (Fine, 2021, p. 99).

The most crystalline expression of this bottom-up, emergentist construction of culture from comes from Randal Collins, an author that is somewhat close to the pragmatist camp though not exactly part of it. Interestingly, this author is a fervent neo-Durkheimian, which goes on to show once again the ambivalent legacy of Durkheim's overemphasis on "ritual". For Collins, emotional energy flows from physical copresence in ritual settings, as a form of physiological, or sociobiological contagion. He calls this a process of "emotional resonances":

because [ritual participants] are focusing attention on the same thing and are aware of each other's focus, they become caught up in each other's emotions. As a result, the emotional mood becomes stronger and more dominant; competing feelings are driven out by the main group feeling. On the ultra-micro level, this happens by the process of rhythmic entrainment physiologically. That is to say, activities and emotions have their own micro-rhythm, a pace at which they take place. As the focus of interaction becomes progressively more attuned, the participants anticipate each other's rhythms, and thus become caught up "in the swing of things." (Collins, p. 108).

Contra this emergentist approach, we should rather insist that local scenes do not create emotions from scratch, but only through the citation (Derrida, 1988) of larger symbolic structures. The symbolic codes and narratives that socialize groups and individuals in moral coordinates are always brought to bear in concrete locales.

Local settings are not only *scenes*, but *mise-en-scènes*: they are situated performances, or displays, of collective meanings (Alexander, 2004). This is what the understanding of resonance as emotional engagement misses. Audiences approach events not as totally external entities but as *executions* of symbolic scripts. What excites immediate emotions is not stylistic flamboyance *per se*, but the perceived aesthetic *faithfulness* of the *mise-en-scène* with respect to a system of background representations. In analyzing the reception of the Conquest of Constantinople Rally, a mass political performance in contemporary Turkey, Karakaya depicts a segment of the audience as singularly attracted to the spectacularity of the event (e.g., President Erdogan landing in a helicopter into a turquoise carpeted stage (Karakaya, p. 135)). What these "spectacle seekers"

desired, however, was not floorless entrancement, but “populist rhetoric, perfectly fused with emotions and layered with historic binaries provided by nostalgia [for the Ottoman grandeur]” (p. 143). Scenes are “felicitous” (Austin) insofar as they are experienced by the audience as exemplary manifestations of the sacred, and felicitous scenes will inspire an immediate emotional response in the audience.

Third, let’s return to McDonnell et al.’s contention that seeing resonance as cultural alignment makes social change inexplicable. This observation is incorrect for various reasons, not less because most of the time, social transgression occurs *through*, rather than despite, alignment. It is precisely this dialectic between newness and continuity what Marx famously articulated in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:

And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language (...). [T]he beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue (Marx)

Additionally, the idea that moral resonance impedes social change makes sense only if we assume, with Snow & Benford and Schudson, that moral alignment leads to emotional engagement. Once we disentangle these two, the objection loses cogency. The moral structures that make resonance

possible are never perfectly stable in the empirical world. As their levels of emotional intensity fluctuate, these structures may strengthen as much as they can fade away. But even if we, for the sake of mental experiment, imagined a scenario where all discourses are stably aligned (in a moral sense) with their respective audiences, social stasis still wouldn't be guaranteed. Why? Because alignment by itself does not lead to action. Agreement can be either emotionally frantic or flat. If we had two conflicting discourses, both resonant with their audiences, a huge amount of variation is theoretically possible. We could see an emotionally symmetrical struggle (two riled up parties), an emotionally asymmetrical struggle (one riled up and one cooled down), or a non-conflict set-up (both cooled down).

Fusing emotions with morality

The other important contemporary revision of “resonance” comes from German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (Rosa, 2019). Unlike McDonnell et al's middle range scope, this is a much more encompassing vision of society, which in the tradition of critical theory poses a strong normative component. Implementing a phenomenological stance, Rosa understands “resonance” as an emotional openness to (i.e., accept being affected by) the things of the world. Such openness suspends the instrumental outlook that transforms objects into resources. Thus, “resonance” occurs precisely when individuals reject narrow problem-solving and instead experience the world with an expectation of mutual feedback, what Rosa refers to as an “adaptively transforming” attitude.

If McDonnell et al's defined “resonance” as an externally generated emotional appeal, Rosa's definition is, in essence, not very different. However, Rosa makes a key qualification: not all

emotional states occurred in the encounter between individuals and the world really involve an external contact. When emotions arise out of subordination to pragmatic goals, this is not the product of an outwardly oriented responsiveness, but a kind of inward solipsism. What appears like a reception of external realities is, in fact, no more than an internal monologue. One of Rosa's examples is the difference between sexuality and eroticism. While eroticism is resonant because it is an expansive exploration of the outer world, sexuality is non-resonant as it mechanically satisfies an individual's desire:

[eroticism] transforms the subject's relationship to the world as a whole, namely in the sense that body and mind in a way become maximally open to resonance and to the presence of the Other (...). [Sexuality] does not affect how subjects feel they are situated in the world, unless negatively, if the world or their sexual partner continues to appear foreign, mute, and external to them, despite being physically "inflamed." (p. 81)

Rosa also rejects the idea that "resonance" should refer to alignment between the symbolic content of external object and the cultural world of the audience. He explains this exclusion by pointing to the original meaning of "resonance" in physics and acoustics:

Resonance is produced only when the vibration of one body stimulates the other to produce its own frequency. Thus even at an acoustic or physical level, we can establish that two bodies in a resonant relationship each speak with "their own voice" (p. 165)

(...)

resonance is to be strictly distinguished from causal or instrumentalist "linear" forms of interaction (in the sense of mechanical coupling) that necessarily produce fixed, precisely predictable effects. Such an effect can be observed, for example, in the case of two wheels

affixed to a single axle. Move one, and the other moves automatically. This cannot be described as resonance, as the wheels at no point develop their own vibrations or oscillations. Resonance is not to be confused either literally or figuratively with the concept of echoing for precisely this reason. An echo lacks its own voice; it occurs in a way mechanically and without any variance (p. 167)

Rosa reduces the content of “resonance” to mutual feedback between a pair of unique vibrations, which is an exceedingly freestyle interpretation of the concept. In physics or acoustics, as mentioned above, objects will not resonate unless a vibrant stimulus oscillates at the same rate as its natural frequency. Not only the process is quite linear and mechanic, but the resulting vibration is far from unique: the resonant object and the source of the vibration oscillate at equal rates –in acoustics, they produce the same note. Metaphorically employing “resonance” to depict a process whereby stimulus and audience develop their own, distinctive voice, rather than just expressing the *same* voice, might be a bit of a stretch.

But let’s return to theory. Rosa acknowledges the importance of morality. “To be able to determine one’s place and direction within this space (...) requires a moral roadmap that defines the horizon of what is important or unimportant, valuable and noble or insignificant and ugly, etc.” (p. 133). He calls these roadmaps “strong valuations”, distinguishing them from purely affective attractions, or “weak valuations”. For Rosa, moral alignment, without emotional investment, is not resonant because it lacks the expression of an inner self. An extreme example of this emotionless appeal would be the renunciation of the affective world guided by adherence to certain religious doctrines, like an ascetic does (pp. 130-131).

If we only ever act in accordance with our values (...) then our relationship to the world lacks our own voice. We are compelled to block out and reify the subjective world of affective sensations and the phenomenal body; our relationship to ourself remains all but mute. (p. 136)

Yet, it is precisely these strong valuations what anchors individual's experiences to the outer world. Without a moral component, affective experiences would be solipsistic. "In relations to objects or behaviors rooted only in weak evaluations, we confront the world merely as a shapeable object, as a resource, obstacle, or instrument;" (p. 134). In conclusion, "resonance" for Rosa necessarily blends the moral with the emotional realms:

resonant experiences occur only in encounters with the world in which strong and weak evaluations (or values and desires) momentarily coincide, or where both dimensions of our normative relationship to the world are simultaneously addressed and in balance (pp. 135-136).

Rosa's proposal has two main problems. First, there's the issue of how it conceptualizes (or fails to conceptualize) the morally disgusting. I already underlined that the "classical" accounts of resonance resented not having a concept of "dissonance". McDonnell et al's toolkit also made the morally repugnant hard to pinpoint. Imagine someone furiously rejecting a Nazi flag waving in the top of a building: would this audience be resonant according to McDonnell et al's definition? Yes, because she would be emotionally invested. But also no, because she would not be "appealed" by the flag.

In the case of Rosa, the absence of the morally repugnant is more striking because he explicitly deals with experiences of repulsion. The opposite of resonance, that is “alienation”, encompasses both indifferent and repulsive attitudes towards the world. In the first case, the world feels “mute”, and in the second case, the world “injures”. As dissimilar as these attitudes appear, Rosa implies that they are relatively alike because he sees repulsion as an attempt at renouncing the world (like in the example of the ascetic)³. But this is debatable. The individual who is vigorously begrudging the Nazi flag is having a repulsive experience, yet she is not withdrawing in any way from the world. Quite the opposite, she may well be touched by the deep desire of making the world a better place. If anything, her repulsion carries an experience of “resonance” (in Rosa’s sense) vis-à-vis her conviction that all human beings are fundamentally equal.

This problem is attached to Rosa’s account of the morality/emotion link. By incorporating morality into “resonance”, Rosa seems to transcend the primacy of emotions over morality. However, his position on emergentism is perhaps too agnostic. Emotions are the basis for belief systems, and at the same time belief systems exert a semi-independent effect. We are left to wonder how this works.

If, on the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that one’s belief (whether in a benevolent God or the law of karma or a Darwinist universe) can fundamentally influence and shape how one experiences and appropriates world, on the other hand there are equally good reasons to suppose that the emotional foundation of our relationship to the world, which

³ “I do not differentiate between positive and negative resonances, but instead refer to what might otherwise be interpreted as negative resonance (i.e. being touched in the sense of striking an “out-of-tune chord”) as a repulsive relationship to the world, counting it among the forms of alienation that I will more closely examine in the next chapter as mute relationships to the world” (p. 170)

remains inaccessible to us, is itself responsible for what beliefs appear reasonable to us (Rosa, 2019, p. 12).

Moreover, Rosa's understanding of long-term emotions is insufficient. With Jaspers, we saw that long-term emotions are compounded: pride, for example, comes in the same battery as shame. This is because long-term emotions are shaped by broad moral structures that symbolically organize the world around the polarity sacred/good/pure and profane/evil/impure. In consequence, attraction and repulsion are much more closely related than what Rosa implies. We cannot have a positive desire for A without having at the same time a negative pulsion for its opposite. There cannot be feelings of solidarity without a feel for exclusion, nor, for that matter, desires for exclusion without a feel for solidarity. This basic relational quality doesn't exist in Rosa. Moments of resonance radically exclude moments of alienation. At best, Rosa mentions that a backdrop of experiences of alienation is necessary to be able to experience resonance and vice versa (p. 190). However, he fails to see that the moral structures enabling us to experience resonance are the same that enable us to experience repulsion.

The second problem of Rosa's theory comes from its normative horizon. "Resonance" is not only a concept, but a desirable goal. Societies *should* strive to multiply the possibilities of resonance as a counterbalance to late modern and capitalistic tendencies towards "acceleration", that is, the "shrinking of the present" (Rosa, 2013). Throughout the text, we get a clear picture of resonance's goodness: it is not only related to emotions, but also genuine, other-oriented, empathic, receptive, expressive, warm, flexible, and cooperative. It is the basis both for a "successful relationship with the world" and a "successful life". On the contrary, alienation is related to the rational,

instrumental, self-centered, dominating, appropriating, egotistical, mute, cold, rigid, and non-genuine. Alienation is the basis for “unsuccessful relationship with the world” and even an “unsuccessful life”. Furthermore, resonant experiences are linked to democratic, egalitarian, and just forms of social organization, whereas alienated experiences lead to totalitarianism, injustice, and exclusion.

Although this normative component makes the theory more compelling, it also opens a Pandora’s Box. Are negative emotions like anger, fear, or hate necessarily undesirable from a normative perspective? Think of anger about mistreatment of marginalized communities, or fear about the uneven application of justice, or hate towards a war criminal. Does indifference always presage lack of empathy? Think of Goffman’s “civil inattention”, which arguably expresses a deep-seated form of social acceptance.

One time after the other, Rosa is forced to create ad-hoc categories each time that empirical cases don’t map into his conceptual-cum-normative architecture. For example, while we know that withdrawal from the world is part of the muteness of alienation, there are certain exceptions like “meditation”, which rather conveys a “speaking silence”, a type of “deep resonance” (p.119). We also know that the responsiveness to the world is resonant, but what happens when the source of such appeal is abhorrent, like National Socialism? “With their songs, torches, parades, rallies, ceremonious incantations, and uniforms, the Nazis staged a tremendous resonance spectacle that touched people directly and “viscerally”” (p. 219). Then, we don’t have “real” resonance, but a kind of “pseudo-resonance” (p. 220).

Throwing the baby out with the bathwater

We explored the pitfalls of the paths offered by contemporary cultural sociology to address the ambivalence of "resonance"—namely, adjusting the concept. A final option consists of abandoning the concept altogether. In this last section I will argue that this path is also suboptimal because there is still some value in “cultural resonance”, and the best way to preserve such value is by removing the emotional engagement component from the concept while retaining the "moral alignment" part.

In creating the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology, Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith explicitly departed from the idea of “resonance”. “While we certainly agree with its claim that a movement succeeded if a frame “resonated,” failed if it did not, the concept of resonance looks a bit like a giant black box for post hoc explanation” (Alexander, Smith p. 21). To them, “resonance” functions more as a convenient cliché or buzzword than as a rigorous analytical tool. Consequently, they not only avoid using the concept but regard it with suspicion, associating it with “weak” cultural sociological approaches (Alexander and Smith).

There is a more fundamental reason why “resonance” (understood as alignment) could be problematic: it may undermine the relative autonomy of culture, which is the Strong Program’s core principle (Alexander, 1990). According to this principle, culture exerts an influence independent from material forces like economy or power, such that collective meanings function as an *explanans* affecting social life rather than an externally determined *explanandum*. Now, the metaphor of “resonance” risks reducing the impact of culture to mere symbolic reinforcement, a zero-sum game that downplays the internal compelling power of codes and narratives—the poetic

force of symbols. The alluring power of a cultural discourse stems, for instance, from the heightened moral tension embedded in semiotic binaries (“good” versus “evil”) or in its fit *vis-à-vis* conventions of established narrative genres (romance, tragedy, apocalypse). The gap between a poetically potent and a dreary cultural script marks the divide, for example, between the creations of a social sciences scholar and those of a public intellectual: while the former crafts nuanced and complex understandings of social dynamics, the latter distills reality into overarching, simplistic patterns— a painting full of “pure” and “impure” forces, “heroes” and “villains” and timeless struggles between redemption and condemnation (Pérez-Jara & Rudas, forthcoming). The “resonance” metaphor stops being helpful here because this type of cultural influence is not about moral alignment with audiences but about morally sculpting them.

However, it is important to relativize the difference between *influence-by-familiarity* and *influence-by-suasion*. These are not opposing effects of culture⁴, but different moments of the same process. Influence-by-familiarity, or resonance, operates by activating the memory of prior symbolic suasion—it is the recollection of a successful poetic force. The moral seduction triggered by an initial encounter between an audience and a cultural performance becomes imprinted onto that audience, shaping their future engagements with later performances through an incorporated normative template. The alluring power of culture is internalized by audiences, making future resonance possible through acts of evocation.

⁴ Which is the impression one could get from some depictions in the literature. For example, in his seminal *How culture works?*, Schudson sharply separates the “resonance” of a message from the alluring power of the message (which he calls “rhetorical force”). The former refers to embeddedness in a shared tradition, the latter refers to its seductive appeal.

Emphasizing the non-resonant allure of symbols can offer valuable insights for empirical research, particularly in analyzing the processes whereby moral structures are incorporated without reference to a previously internalized symbolic system—such as during primary socialization or in moments of sudden self-transformation (DeGloma, 2014). However, most case studies conducted by Strong Program practitioners focus not on this type of phenomenon but on manifestations of cultural influence that presuppose some degree of symbolic familiarity between stimuli and audience. Take, for example, the studies about the civil sphere: the “discourse of civil society” works in democratic societies because it is a widely shared moral metalanguage. This language provides a set of generalized signifiers which all parties employ while introducing specific, competing variations (Alexander, 2006; Morgan, 2022). If the allure of concrete political speeches builds upon reference to these broader symbolic preconceptions, then moral alignment surely plays a role in its success.

“Resonance” is a vital idea because it highlights how cultural influence often contains at least a trace of un-newness, even when it is transgressive (remember Marx in the Eighteenth Brumaire). In other words, resonance is intrinsic even to cultural innovation. Alexander shows that during the Arab Spring in Egypt, the “revolutionary discourse (...) found fresh tropes for speaking the sacred and profane,” one example being the characterization of Hosni Mubarak as a “modern-day Pharaoh” (p. 17).

Though resonance can have a *transgressive* side, it often operates in a more conservative or *purist* mode. Purist resonance helps us to explain a basic yet significant phenomenon: audiences with specific beliefs are more likely to favor performances that reflect those beliefs—an evangelical

audience, for instance, will resonate more with an evangelical performance than a Marxist one. At the same time, the concept can illuminate processes of fragmentation within once-cohesive communities—cases where resonance remains alive but collective rituals fail to emotionally mobilize their constituencies as they once did.

The Strong Program might benefit from integrating “resonance” not only to better grasp the process of cultural transformation, but also to better scrutinize the process of cultural reproduction (this would be a good starting point to create a more “musical” alternative to the Bourdieusian approach to the matter). Binder (2017) has already noted that the Strong Program tends to focus on disruption and dislocation when studying cultural influence. Thus, Alexander’s work on performance is biased towards audiences open to changing their minds, leaving aside those ideologically compact groups that reinforce their belief systems, seemingly notwithstanding external events. However, overlooking this latter dynamic may come at too great a cost. The capacity of cultural discourses to generate continuity and affirmation is a major social process, and “resonance” serves as a crucial analytical tool for understanding the role of familiarity in reinforcing and sustaining a symbolic order.

Finally, the role of resonance in the production of continuity brings “ideology” back to the picture, a concept that the Strong Program tends to neglect. For many authors (e.g., Geertz, Lukes, 2021), ideology is often indistinguishable from cultural system. However, a key distinction is possible: ideologies are cultural systems that become more explicit, articulated, and formalized (Swidler, 1986, p. 278). The articulation of an ideology is an attempt to make the resonance of audiences more predictable. It is a precondition for the emergence of community-affirming rituals as well as

for making internal messaging more fluid (for example, by creating dog whistles). Audiences can be positioned along a continuum based on their level of ideological adherence. The stronger the ideological allegiances of an audience, the greater the potential for *purist* resonance—that is, greater the predictability of its moral alignment. Moreover, ideology also shapes dissonance, making negative responses more foreseeable. Just as ideologically committed audiences are more likely to experience *purist* resonance, they are also more prone to *purist* dissonance: Evangelicals are far more likely than politically unaffiliated individuals to rebut a Marxist performance.

Conclusions

The metaphor of “resonance” is valuable because it is widely understood in vernacular language rather than being confined to specialized academic jargon. This paper has sought to clarify both the limitations and possibilities of the concept within cultural sociology, with a particular focus on distinguishing its often-obscure interplay between moral and emotional dimensions.

The primary mistake in common understandings of the metaphor has been the tendency to elevate “resonance” as the defining feature of cultural reception. Instead, I argue that resonance should be seen, more modestly, as one among several dimensions of reception. The most useful way to define resonance is as moral alignment. Moral alignment, on its own, is relatively inconsequential. Moral endorsement has limited explanatory power unless we specify how it connects, or fails to connect, with immediate emotions. Moreover, resonance is sometimes easily achieved, particularly among ideologically zealous audiences, making the real challenge for social actors not just to secure alignment but to cultivate an charged attitudinal disposition. Put in more dramatic terms: taken in isolation, “resonance” is sociologically superfluous. However, when paired with concepts such as emotional investment—or “dissonance”—it becomes an essential ingredient in explaining cultural reception.

Of course, achieving resonance in the social world is never as mechanical or automatic as it is in physics or acoustics. Resonance always contains an emergent quality, as the relationship between deep symbolic structures and the actual discourses presented to audiences is inherently contingent. Drawing on Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, Alexander and Smith argue that "cultural codes are elastic because individuals can ad hoc from event to code and from code to event" (Alexander & Smith, 1993, p. 158; see also Norton, 2014; Tavory & Swidler, 2009). As a result, the cultural content of an object or performance is never fully coherent with background symbolic systems. For example, cultural objects may blend elements from multiple semiotic complexes or be presented in a vague manner. The extent to which a script resonates with a morally aligned audience depends on how that audience navigates the ambiguity, ambivalence, or indeterminacy of the discourse.

A more modest and precise version of the "resonance" metaphor can be critical for cultural sociology, helping to adumbrate processes of cultural continuity as well as the un-newness enmeshed in cultural innovation. In this regard, the introduction of new ideas, such as the distinctions between "purist resonance" and "transgressive resonance," alongside the concept of "dissonance," may come handy in guiding future empirical research.

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