

Contact Ontology and the Crisis of the Modern Order

Toward a Counter-Paradigm Against Life-Detached Thought and Life-Constricting Institutions

Hakkı Tan

Abstract

This article examines the crisis of the modern social order not merely through the lenses of political economy, law, or culture, but at a deeper level, through the deterioration of the human relation to the world. Its central claim is that modernity simultaneously recognizes the human being as an autonomous subject, citizen, and bearer of rights while materially producing forms of existence marked by market dependency, temporal deprivation, and institutional abstraction. The result is a subject that is formally free yet increasingly passive, fragmented, and estranged from the conditions of shared life. For this reason, the contemporary crisis cannot be exhausted by categories such as inequality, misrepresentation, poverty, or identity conflict. Beneath these lies a regime of knowledge, institutions, and existence that fails to sustain life. To conceptualize this condition, the article proposes what it calls contact ontology. Contact ontology rethinks the value of thought and action in terms of their capacity to sustain human beings, living worlds, and the common world. From this framework, the article advances three material-political grounds for a counter-paradigm: secure housing, debt-free and orientation-based education, and the gradual restoration of time through the reduction of labor-time domination. The argument relies neither on a romantic conception of human nature nor on a crude utilitarianism. Rather, it contends that freedom must be understood not merely as legal recognition, but as a materially enabled form of relational existence.

Keywords: ontology, modernity, alienation, labor, housing rights, education, politics of time, relationality, counter-paradigm

1. Introduction

The crisis of contemporary society is often diagnosed at the wrong level. Political analysis tends to interpret it as a crisis of representation, economics as a problem of distribution, and cultural critique as a matter of value erosion. Each of these diagnoses identifies something real, yet none reaches the underlying structure of the problem. At a deeper level lies a systematic distortion in the way human beings relate to themselves, to others, to place, to living worlds, and to time. Human beings today inhabit an order marked by unprecedented technical capacity, information circulation, and specialization. Yet under these very conditions they are increasingly exhausted, insecure, time-poor, and estranged from durable forms of relation. The problem is not simply governmental failure, market malfunction, or cultural decline. It concerns the criteria by which value is assigned, the objects to which thought is held accountable, and the material conditions under which freedom becomes possible.

The central thesis of this article is that the fundamental blindness of the modern order lies in its severance of thought, institutions, and social organization from the criterion of life-sustaining relationality. Practices that enable people to dwell, learn, take root, relate, and participate in the maintenance of a shared world cannot be placed on the same plane as practices that trap them in regimes of debt, precarity, discipline, and abstract management. Yet modern institutions frequently obscure this distinction through their own legitimating vocabularies. Terms such as law, rationality, efficiency, expertise, and growth are routinely treated as intrinsically positive, irrespective of what they do to the conditions of life itself.[1]

Against this blindness, I propose a framework I call contact ontology. At the outset, however, a conceptual distinction is necessary. This article does not collapse the ontological, the normative, and the institutional-political into one another. The ontological level concerns what kind of being the human is, and what kind of mode of existence it is pushed into. The normative level concerns what forms of life are defensible. The institutional-political level concerns the material conditions through which such defensible forms of life may become possible. Contact ontology does not dissolve these levels into a single discourse; rather, it seeks to clarify their relation.

Accordingly, what follows is neither a purely metaphysical ontology nor merely a policy program. It is an attempt to establish a systematic relation between the quality of human attachment to the world and the institutional forms that either erode or sustain that attachment.

2. Theoretical Positioning: Speaking from Within the Critique of Modernity

The history of modern thought is not a single, uninterrupted narrative of rationalism. It also contains a powerful internal line of self-critique. Marx analyzes alienation; Heidegger diagnoses the oblivion of Being and the reduction of the world to a standing reserve; Arendt distinguishes labor from action and shows the contraction of the public realm; Foucault tracks the constitution of the subject within dispositifs of power and knowledge; Illich exposes the way institutional systems expropriate the very capacities they claim to serve.[2] These thinkers do not form a coherent school. Their methods, anthropologies, and political implications differ sharply. I invoke them together not as representatives of one doctrine, but as bearers of a shared negative intuition: that modern order repeatedly abstracts, disciplines, and detaches the human being from the life-world it inhabits.

That negative intuition provides the point of departure here. Still, contact ontology should not be reduced to any one of these thinkers. It is not a borrowed term but an independent proposition developed through the fractures they opened. The central issue is this: the dominant form of modern institutions and political imagination recognizes the subject as formally autonomous, rights-bearing, and self-owning, while materially binding that same subject to systems of dependence in housing, education, health, and time. What emerges is a human being declared free in law yet suffocated in practice. This contradiction marks one of the defining hypocrisies of modern order.[3]

At this point the relation between ontology and politics becomes decisive. Ontology must concern itself not only with the question what is being? but also with the question what kind of existence is being socially produced? The human being is not merely a consciousness-bearing subject. It is also a temporal, spatial, embodied, and relational agent. For that reason, the institutional environments that surround it must be evaluated not solely in economic or legal terms, but also in terms of the forms of existence they generate. Today, market regimes, housing systems, debt-driven education, extended labor-time, and performance cultures do not merely organize behavior; they produce a particular kind of human being: fatigued, vulnerable, short-termist, competitive, and increasingly severed from the common world.[4]

3. Contact Ontology: Definition and Limits of the Concept

The point of departure for contact ontology is straightforward: when a form of thought or action does not sustain human beings, living worlds, or the common world, its claim to value remains incomplete. To sustain does not mean merely to produce utility or immediate function. Contact must be defined more narrowly and more rigorously through two criteria: first, not intensifying the fragility of life; second, supporting the relations and practices that make a common world sustainable.

This definition matters because the concept of contact can easily become rhetorically inflated and come to mean everything at once. Contact ontology therefore does not automatically validate any activity that appears constructive, compassionate, or well-intentioned. The relevant question is not how an idea presents itself, but what it does to the fragility of life and to the durability of shared worlds.

Two misreadings should be rejected at once. The first is that this approach amounts to crude practicalism or utilitarianism. It does not. Contact ontology does not assess thought only in terms of immediately observable use. Mathematics, logic, theoretical physics, or philosophy of language do not fall outside contact simply because they are abstract; they too shape worlds indirectly. The problem is not abstract thought as such, but the immunization of abstraction from accountability to life. The second misreading is that this is a romantic naturalism. It is not. Contact ontology does not call for a return to some pre-technological pastoral purity. Its target is not complexity but the reduction of value to financial circulation, managerial efficiency, and institutional prestige.

Within this framework, four derivative forms of contact can be distinguished. The first is ethical contact: refusing indifference to the vulnerability of others and taking the obligation of care seriously in public life. The second is material contact: participating in the infrastructures, care networks, and processes of production that sustain life. The third is epistemic contact: holding knowledge accountable to the life-world it affects. The fourth is political contact: evaluating institutions not solely by their formal legitimacy but by what they do to life. Contact, then, is not reducible to a negative principle of non-harm; it also includes the active sustaining of the common world.[5]

The normative implication is clear. Freedom cannot be understood as mere non-interference. Human beings become agents not simply when coercion is absent, but when they have a place in which to breathe, a real possibility of learning, and a horizon of time not exhausted by the struggle to survive.

4. The Crisis of the Modern Order: The Expropriation of Space, Knowledge, and Time

4.1. The Expropriation of Space: Housing as an Instrument of Discipline

Housing in modern societies is not simply a need; it is a direct instrument of governance. Once dwelling becomes subordinated to speculative property regimes, a basic condition of existence is delivered over to market volatility. The home ceases to be the ground of life and becomes instead an element in circuits of debt, rent extraction, and dispossession. The consequence is not only poverty. It is the erosion of rootedness, spatial security, and the capacity to inhabit the world as more than a temporary burden. Those who cannot dwell cannot become stable agents; they become beings of permanent postponement.[6]

4.2. The Expropriation of Knowledge: Education as Debt and Selection

Education is similarly transformed when it ceases to be an opening of life and becomes primarily a mechanism for producing human capital. Under these conditions, knowledge no longer functions in a liberatory but in a selective and disciplinary manner. What matters is less aptitude, inclination, or intellectual formation than competitive performance and financial endurance. The right to education may remain formally intact, while in practice it becomes a classed and psychological sorting mechanism. In this form, education alienates individuals not only from social equality but from their own capacities and their own time.[7]

4.3. The Expropriation of Time: The Existential Damage of the Labor Regime

The deepest expropriation concerns time. Modern labor regimes do not merely employ human beings by the hour; they colonize attention, rhythm, and life-horizon. Long hours, insecurity, and performance discipline reduce the person from an agent capable of shaping a life into a being compelled ceaselessly to reproduce the conditions of its own survival. This is not merely an economic problem. A person whose time is fragmented cannot think, cannot sustain deep relations, cannot care adequately, and cannot reproduce a public world. The politics of time becomes decisive at precisely this point.[8]

5. Three Material Grounds for a Counter-Paradigm

If contact ontology remains only an ethical appeal, it has no theoretical weight. Its political force depends on its articulation through material grounds. The three principles defended here do not claim to offer a final solution or a comprehensive economic transition model. Yet they cannot remain at the level of abstract orientation alone. The seriousness of a counter-paradigm depends on whether these material grounds can be institutionally built in gradual and plural ways. What is proposed here is therefore less a sudden systemic rupture than a field of differentiated transition paths involving public law, local government, cooperative forms, distributive claims on productivity gains, and regimes of social contribution.

5.1. Secure Housing

Housing must be understood not as charity but as a right, because the capacity to dwell in the world is a precondition for nearly every other freedom. What is defended here is not universal ownership of unlimited property, but guaranteed access to dignified and secure dwelling. The concrete institutional forms may vary: public housing, cooperative housing, the social use of vacant housing stock, regional rent controls, transitional housing, and mixed local models. What does not vary is the principle: no person should be abandoned to the naked disciplinary power of the housing market.

A familiar objection is that such a commitment would expand the state excessively. Yet this objection typically rests on an ideological blindness that treats existing coercive structures as natural. Human life is already governed by large-scale compulsion; it is merely called the market, and is therefore exempted from critical naming. A form of coercion does not become natural simply because it is not state-administered. The relevant question is not whether constraint exists, but which constraints make life possible and which hold life hostage.

5.2. Debt-Free and Orientation-Based Education

Education must cease to function primarily as a mechanism for converting persons into labor-market inputs. The issue here is not a romantic discourse of self-discovery, but the possibility of establishing a non-destructive relation between individual inclination and social life. Education must therefore be conceived not simply as formal access to institutions but together with nourishment, transportation, materials, guidance, and time. Debt-financed education is not emancipation; it is deferred submission.

At the same time, orientation-based education should not be understood as the early confinement of individuals into fixed roles. Orientation is not an essential core discovered once and for all, but a dynamic process that emerges through pedagogical observation, plural opportunities for experimentation, and reversible paths of development. Educational institutions should therefore not rank students according to a single norm of success, but create plural pathways capable of recognizing different forms of aptitude. Teacher assessment, counseling structures, lived student experience, and social needs should be held in a permeable relation to one another, such that no orientation becomes final, irreversible, or prematurely locked in. The aim is not to subordinate individual inclination to a planning logic of social necessity, but to construct revisable, non-destructive relations between them.

When a society's regime of knowledge turns education into a market-oriented filtering mechanism, it produces not only inequality but also the instrumentalization of thought itself. Debt-free education is therefore not simply a matter of fair access; it is a matter of restoring a meaningful relation between knowledge and life.

5.3. The Gradual Restoration of Time

Reducing working time is not a populist slogan but an existential necessity. Yet this claim must be defended seriously. To halve labor-time overnight while maintaining wages without regard for broader economic effects would be naïve. What is defensible is a different proposition: as social productivity, automation, and technical capacity increase, their gains should be distributed not only as capital accumulation but also as reductions in working time.

The restoration of time cannot remain a vague appeal to goodwill. Institutionally, it may be approached through at least three families of mechanisms: first, the gradual reduction of legal maximum working hours in relation to productivity gains; second, the redirection of part of the gains generated by automation and high productivity into public time funds or wage-compensation mechanisms; third, the social recognition and support of forms of labor that are necessary for collective life but systematically devalued by markets, such as care work, ecological repair, and the labor of social reproduction. The point is not to abolish labor but to prevent productivity gains from flowing entirely into capital concentration.

The restoration of time is therefore not a demand for a right not to work. It is a refusal of the total occupation of life by wage compulsion. The aim is not to deny socially necessary labor, but to render it more just, more bounded, and more compatible with life.

6. The Strongest Objection: “Who Will Work?”

Any approach that dismisses this question deserves to collapse, both theoretically and politically. Contact ontology does not romanticize the human being as naturally good, productive, or oriented toward public benefit. Such optimism has no serious historical basis. Human beings can become constructive or destructive depending on the material and institutional conditions under which they live. Social order must therefore rely not only on moral aspiration but also on a principle of reciprocity.

The basic principle should be stated clearly: no one should be compelled to work through the threat of hunger, homelessness, or total insecurity; but no one who is capable of contributing should be wholly exempt from the burdens of sustaining common life. This is not a sanctification of coercive discipline, but an honest recognition of social reproduction. There are forms of labor that must be done if any regime of rights is to endure. Yet these forms must not be reduced to market employment alone. Care work, ecological repair, technical maintenance, public sanitation, food production, disaster preparedness, education, and health support are all forms of social contribution.

The answer to the question “Who will work?” must therefore be sought not in moral exhortation alone but in institutional reciprocity. Reciprocity need not take the form of a single uniform labor regime. Obligations of contribution may be organized through plural forms: public service hours, the recognition of care labor, community-based service, profession-specific contributions, or differentiated obligations calibrated to income and wealth. The governing principle remains unchanged: no one should be forced into labor by sheer survival panic, but no one capable of contributing should be fully released from the material burdens of common life.

For this reason, contact ontology does not defend parasitism. On the contrary, parasitism is already institutionalized in the present order: one class endures the brute pressure of labor, while another accumulates through rent, speculation, and property privilege. To direct the critique of unearned consumption only at those seeking exit from insecurity, while leaving intact these entrenched structures of extraction, is not economic analysis but ideological choice.[9]

7. Conclusion

This article does not claim to present a blueprint for a perfect society. Its aim is more limited and more fundamental: to render visible the existential core of the contemporary crisis and to propose, against it, a counter-paradigm organized around the threshold of livability. The fundamental lie of the modern order is that it can declare the materially suffocated individual formally free. Its second lie is that forms of knowledge and institution detached from the sustenance of life can still be treated as neutral, objective, and universal simply because they speak in abstract languages.

Contact ontology contests both lies. It argues that freedom is not merely non-interference but materially enabled relationality; that thought is not merely abstract competence but responsibility toward life; and that politics is not merely a technique of administration but a way of either sustaining or severing the human relation to the world.

A society's level of civilization should therefore be measured not by how much data it processes, how much it grows, or how many experts it produces, but by how much space, time, and livable world it leaves to those who inhabit it. Beyond that threshold, narratives of progress too often function as legitimations for more sophisticated forms of alienation.

Notes

- [1] For major variants of the critique of modern rationality, see Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*; Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- [2] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology"; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Michel Foucault's work on subjectivity, governmentality, and biopolitics; Ivan Illich on institutional expropriation.
- [3] On the tension between formal freedom and material dependence, see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.
- [4] On the broader logic through which power shapes life-rhythms and subjectivity, Foucault's analyses of governmentality and biopolitics remain indispensable.
- [5] Relationality has appeared in different forms in phenomenology, care ethics, and ecological thought. Contact ontology is not reducible to any of these traditions, though it intersects with them.

- [6] On the existential significance of dwelling and place, see Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.
- [7] On the critique of institutional schooling and emancipatory pedagogy, see Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
- [8] On time-discipline and temporal acceleration, see E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” and Hartmut Rosa’s work on social acceleration.
- [9] Rent extraction, speculation, and accumulation without direct productive contribution are central features of contemporary capitalism. Critiques of living without work become ideological when they target only public guarantees while leaving these structures untouched.

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