

A Critique of Neighborhood Relationships from the Perspective of Social Acceleration Theory

Yangbin Ye^{1,#}, Linxuan Wen^{1,#}, Shengliang Xu^{2,*}

¹*School of Journalism and Communication, Nanchang University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China*

²*School of Journalism and Communication, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China*

[#]*These authors contributed equally to this work.*

^{*}*Corresponding Author*

Abstract: Traditional neighborhood relationships have undergone profound changes during the process of social modernization. This transformation, contrary to people's vision of a better life, has plunged into a crisis of alienation. From the perspective of social acceleration theory, the author delves into the transformation of neighborhood relationships in the modernization process. The article points out that with the advancement of technology, the acceleration of social change, and the increase in the pace of life, neighborhood relationships have undergone a deep transformation from traditional to modern, characterized by alienation and estrangement. The reconstruction of space, the detachment in actions, and the alienation on both individual and social levels collectively constitute the new forms of neighborhood relationships. The content is: Further exploring the roots of alienation in neighborhood relationships through the three dimensions of time critique-functional critique, normative critique, and ethical critique-and proposing the resonance path as a possible solution. Although neighborhood relationships have gradually weakened in the process of modernization, their support mechanisms and grassroots governance functions remain significant. The research in this paper holds important implications for understanding the changes in neighborhood relationships and strategies for addressing them.

Keywords: Neighborhood Relations; Social Acceleration Theory; Time Critique; Resonance

1. Introduction

In the traditional agricultural society of China,

the self-sufficient small-scale peasant economy determined the customs of attachment to one's native land and reluctance to move. Traditional neighborhood relations under the small-scale peasant economy were primarily linked by kinship, intertwined with territorial relations, and on this basis, villages or clans with common emotions and cohesive forces emerged. During the era of the planned economy, urban communities exhibited three main characteristics: the danwei system, the allocation system, and household registration restrictions. During this period, neighborhood communities, due to the influence of work units, gathered residents together through professional ties, forming a sense of community based on the "danwei system." With the development of the market economy, urban residential areas in China have evolved towards commercial housing, leading to a diversification of community residents. The development of the labor market and commercial housing has eroded traditional blood and professional ties, making community cohesion and shared emotions seem to disappear. As China accelerates its pace of "five-in-one" social construction, new demands are placed on social development. Ecological civilization calls for "high ecological quotient" ecological individuals, and the transformation from modern individuals to "ecological individuals" becomes increasingly urgent. As Fei Xiaotong mentioned in "Earthbound China," "From the grassroots perspective, Chinese society is rural in nature." This rural nature ensures a lifelong and well-known neighborhood relationship. However, as "countryfolk" leave their rural roots and adapt to changes in urban communities, the barriers of space between residents in high-rise buildings, and the accelerating process of modernization,

neighborhood relationships are increasingly becoming alienated. This issue deserves our reflection.

2. Modernization Pathways for Neighborhood Relationships

Traditional neighborhood relationships, formed at the intersection of geography and kinship, measure proximity by household and distance. In "Peasant China," Fei Xiaotong posits that "in traditional structures, each household takes its own position as the center, drawing a circle around itself, which is the 'neighborhood.' [1] This circle involves mutual assistance in daily life, such as hosting banquets for joyous occasions, distributing red eggs for births, and offering help in funerals by assisting with the coffin. Or, the neighborhood relationships in traditional structures also gradually extend from individuals, representing an increase in private connections, with the core of maintaining such relationships being morality. However, unlike other relationships such as kinship and clan, the primary bond in neighborhood relationships is not simply "trust" but a complex "benevolence." In Fei Xiaotong's view, "benevolence" is a concept beyond the self, often occurring in group structures, because practicing "benevolence" requires "self-restraint," and the "groups" in Chinese rural society are not cohesive. In other words, interactions with neighbors often occur in public rather than private spaces, such as public events like weddings and funerals, discussions about market prices, and gossip. As such, traditional neighborhood relationships, set against the backdrop of agricultural society and rural China, are largely intertwined with family relations and influenced by family cultural ethos. Neighborhood relationships are a form of acquaintance relationships, bearing more social functions and roles within an acquaintance society. Conversely, traditional neighborhood relationships are also shaped by local, clan-based rural governance models and village regulations.

The boundaries of modern neighborly relationships in contemporary rural and urban areas have become more distinct. Modern rural areas in China represent transitions under the context of coordinated urban-rural construction and the promotion of urbanization,

while modern urban areas are the result of industrialization and the construction of transportation infrastructure. They share a common trait: the disruption of traditional neighborly relationships, which are based on kinship and geographical proximity, during the process of social residential environment reorganization. This means that the rebuilding of neighborly relationships requires a transition from unfamiliarity to familiarity. Specifically, in urban construction planning, the spatial reconstruction of modern society introduces conflicts between buildings and land, which add an obstacle to the harmonious relations among neighbors.[2] The social regulation mechanisms of gifts and personal connections are reproduced on the basis of building and land interests, and it takes a long time to reestablish familiar neighborly regulation mechanisms. Moreover, the layout of new residential buildings has added another layer of security on the foundation of land, with walls surrounding rural courtyards and burglar-proof doors and windows being essential in urban homes. The minor details of decoration serve as barriers for unfamiliar neighbors, deepening the sense of estrangement among neighbors during the restructuring process of this urban and rural layout. In terms of production and living, the choice of residence no longer relies solely on geography and kinship; instead, occupation often becomes the primary driver. Factors such as workplace and educational welfare facilities become the foremost considerations in choosing a residence. Consequently, real estate developers in urban areas have constructed concepts like "school district housing" and "welfare housing," while in modern rural areas, new residential circles have emerged around facilities like bus stops and cultural plazas. Culturally, people from different regions differ in cultural backgrounds, values, and moral standards, lacking a holistic sense of identity and mutual trust. Superficial interactions tend to be simplistic and conservative. Meanwhile, with the increase in farmers' income and improvement in living standards, modern network media and electronic products have significantly influenced residents' lifestyles. Residents spend considerable time on emerging forms of entertainment, such as watching TV, video chatting online, and browsing short videos during their leisure

hours.

Entering the era of mobile internet, the postmodern neighborhood relationship, intertwining reality and the web, surpasses any previous stage of neighborhood. Based on the characteristics of internet-based interaction, sharing, immediacy, and integration, the connection between real and virtual communities enables linkages without stepping out of the house; online gatherings lead to offline practices, such as property notices and neighborhood online assistance. The mechanisms of human connections based on kinship, geography, or economics have dissolved, but face is presented in symbolic, informational, and fragmented forms. Traditional mutual assistance roles among real neighbors are rarely played out, but virtual communities inherit this mutual aid structure, with the content of assistance now centered on culture, becoming a significant part of digital existence. However, after transcending the constraints of real-life production and daily routines, the media image of so-called "neighbors" becomes polarized. The symbolic information presented is insufficient to fully grasp the true circumstances of neighbors, and performative behaviors are prevalent on the internet. For performers, online community interactions indeed function as a kind of spiritual opium in the contemporary context, serving to mediate conflicts in self-perception in real life; there is tangible mutual restraint among performers, and these interactions in online communities should not necessarily exhibit arbitrariness or subversion due to the far greater freedom compared to face-to-face interactions.[3] Thus, although postmodern neighborhood relationships are not primarily constrained by real-world environments, they are inevitably subject to the drawbacks brought about by the limitations of the media itself.

In fact, whether during any period, neighborhood relations coexist with other relationships in the process of modernization. Precisely because of this, with the advancement of time, the status of neighborhood relations within the structure of diverse relationship coexistence has increasingly diminished. Or to put it another way, in today's urban commercial housing communities, increasingly familiar online social interaction patterns and unfamiliar

real-world social interaction patterns intersect and interweave, giving rise to new and complex forms of interpersonal relations within the community, forming a "familiar strangers" type of community interpersonal relationship.[4] In the author's view, traditional neighborhood relationships in reality are gradually being replaced by community collectives. Despite the emergence of digital media re-connecting neighbors, simple neighborhood ties are inevitably enveloped by the complex symbols of the internet, becoming just one corner of diverse online cultural fandoms.

3. Neighborhood Relations in Social Acceleration

The formation of modernization manifests as an accelerating trend. Hartmut Rosa argues that this accelerating trend is not accidental, and thus he proposes a systematic theory of social acceleration. He points out that social acceleration has three dimensions: the acceleration of technological progress, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life. [5] Specifically, technological acceleration has transformed the societal temporal-spatial system; the acceleration of social change has increased the rate of cultural and social innovation; and the acceleration of the pace of life has enhanced the quantity of actions and experiences. Thus, it is evident that there are three driving mechanisms of social acceleration: competition, culture, and subjectivity. In the interaction of these three, the accelerated society has fallen into a cycle of perpetual acceleration. The principle of competition is not confined to the economic sphere; this principle governs the distribution across all domains of modern life and is a core principle defining modernity. The primary cultural logic of Western modernity corresponds to the pursuit of "eternity," where the richness, satisfaction, and quality of life are measured by the sum and depth of experiences accumulated throughout one's lifetime. Finally, the acceleration of technological advancement, social change, and the pace of life has formed an interconnected, self-driven feedback system. Rosa argues that to assess the quality of people's lives, it is necessary to examine the temporal structure and patterns of modern society, as time is not only the mode of

existence for all things but also the central point for coordinating macro social structures with micro individual behaviors. The concept of "social acceleration" aptly reflects the diagnostic results of the temporal structure of modern society. Neighborhood relationships, too, exhibit a state of "alienation," as described by Rosa, under the trend of acceleration.

The opposite of a good life in social relations is alienation, which refers to the distortion of the self's relationship with the world. The unfamiliarization of neighborhood relationships clearly stands against the ideal of a good life. In Rosas' vision of a good life, technological acceleration and the transformation of our "world relationship" alter our connections with the objective world, the social world, and the subjective world. Spatial proximity is no longer necessary for maintaining intimate social relationships. The closeness or distance of social relationships and emotional intimacy are now unrelated to spatial distance, allowing our neighbors to be complete strangers while someone thousands of miles away could be our closest companion. Therefore, the alienation of neighborhood relations transcends the realm encompassed by the economic capital structure.

Social acceleration has caused alienation of neighborhood relations in terms of space, action, self, and society. On the spatial level, repeated relocations prevent people from developing a sense of intimacy and familiarity with a geographic space. After moving to a new place, people will gradually learn where supermarkets, household goods stores, schools, companies, and other locations are. However, these places are "silent spaces"; they lack stories, memories, and intertwined personal identities. The neighborhood space is also silent within this context, and all of this requires lengthy practices to build. At the action level, neighbors no longer have as much time as they used to get to know each other well. Often, people do not consciously forget to greet their neighbors but rather forget how to do so. On the self and societal levels, all the moments and experiences that should be shared among neighbors, all the choices made, and all the people and things encountered serve as materials for external validation of one's identity. However, if we lose sight of what is important to us, if we lose a stable and directional understanding of significant

matters, and if, in short, we no longer recognize the importance of neighborhood relationships, then people are completely trapped in a state of alienation.

4. Temporal Critique and Resonance Pathways of Neighborhood Relations

Alienation is difficult to avoid in the competitive environment of social acceleration, but as active subjects, individuals are not passively entrapped. In Rosas's theory of social acceleration, his proposition of the concept of acceleration is based on the reconstruction of the concept of time, making time the clue for Rosa to understand accelerated society. Following this logic, neighborhood relationships are equally worthy of our critical examination from the perspective of temporal context. The critique of temporal context has three dimensions: functional critique, normative critique, and ethical critique.

Functional criticism acknowledges the synchronization of time, and the inability to synchronize becomes a manifestation of neighborhood issues. In other words, as long as two processes intertwine, that is, as long as they synchronize, then when one speeds up, the other feels pressure. Unless the other also speeds up, it will only interfere with or hold the other back. The same is true for neighborhood relationships; when a neighbor's economic and material conditions surpass one's own, the natural pace of life cannot match, resulting in fewer intersections. Alternatively, if the neighbor's working hours differ from one's own, there is simply no possibility of communication within the same time frame. Culturally, cultural norms and the transmission of knowledge reflect the stability and continuity of society. If the lifeworld becomes dynamic to the extent that there is no longer, or only minimal, stability between generations, then in essence, generations would be living in "different worlds," posing a risk of disruption to the reproduction of social symbols. The frequent interactions among traditional neighbors are disrupted by the fast-paced lifestyle, and issues such as shopping and voting are continually iterated by technological forces. In addition to this harmful desynchronization, synchronized behaviors among neighbors also maintain intermittent synchronization in traditional

culture and recreational activities. Synchronized behaviors also occupy a significant amount of time, further forsaking the pursuit of innovation and change in the accelerated cycle. On the internet, the process of reproducing natural social relations and structures is a feedback mechanism where individual selves are re-presented and recreated in the virtual world. For instance, expressions of individual emotions, credit systems, public interests, etc., in the virtual world serve as miniature reflections of relational exploration and synchronization. Taking emotions as an example, netizens engage their feelings in the narration of media events, connecting online neighbors and shaping their relationships and identities. [6]This is the "empathy" among virtual neighbors in the network.

The crux of normative critique lies in the hidden concept of social time within modern society, where temporal segregation among neighbors is evident. In any stage of neighborly relations, how to meet the requirements of cooperation, regulation, and synchronization in the face of extremely long dependency chains is achieved through the rigorous implementation of temporal norms—either completing tasks to fulfill dependency or overwhelming individuals with guilt for not completing tasks. Being bound by time gives rise to a contradiction: the overwhelming force of strict regulation versus almost complete freedom of choice. Neighborhood relations lean more towards the latter in their intertwined social environment, becoming a dynamic social relationship. Compared to social relations such as kinship, colleagues, and family, neighborhood relations are a weaker form of connection. Numerous studies suggest that not only neighborhoods but also modern communities, which have replaced traditional neighborhoods, struggle to foster a sense of community. In such environments, there is no "guilt" associated with not interacting with neighbors, nor does it become a pressing pressure like being late, meeting deadlines, or paying rent. The manifestation in private matters is self-evident; for instance, the mutual assistance among neighbors in daily activities, like three meals is determined by this social life time rule. However, when entering the public domain, such as traditional rural society's market days

or pilgrimages, we must pay the price for our shortcomings—the increased competition load of different tasks occurring simultaneously. In the internet era, people have mastered a technique of managing time and attention—multitasking. [7]This appears to make them more efficient, enabling them to handle multiple tasks in a short period. However, this efficiency comes at a cost, as the technology undermines our attention and cognitive abilities, leaving less energy to properly manage relationships with neighbors. Ethical critique directly targets the root causes of accelerated social alienation—the deviation of modernization from modernity. Social acceleration is more powerful than the modernity project, at least in Western societies, where acceleration no longer guarantees the pursuit of individual dreams, goals, and life plans, nor does it ensure that society will reform based on notions of justice, fairness, progress, and sustainability. For individuals, maintaining acceleration in the competitive race while possessing high-quality innovation capabilities and achieving self-realization becomes a challenge. Thus, people gradually embrace "Utopia" and initiate their own "struggles." The internet serves as a public platform for learning, work, entertainment, self-expression, and value realization, with cyberspace commonly becoming the second refuge outside the home. Neighborhoods have also become an appendage of Utopia. People look out into the network and anticipate ideal neighborly relationships, yet in reality, communication is hindered by peepholes. For individuals, this is clearly a challenge, representing a game between accepting modern survival conditions and defying the demands of modernity. In the competitive race of an accelerating society, this game has become increasingly prominent. Modern promises cannot be fulfilled as expected in the ongoing practices of modernization, leading people to gradually forget what the "true" goals and intentions are between each other. In short, the expectation of a good life is forgotten in the process of alienation. Some scholars argue that there is no fundamental difference between the social ailments brought about by the dynamic stable structural characteristics and the cultural traits defined by them, and those brought about by social acceleration. The former is primarily a

developmental interpretation of the latter. The former provides a more precise and specific reflection on "why life is not good," and therefore is the answer that Rosa currently favors more for "why life is not good." [8]

For the dissection of these three dimensions of alienation, Rosa provides his own answer - resonance. The key to breaking free from the alienation predicament among neighbors lies in the recognition of resonance and the construction of a community. In Rosa's view, resonance serves as a new standard for measuring the quality of life; the resonant relationship between the subject and the world is the ideal state of a good life, fundamentally representing a new concept and cultural paradigm for understanding the good life. From this perspective, the indifference in neighborly relations is essentially a sign that "resonance" has not yet matured. Even if spatial proximity is no longer needed for many, psychological proximity becomes more inevitable. The cultural development in the internet era has flourished unprecedentedly, and psychological recognition among neighbors has become a new way to break the ice of indifference. Whether it is leisure activities like playing cards or gossiping, or spiritual pursuits at the levels of education, knowledge, and technology, they all become new fields where neighbors intersect. However, some scholars argue that this solution, strictly speaking, is not a critique but a compromise with the most realistic pace of social acceleration, an echo of life's rhythm with the accelerated social pace. It is not a path to liberation but rather a state where, once you adapt to the accelerated rhythm, you can find a bit of contentment within the dialectical relationship of resonance and alienation.[9]

The author believes that Rosa's path of resonance undoubtedly offers a solution, yet existing experiences cannot verify its regularity, or rather, it requires practice to test. Rosa's idea of harmoniously and intimately coordinating with neighbors is an ought, but the layers of alienation in reality prevent the actual from approaching the ought, which also plunges the theory of social acceleration into an unresolvable paradox. In fact, the new community construction efforts in our country aim to establish a new residential community, which is a significant attempt at resonance [10].

5. Conclusion

Neighborhood relationships, though weak ties, continue to effectively function in support mechanisms and grassroots governance, aligning with people's expectations for a better life. In Rosas' research, he argues that the constant saturation of social connections leads individuals into alienation and confusion, with resonance being an ideal solution. Especially during major public health emergencies, we see that neighborhoods still foster unity based on national and local sentiments. The Chinese people, united as one, lead by example, and through online platforms, individuals within their living spaces express support for those affected by the public health crisis. This reflects the social life of people across all ethnic groups in China and embodies the most essential and concentrated essence of Chinese culture. At this moment, we all become virtual neighbors, caring for and supporting each other.

In summary, the era we live in is one where tradition and modernity intersect, and the past and future accelerate. The social bonds of reality are transferred to the virtual community space, connecting neighbors in the global village. The fast-paced, fragmented modern life inevitably falls into a "cycle of acceleration" competition, and the methodological path proposed by Rosa is in fact illusory, unable to truly solve the problem of social acceleration alienation. Nonetheless, under the logic of acceleration, the construction of a "good life" serves as Rosa's critical motivation, inheriting the pursuit of "free development." In other words, even if the competition is exceptionally fierce, we cannot ignore the crowd cheering outside the arena. Surpassing the speed competition mechanism and the cult of speed is a form of "human free development."

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