

On the Janus-Facedness of Stress and Modern Life

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Abstract

Stress is a relatively new concept that has evolved during the second half of the 20th century. Besides being a theoretical construct that is used extensively in research, the stress concept has permeated into our daily lives. The question is: Why? Why has it become so normal to describe our daily hassles by referring to the concept of stress? This paper investigates the societal functions of stress and argues that the concept of stress is deeply intertwined with the constituents of modern identity: It fits well into the discourse about the fundamental changes which the modern age imposes on individuals as well as on society as a whole. Following this line of thought, stress may be viewed as the result of an ongoing trend towards acceleration and flexibilization in the last decades. As acceleration and flexibilization are not inevitable, their existence itself needs an explanation, though. In order to provide such an explanation, one has to apply a broader understanding of the terms “modern life” and “modern identity”, incorporating developments of the last centuries rather than decades. This is done by using Taylor’s (1989) philosophical framework, which proposes three constituents of modern identity: inwardness, the affirmation of ordinary life, and expressivism. A detailed analysis of the relation between these constituents of modern identity and the concept of stress reveals that stress is paradoxically used for both criticizing the constituents of modern identity and perpetuating their influence. Stress is a janus-faced concept mirroring the janus-facedness of modern life.

Keywords: stress, modern life, modern identity, flexibilization, acceleration.

On the Janus-Facedness of Stress and Modern Life

Stress is a relatively new concept that has evolved during the second half of the 20th century. Before the Second World War, “no one spoke of stress; after it, increasingly, everyone did” (Kugelman, 1992, p. 54). Besides being a theoretical construct that is used extensively in research, the concept of stress has permeated into our daily lives. People use a stressful day at work as an excuse not to tell their children their bedtime story or as an explanation why they are always fighting with their partner. They participate in stress management seminars in order to learn relaxation techniques and coping strategies, ask their doctors to put them on sick leave, and talk to their psychotherapists. Stress is also used to state the discomfort with current societal and economic developments. In short, the concept of stress shapes peoples’ lives. Being stressed out has become “a way to be a person, to experience oneself, to live in society” (Hacking, 2007, p. 299). The question is: Why? Why has it become so normal to describe our daily hassles by referring to the concept of stress?

In trying to answer this question, this paper investigates the societal functions of stress, not touching upon the scientific value of the stress concept. It is argued that the concept of stress fits well into the discourse about the fundamental changes which the modern age imposes on individuals as well as on society as a whole. Referring to stress helps individuals to understand their modern lives and to articulate their concerns. That is not to say that past populations were less exposed to “warfare, epidemic disease, unemployment, and poverty than their modern counterparts are” (Jackson, 2014, p. 301). Although the concept of stress did not exist 500 years ago and being stressed out was thus not a way to be a person, people back then also had to deal with difficult situations and hardships (see Pollock, 1988). Hence, rather than providing a historical analysis (for the history of stress see e.g. Cooper & Dewe, 2004; Doublet, 2000;

Jackson, 2013; Kugelmann, 1992), this paper asks for the connections between the constituents of modern identity and the concept of stress. Investigating stress as a “deeply held modern metaphor” (Viner, 1999, p. 392) means investigating it as natural language term that is used in different contexts and with different meanings. Such an approach does not require a formal definition of “stress” and is not based on a certain model or theory of stress. Instead, at least in its use in the societal discourse, stress can be viewed as a fuzzy and versatile concept, expressing the vague notion that “things are getting too much and out of balance”.

When it comes to “modern life” and “modern identity”, more precision is needed. Both terms can be understood as referring to the changes in the last decades, more or less paralleling the development of the stress concept. Following this line of thought, stress may be regarded as a consequence of the constant acceleration (Rosa, 2010; 2013) or as a result of ongoing flexibilization (Sennett, 1998; 2006). The first section of this paper investigates this option with mixed results: While acceleration and flexibilization may contribute to the feeling of being stressed out, they rather mirror than represent the constituents of modern identity. As the tendency towards acceleration and flexibilization is not inevitable and God-given, its existence itself needs an explanation. In order to provide such an explanation, one has to apply a broader understanding of the terms “modern life” and “modern identity”, incorporating developments of the last centuries rather than decades. From this perspective, the present day situation is the culmination point of a long process. The second section of this paper identifies the sources of modern identity following Taylor’s (1989) philosophical framework and connects them to the concept of stress. As it turns out, stress is paradoxically used for both criticizing the constituents of modern identity and perpetuating their influence.

Acceleration and Flexibilization

People complain about the acceleration of modern life at the latest since the 19th century, suspecting that new technologies – like the railway (Schivelbusch, 1979) – will exceed their capabilities. The claim that everything is running faster nowadays is too vague to serve as a powerful tool of analysis, though, as Rosa (2010) argues. Thus, he differentiates between three dimensions of acceleration whose interaction leads to an ongoing acceleration-cycle: technological acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of the “pace of life”. *Technological acceleration* refers to “the intentional speeding up of goal-directed processes of transport, communication, and production” (Rosa, 2010, p. 16), while the term *acceleration of social change* is meant to capture the decreased stability of social structures, and *acceleration of the “pace of life”* reflects the “increase in the number of episodes of action or experience per unit of time” (Rosa, 2010, p. 21). If people have the impression of being rushed and hopping from project to project, i.e. have the impression of an increased pace of life, they long for technological innovations which promise them saving time and energy. However, technological acceleration leads to an acceleration of social change: When people, information, and products can be moved at a higher speed, social practices and institutions become more and more transient. Living in a society being dominated by social change, the individual needs to do more in a shorter period of time to keep its position stable. Consequently, one feels “under time pressure and stress” (Rosa, 2010, p. 21). The acceleration-circle is complete.

Nevertheless, the main question remains unanswered so far: Why is there acceleration, why do people perpetuate the acceleration-cycle instead of breaking it when it makes them feel stressed out? Rosa (2010) names three reasons. The first reason is the acceleration-cycle itself, which “has turned into a closed, self-propelling system” (Rosa, 2010, p. 33). Once the acceleration-cycle has come into being, one dimension of acceleration seems to necessitate the

others and is necessitated by them. The second reason is the *social motor*: In modern societies, wealth, privileges, and social status are no longer distributed according to birth, but according to peoples' position in the economic sphere. According to Rosa, modern societies closely follow the logic of competition, not only when it comes to economical interactions, but also in our daily lives. The third reason is the *cultural motor*: Modern societies are mostly secular societies. If Rosa is correct, people focus on the present, instead of thinking too much about the afterlife. As many people do in fact no longer believe in the existence of an afterlife, the importance of peoples' life on earth increases: Hence, "the richness, fullness or quality of a life [...] can be measured from the sum and the depth of experiences made in the course of a lifetime." (Rosa, 2010, p. 29) In this respect, acceleration offers the modern individual a seemingly easy way out: It promises to make more experiences consumable in a shorter period of time. This promise has a hidden dark side, though: The number of available options is growing faster than the amount of available extra time created by acceleration. To give one illustrative example: Planes significantly shorten the time needed for a journey. By making journeys easier, planes also bring far-away places into reach, creating new travel destinations no one would have thought of before. As a result, the number of journeys one could go on grows faster than the number of journeys one can in fact manage to undertake. As it seems, acceleration intensifies the problem it pretends to solve, a paradoxical situation modern individuals can – among other things – refer to by using the concept of stress.

Before turning to the lessons that can be learned from Rosa's (2010; 2013) theory for the connection between modern identity and stress, Sennett's (1998; 2006) analysis shall be reviewed briefly, as it adds to the picture drawn by Rosa by taking a deeper look at the functioning of modern capitalism. Sennett (2006) holds that we live in times of Post-Fordist

production, i.e. in times in which flexible specialization replaces assembly-line work. While classical capitalism forces the industry worker to perform the same movements over and over without having an overview over the production process as a whole, the culture of the new capitalism requires something qualitatively different. Above all, it asks for flexibility and as Sennett (2006) writes, “[o]nly a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions” (p. 3). The ideal worker in Post-Fordist capitalism is able to handle three major challenges. First of all, the individual needs to cope with uncertainty and unpredictability, as it is “migrating from task to task, job to job, place to place” (Sennett, 2006, p. 4). Second, the individual permanently has to be ready to learn new skills, to adapt itself to new circumstances. Talent is no longer regarded as something fixed, but as something to work on, something to be developed. The culture of the new capitalism “celebrates potential ability rather than past achievement” (Sennett, 2006, p. 4). Third, modern individuals have to cope with the necessity “to let go of the past” (Sennett, 2006, p. 4). They have to accept that everything is transient, that everyone and everything can be replaced easily, and that one does not have a fixed place in the world. The problem with a society and an economy “oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience” (Sennett, 2006, p. 5) is obvious, as Sennett points out: “Most people are not like this” (Sennett, 2006, p. 5), i.e. most people are not this kind of ideal worker Post-Fordist capitalism is looking for. For them, one may argue, a culture of ongoing flexibilization is equivalent to a culture of excessive demands, a culture they relate themselves to by saying that they are stressed out.

So how do Rosa’s (2010; 2013) and Sennett’s (1998; 2006) analyses contribute to answering the question why stress has become such an omnipresent concept which modern people use to express their troubles and worries? At first glance, one may attribute the

importance of the stress concept to acceleration and flexibilization, i.e. to the structure of the modern capitalist economy, and to the increasing degree of adaptability that is necessary to react adequately to a more and more complex world. As stress can be understood as the vague feeling that things are getting too much and out of balance, and as things are in fact getting too much and out of balance due to acceleration and flexibilization, referring to stress perfectly fits into the discourse about the hardships of modern life. Such a summary would be shortsighted for two reasons. First, acceleration and flexibilization need explanation themselves. That is to say that the concept of stress may actually not be used to react to acceleration and flexibilization, but rather to their deeper roots and causes. The social and the cultural motor mentioned by Rosa (2010) point into this direction by explaining that acceleration is unavoidable in a culture that cherishes competition and tries to find eternity in the strictly limited span of time the life of a human being covers. Thus, stress may be a way of expounding the problems of the values that constitute modern identity and not so much a direct response to acceleration and flexibilization. Consequently, taking a closer look at the set-up of the core identity concepts of modern Western societies seems promising. The second reason why the analysis should not stop at this point is the observation that the concept of stress is not only a reaction to the negative characteristics of modern life, but also plays an active role in the discourse. As it will turn out in the next section, stress does not necessarily oppose the constituents of modern identity, which lead the individual to a point where things are getting too much and out of balance. The way the stress concept is used in the discourse, it equally contributes to reproducing and stabilizing those core values.

Sources of the Self

Both Rosa (2010; 2013) and Sennett (1998; 2006) are concerned with developments of late-modern societies, i.e. with understanding economic and societal changes within the last

couple of decades. Taylor (1989), on the other hand, “attempts to define modern identity in describing its genesis” (Taylor, 1989, p. X), which means tracing it back through two thousand years of history and philosophy. That fact that the constituents of modern identity have evolved over such a long period of time explains why they are deeply rooted in modern Western societies and why they remain largely unquestioned: They seem completely natural. Taylor identifies three major facets of modern identity: “first, modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are ‘selves’; second, the affirmation of ordinary life [...]; third, the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source.” (Taylor, 1989, p. X) As the impact of the combination of these three dimensions has reached its culmination point in the 20th century, Taylor’s philosophical framework can be used to shed new light on relatively new developments like the success of the concept of stress. In the following sections, the three facets of modern identity will be discussed in greater detail and connected to the concept of stress.

Inwardness: Disengaged Reason and Punctual Self

As Taylor (1989) proposes, the modern self perceives itself as being independent from others. That is why it becomes a punctual self: It holds that it can be understood and described without referring to the environment it is surrounded by. The subjective inner world becomes crucial. That is not to say that interpersonal relations are not important, but that the modern self puts more emphasis on autonomy and self-determination than on collective connectedness. This attitude is combined with disengaged reason, “the ability to take an instrumental stance to one’s given properties, desires, inclinations, tendencies, habits of thought and feeling” (Taylor, 1989, p. 159) Modern selves are capable of objectifying themselves: They are able to intentionally shape their individuality, to strengthen certain aspects of their personality and to minimize other

features they disagree with. Regarding the individual as a punctual self who is able to behave rationally and predictably is an indispensable precondition for the organizational structure of modern societies and economies. The whole idea of a free market that rational agents use to exchange goods and maximize their profits is unthinkable without this mindset. Focusing on the individual's freedom and rationality also has consequences for the way in which modern selves think about their lives: Destiny becomes manageable, it lies in the hands of the individual rather than being preordained by God, family, or society. Hence, the individual becomes responsible for both its successes and defeats; it has the potential to control the seemingly uncontrollable. This can be viewed as a positive tendency towards empowerment: It opens a potentially unlimited space of opportunities and options the individual can operate with following its personal leanings. This empowerment also has a downside, though. Whenever the individual does not meet the high standard of managing its own destiny, it is made culpable for its failure. When things get out of balance although keeping them in balance is supposed to be the modern self's core business, it needs a way to phrase its discomfort – and this is where stress comes into play.

Making the Individual Responsible. If the individual is responsible for its life, it is also responsible for its stress – and for coping with it. Being able to cope with stress is a good thing: “both personal mastery and social support are terrifically helpful to people as they face adversity” (Becker, 2013, p. 72). Besides, coping can also become a dangerous thing: Making the individual responsible potentially frees society and employers from the necessity to act. If the individual can transform itself or adapt to the demands of its environment, there is no reason for change – and no reason to question the organizational structure of a company or the society as a whole. “Self-care is [...] cheaper than state care” (Pollock, 1988, p. 389) – and it is also easier: It

keeps the engines running. This is what can be called the political or ideological function of stress (Mulhall, 1996). Besides, being able to deal with high demands is not equivalent to enjoying it. To use an analogy: Airbags are a brilliant invention, but they do not make car accidents fulfilling experiences. If you have an accident, you are happy that your car is equipped with an airbag. Nevertheless, you still prefer not to be involved in an accident at all. Therefore, driving on the streets is governed by rules. The same applies to stressful events: Coping strategies can be understood as mental airbags. But neither the airbags in our minds nor the airbags in our cars alone can guarantee our safety or health:

When we say, for example, that poverty is stressful (in fact, in the academic literature, poverty is often called a stressor), we're saying that people subjectively experience poverty as stressful; one person's stress is another person's challenge. But poverty is not merely – or mainly – a subjective experience. [...] The stress concept often obscures injustices and inequalities by seducing us into viewing those injustices as individual problems. (Becker, 2013, pp. 6-7)

Thus, the tendency to make the individual responsible leaves almost no room for deliberating whether our society sufficiently supports the individual efforts by creating adequate regulations and structures. These tentative considerations already show the versatility of the concept of stress as well as its complex interplay with the facets of modern identity. Stress is something people experience when they fail to manage their own destiny, i.e. fail to meet the standard a modern self is supposed to meet. At first glance, it would seem plausible to utilize this experience to criticize the ideal of unlimited autonomy and freedom, which expects too much from the individual. In fact, the discourse seems to work the other way around: Instead of undermining the ideal, the notion that the individual is responsible for its well-being is

reinforced. Consequently, stress is not primarily or at least not solely used to react to the problematic aspects of the concept of modern identity, but has rather found a place within the existing framework.

Controlling the Uncontrollable. Although modern individuals believe in being the sovereign master of their destiny, many things are beyond our control. We do not choose when and where we are born. We do not choose our parents or teachers or classmates or colleagues at work – and we do not choose which disease we suffer or die from. This is a potential problem for the proposed conceptualization of modern identity: Having to accept that there are things we cannot change conflicts with the ideal of limitless freedom and autonomy. Especially when it comes to talking about disease and illness, the stress concept turns out to be a valuable tool, as it “provides an answer to the ‘particularity of misfortune’ [...]. [...] The concept [...] informs the ‘why’, ‘how’, and also the ‘what to do’ questions.” (Mulhall, 1996, p. 464)

Being able to answer the why-question implies being able to give causes and reasons for the things that have happened. As it is argued “that certain pathological states or diseases emerge from the combination of a predisposition with stressful events” (Salomon & Jin, 2013, p. 591), the concept of stress provides a possible answer to the why-question. As the presence of risk factors is mostly not enough to make someone ill and the absence of risk factors not enough to guarantee remaining healthy, there is an explanatory gap to be bridged. This is done by assuming that “individuals have their own point at which they will develop a given disorder, a point that depends on the interaction between the degree to which these risk factors exist and the degree of stress experienced by the individual” (Ingram & Luxton, 2005, p. 36). This is the answer to the why-question: A person develops a certain disease or disorder whenever the combination of vulnerabilities and the amount of stress exceeds the individual’s resources.

The how-question refers to the mechanisms. In general, stress is considered to be an adaptive alarm response, preparing our mind and body for upcoming challenges. Only if people are constantly exceeding their resources, the body will become more and more vulnerable and finally ill. It is the permanent need to be ready to react to challenges and unforeseen events, the constant unpredictability of modern life that stresses people out and makes them ill. Hence, the stress concept gives “an explanation for illness that goes beyond the sheer arbitrariness of random events.” (Pollock, 1988, p. 390)

Apart from the medical treatment, which might be necessary to cure a disease, the what-to-do-question also embraces strategies for the future. The concept of stress does not only explain why everything was getting out of balance and why one developed a certain disease, it also offers a way out: “The word stress gives hope – hope that something can be done.” (Kugelman, 1992, p. XVI) Dealing with stress involves a whole industry, an armada of health professionals and self-help gurus. Many strategies are regarded as potentially helpful and offered to the stressed individual: yoga classes (Parshad, 2004), meditation (Astin, 1997), relaxation techniques (Rausch, Gramling, & Auerbach, 2006), journal writing (Smyth & Helm, 2003), cognitive reappraisal (Jamieson, Mendes, & Nock, 2013), coaching (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005), massages (Cady & Jones, 1997; Zeitlin, Keller, Shiflett, Schleifer, & Bartlett, 2000), walking in the forest (Hansmann, Hug, & Seeland, 2007; Morita et al., 2007), humor (Abel, 2002; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, & Dance, 1993), spirituality (Delgado, 2007; Kim & Seidlitz, 2002), physical exercise (Salmon, 2001), mindfulness-based stress reduction (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004), aromatherapy (Hur, Song, Lee, & Lee, 2014), and so on.

The stress concept is a powerful instrument, which helps modern selves to manage their destiny and to answer the questions the particularity of misfortune poses. This has advantages

and disadvantages. Having a framework to refer to when it comes to facing the uncertainties of life is beneficial. On the other hand, the stress concept might nourish the illusion that every evil can be removed by coping with it. Again, stress seems to be in line with the way modern individuals perceive themselves – and it helps them adhering to the idea of autonomy and freedom by suggesting that sometimes even the uncontrollable can be controlled.

The Affirmation of Ordinary Life

The affirmation of ordinary life is the second facet of modern identity named by Taylor (1989). The term ordinary life designates “those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labour, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family.” (Taylor, 1989, p. 211) While positive feelings were a welcome add-on and probably desired by most people, they were not the main reasons for getting engaged in pre-modern times. Above all, marriages served as a social institution, organizing and structuring daily life as well as protecting the individual in hard times. Since the 19th century and the times of romanticism, a relationship is supposed to be based on love and an affinity of spirits. A similar shift of priorities can be observed when it comes to “the making of the things needed for life”. For a long time, work was something that had to be done for the purpose of survival: Whoever managed to survive without work – for example by letting others work for him – chose this option to have more time for activities, which were considered less profane. In the modern age, work has turned itself into a sphere of self-fulfillment and a way to create meaning in one’s life. Mostly, people are not looking for any kind of job, but a job they can identify with and that gives them a sense of being important. This trend seems to be even more distinct in the secular Western societies of the 20th and 21st century.

There are several possible explanations for this development. One explanation is Rosa's (2010; 2013) cultural motor of acceleration: As the normative function of religion has faded away, the ordinary life is the only life people have. They may still believe or hope that paradise is waiting for them, but it is no longer an undisputable certainty. If the time people have is limited to the few decades they spend on earth, people feel the duty to make as much out of these decades as possible. Taylor's (1989) explanation points into a slightly different direction: Pre-modern societies put great emphasis on the importance of leading an ethical life and of developing desirable virtues: "men deliberate about moral excellence, they contemplate the order of things" (p. 211). Leading a good life implies leading a *morally* good life. In contrast, modern societies neither share a common view of moral excellence nor believe in a higher, rational order one could contemplate about. As Taylor puts it: "Our own nature is no longer defined by a substantive rational ordering of purposes, but by our own inner impulses and our place in the interlocking whole." (p. 301)

In the absence of such a substantive rational ordering of purposes, the ordinary life becomes the central source of meaning; and as ordinary life becomes more important, each and every decision becomes more important. If a good life means exhausting the options the world offers, choosing the wrong option is problematical for the modern self: It implies having a less than optimal life. The inner urge to strive for perfection may lead to the feeling that things are getting too much, a feeling people can refer to by using the concept of stress. This line of thought can be turned upside down, though: The more people have the impression that things are getting too much, the more reason they have to believe that they are performing well. In this sense, claiming to be stressed out can also mean claiming that one is important.

So many opportunities, so much stress! As Rosa has pointed out and as Taylor confirms, modern selves tend to believe that the best way of spending their time on earth is trying to make as many experiences as possible. This attitude leads modern selves into a complicated dilemma. While the fact that many more options have come into reach seemingly makes a fulfilled life easier to achieve, it also poses at least two severe problems. The first problem is brought up by Rosa: The time people have to exploit the available options has remained limited to the few decades a human life comprises. The second problem can be derived from Taylor's analysis: As there is no higher-order ideal of a good life people can rely on, they lack a compass to guide their choices in the face of an abundance of possibilities. Hence, modern selves find themselves chasing the optimal life which is in principle unfinishable endeavor. As described above, this may lead to the feeling of being stressed out.

The agony of choice modern selves find themselves in is aggravated by the necessary trade-off between the quantity and the quality of experiences that one can make. The affirmation of ordinary life as interpreted in the Western societies of the 21st century seems to choose quantity over quality: There are not only *1.000 Places to See Before You Die* (Schultz, 2003), but also *1.000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die* (Moon, 2008), and *1.000 Books to Read Before You Die* (Mustich, 2018). Lists like these lead to two difficulties. First, they can always be prolonged: Whoever has seen all 1.000 places, heard all 1.000 recordings, and read all 1.000 books will soon realize that there are many more beautiful and interesting places to visit, fascinating albums to listen to, and inspiring books to read. Consequently, these lists only create the fleeting illusion of limited options. Second and more importantly, while choosing quality over quantity potentially conflicts with the affirmation of ordinary life as interpreted in the 21st century, constantly choosing quantity over quality conflicts with common wisdom. People know

that visiting seven Italian cities in seven days is not necessarily better than spending a whole week in Rome, and briefly scanning through several books not more satisfying than being deeply moved by one. Being engaged in something requires time and effort. Investing this time and effort necessitates giving up the possibility to live some of the other options one could choose from – which is inherently problematic for modern selves. Hence, the feeling of being stressed out may not only result from the attempt to make as many experiences as possible, but rather from the complicated choice between quantity and quality: While both criteria are important, people can never meet them at the same time. Trying to establish a balance where no real balance can be established may be perceived as being stressful.

I am so stressed out, I must be important! Claiming that one is stressed out is a complaint: Stressed people are seldom happy people. But that is only one side of the coin: Stress can also be seen as a positive attribute, as “an individual and collective indication of political and cultural endeavour, a testimony to the modern aptitude for working productively under pressure, and a barometer of technological and social progress.” (Jackson, 2013, p. 267) The idea behind this is that stressed people are people who try hard and fight for their goals. Stress transforms them into a “powerful being who overcomes mere human limitations” (Kugelmann, 1992, p. 17). From this point of view, having an interesting life means having a stressful life. A life without stress – desirably as it may seem at first sight – would be a life without challenges and without adventures.

What has been described for individuals so far can be applied to societies as well. The notion that “[t]he present provides hardly any dwelling place” (Kugelmann, 1992, p. 17) and that we are surrounded by “a flood of information trivial and profound, true or false, a torrent of demands, deadlines and tasks, a revolving door of work and rest” (Kugelmann, 1992, p. 17) is

not exclusively negative. It reflects both, our criticism of modern societies and our pride to be part of them. Following this line of thought, our stressful lives are only possible because the Western societies we live in are so innovative and productive, because these societies try to lead the world into safer and better times. All the technological and scientific achievements of the last century would not have been possible without many people working very hard – and being stressed out.

In this sense, the stress concept justifies the second facet of modern identity, the affirmation of ordinary life. Thereby, it also stabilizes the existing social order. If stress is an inevitable part of leading a modern life, if it is the price modern selves have to pay for their wealth and for being members of a highly developed society, coping is the only thing that is left. This might then in turn prevent people from questioning and rethinking the performance–paradigm, i.e. prevent people from questioning and rethinking the way they have designed their societies. Once more, this illustrates the janus-facedness of the concept of stress: It can be used to express discomfort with the current state of affairs while at the same time stabilizing the facets of modern identity, which helped creating present-day societies and economies.

Expressivism: Recognized Particularity and Personal Commitment

Inwardness, the first facet of modern identity, makes the individual responsible for managing its destiny, it points to the idea of “self-responsible independence” (Taylor, 1989, p. 185). This notion goes hand in hand with two more ideas, the idea of a “recognized particularity” (Taylor, 1989, p. 185) and the idea of the “individualism of personal commitment” (Taylor, 1989, p. 185). Taken together, these two latter ideas form the third facet of modern identity, expressivism. If the modern self is a punctual self that has to take decisions independently from others, it needs to explore its inner depths to figure out what to do. The inner world becomes

decisive. In this context, *recognized particularity* reflects the thought that individuals are not only independent, but also different from others. This difference is accepted as natural and cherished as important. In modern societies, individuals are asked to express their subjectivity and to find ways of realizing their potential. Ideally, living one's own recognized particularity is combined with personal commitment: "No way of life is truly good, no matter how much it may be in line with nature, unless it is endorsed with the whole will." (Taylor, 1989, p. 185) The individual has to learn to use its freedom. In case it fails at doing so, infinite freedom can lead to infinite stress. However, stress can not only be the result of the challenge to express one's individuality, but also a means to organize one's reactions to this challenge: Whoever is able to manage his stress will be able to take part in the unfinishable quest of exploring one's subjectivity. Additionally, claiming that one is stressed out can be interpreted as a form of protest against society and economy: As things are systematically getting out of balance, the individual does not have enough time to work on its self-fulfillment. As the analysis will show, this protest tends to remain toothless, offering an escape without escaping, thereby rather stabilizing than undermining the existing social order.

Infinite Freedom, Infinite Stress. According to Taylor (1989), the modern self is not only regarded as free and reasonable, but also as a being with an inner depth, that needs to be expressed and developed. In fact, individuals in present-day Western societies are less bound to traditions and to following their ancestors' paths than they have ever been in the history of humankind. Ideally, the modern society of the 21st century gives people the opportunity to live up to their full potential – but it also obliges them to do so. Not being bound to traditions also means having no traditions to rely on. If everyone is special, shaping ones distinctive individuality is a life-long project. However, constantly improving oneself and trying to be

exceptional can become exhausting: Infinite freedom may cause infinite stress. This stress does not only result from the infinite number of options one has to make a limited choice from, as described above. It also results from the struggle to find out which option suits one's lifestyle and personality best.

Interestingly, stress is not only a label people can use to state that they are overburdened by the freedom they possess: Being stressed out is not necessarily the bitter end of their failed efforts, it can also be the starting point for further self-transformation. This is why some people "take up stress management as a form of self-discipline, as the spiritual exercise of the day." (Kugelman, 1992, p. 166) According to this point of view, learning to cope with stress means learning to appreciate the advantages of modernity. Whereas people in ancient times and medieval ages were exposed to an environment they could not control, life in the 21st century may be stressful – but it is also predictable. In this context, stress provides "a constructive conceptual matrix for developing new models of health and happiness and for generating therapeutic protocols" (Jackson, 2013, p. 228). Once it is acknowledged that stress can be handled, there is an incentive to figure out how this can be done. Thus, the stress concept "keeps consultants busy, researchers productive, exercise instructors jumping, and ordinary citizens experimenting with an increasingly complex array of diets, life-styles and technological stress-reducing gadgets." (Kugelman, 1992, p. 21) As stress is seen as an integral part of modern life, all those techniques and technologies are rather meant to make people better at stress than to help them getting rid of it. In accordance with that, people are encouraged "to maintain vigilance over their mental and physical states so that they can transform those states when they judge they're stressed out." (Becker, 2013, p. 6) People try to regulate their stress because they hope that it will

bring them closer to everlasting happiness and well-being. In this sense, coping with stress can be interpreted as coping with infinite freedom.

Hence, the stress concept is more than a way to express discomfort: It embraces both the unpleasant consequences of modern life and the strategies individuals use to cope with them. It integrates the good and the bad, the daily hassles and the wellness practices. In the framework of an ideology “that praises not only individual freedom, but also individual success and self-actualization” (Becker, 2013, p. 4), the stress concept ultimately enables modern selves to continue working on the interminable endeavor of becoming a better person.

Making Society Responsible – Escape without Escaping. The current discourses on stress “can be seen as an attempt to normalize stress, and at the same time ‘problematize’ it.” (Donnelly, & Long, 2003, p. 398) On the one hand, stress is declared to be inescapable. As there is no one to be accused for inescapable events or for the detrimental effects they cause, “the responsibility to cope with stress rests with the individual.” (Donnelly & Long, 2003, p. 398) This was the idea behind the attempt to make the individual responsible (see above). On the other hand, stress has somehow become “a unifying slogan for the unnatural effects of modern industrial civilization” (Viner, 1999, p. 401). Hence, stress can also be seen as a societal problem. Expressivist selves may complain that the excessive demands of leading a modern life keep them from exploring their inner depths and from fully exploring their potential: They have no time for becoming who they want to be.

Even those who claim that it is the structure and the functioning of society that stress people out, will have to admit that changing society is a complicated and longsome process mostly beyond the strength of the stressed individual. Complaining about the current state of affairs may be experienced as relieving, but it does probably not free from the feeling of being

stressed out in the long run. A person who feels stressed out right now cannot wait for fundamental societal and economic changes, which might take years or even decades to become graspable. It is therefore perfectly understandable when individuals decide to work on their coping strategies instead of working on changing society. It is also perfectly understandable when psychologists and health professionals decide to do their best to help stressed out individuals and to enable them to function in modern societies. Besides being understandable, it can also be seen as problematic: the attempt to make society responsible for the daily hassles of modern selves potentially ends with the individual trying to cope with them. Following this line of reasoning, treating stress on an individual level would reflect an individualization of collective problems.

The escape of blaming society easily becomes an escape without escaping. Becker (2013) describes this dilemma by distinguishing a damage and an adjustment scenario: “The damage scenario emphasizes the possibility that society can destroy our health and well-being; the adjustment scenario emphasizes the possibility that if we fail to adapt to the conditions imposed by our culture we will ruin ourselves.” (p. 20) Even if the society is considered to be responsible for causing a certain condition, the individual is held responsible for dealing with it: Society can make one ill, but only if one fails to transform oneself and to create resilience. Conversely, restoring the functioning of the stressed individual does not only help the individual, but also perpetuates the established societal and economic order. Hence, the stress concept helps “legitimizing existing social arrangements” (Young, 1980, p. 144) – maybe even if these social arrangements are acknowledged as being stressful and potentially detrimental for the individual.

Summary: The Janus-Facedness of Stress and Modern Life

According to Taylor (1989), modern identity in Western societies is based on three facets: inwardness, the affirmation of ordinary life, and expressivism. Those facets can be traced back in the history of philosophy over many centuries, but have reached their culmination point in the 20th century. Their effect on the life of modern selves is janus-faced: On the one hand, modernity can be viewed as a success story. It has freed individuals from restricting traditions and given them the right to act autonomously; the trust in human reason has led to remarkable technological changes, making life more controllable, more secure, and more agreeable for millions of people. On the other hand, modernity can also be viewed as a story of ongoing decay, of constantly asking too much of the individual, of acceleration (Rosa, 2010; 2013) and flexibilization (Sennett, 1998; 2006) which exceed peoples capabilities. As Taylor (1989) points out, those two perspectives cannot be separated from each other: They flow from the same sources. The way modern identity is conceptualized and the way modern societies are designed put the individual right into the middle of an unsolvable dilemma. Hardly anyone wants to turn back the wheel, but wanting the conveniences of modern life at least seemingly implies that one has to accept its' downsides as well.

How this dilemma can be resolved is far beyond the scope of this paper (see e.g. Fromm, 1941, Lasch, 1979, or Habermas, 1984; 1987, for some critical analyses). Instead, it was concerned with the exploring relation between modern life and the ongoing success of the concept of stress in the public and societal discourse – hoping that such an analysis can reveal why it feels so natural to describe our daily hassles by referring to stress. As it turns out, the janus-facedness of modern life is complemented by the janus-facedness of stress. Paradoxically, the concept of stress is used for both criticizing the constituents of modern identity and perpetuating their influence. The modern self – conceptualized as being punctual and capable of

disengaged reason – experiences stress as it is made responsible for its successes as well as for its defeats. At the same time, it needs the concept of stress to nourish the illusion of being able to control the uncontrollable. The affirmation of ordinary life results in stress as individuals feel the pressure to make as many experiences as possible, leaving no time for rest and contemplation. On the contrary, being stressed out can also be interpreted as a sign of personal importance. The expressivist self feels stressed out as it is trying to manage its infinite freedom and – reversely – uses stress to organize its efforts. Last but not least, modern individuals refer to the concept of stress to express the notion that the demands of society are too high and not leaving enough space for self-actualization.

As this brief summary illustrates, Taylor's (1989) philosophical framework offers a structure that helps illuminating the relation between stress and modern life as well as systemizing the different societal functions the concept of stress serves. The concept of stress is indeed able "to incorporate a wide range of themes" (Pollock, 1988, p. 387) which are related to the constituents of modern identity: It enables modern selves to take a critical stance towards modern life while not forcing them to leave the existing economic and societal framework. In its own janus-facedness, stress mirrors the janus-facedness of modern life. Understanding this complex interplay can at least enable us to take a step back and to develop a more reflective point of view towards the notion that ours is an age of stress. Realizing the social constructedness of concepts that shape our daily lives does not automatically free us from their influence, but it may give us enough space to start deliberating upon alternative conceptualizations. Maybe it is time to rethink stress – not necessarily the scientific concept itself, but certainly the use we make of it.

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