

The Tyranny of Time

by Jay Walljasper

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. As a kid in the 1960s I remember hearing that one of the biggest challenges of the future would be what to do with all our time. Amazing inventions were going to free up great stretches of our days for what really matters – friends, family, fun.

But just the opposite has happened

People may complain about how busy they are and how overloaded life has become, but speed is still viewed as generally positive – something that will help us all enrich our lives.

It has always seemed obvious to me that the faster I move, the more things I can do, and the more fun and meaning my life will have. As I race through meals, work, family time, social encounters, and the physical landscape on my way to my next appointment, I'm beginning to wonder what I've been missing, what pleasures I've been in too much of a hurry to appreciate or even notice.

But Historian Stephen Kern, a professor at Northern Illinois University whose book *The Culture of Time and Space* chronicled the soaring velocity of life between 1880 and World War I, pointed out that "new speeds have always brought out alarmists." In the 1830s, he noted, it was feared that train passengers would suffer crushed bones from travelling at speeds as high as 35 miles an hour. Kern considers the current concern about the effects of our speeded-up lives a similar form of hysteria. "Technologies that promote speed are essentially good," he said, adding that, "the historical record is that humans have never opted for slowness."

Slowing down can be fulfilling

A surprising number of people I know have cut back to part-time work in their jobs or quit altogether in order to work for themselves, raise kids, go back to school, or find some other way to lead a more meaningful, less hurried life -- even though it means getting by on significantly less income.

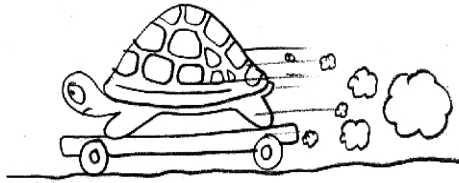
The Tyranny of Time : The speed trap by Jay Walljasper, HumanScape,  December, 1999 by Third World Network Features [C. ELDOC6006973]

There is a small but growing chorus of social critics, Schor among them, who believe that faster is not always better and that we must pay attention to the psychological, environmental, and political consequences of our constantly accelerating world.

Environmental activist Jeremy Rifkin was one of the first to raise questions about the desirability of speed in his 1987 book, *Time Wars*. "We have quickened the pace of life only to become less patient," he wrote. "We have become more organised but less spontaneous, less joyful. We are better prepared to act on the future but less able to enjoy the present and reflect on the past."

Danny Hillis, who pioneered the conceptual design behind high-speed supercomputers, disagreed with Kern, warning that our obsession with speed forces us to lose sight of the future and remain trapped in the present. He recommended cultivating what he calls 'a new aesthetic of slowness'.

The prominent German environmental thinker Wolfgang Sachs shares Hillis' interest in devising an aesthetic of slowness and offered his own ideas about what form it would take. "Medium speeds will be considered an accomplishment, something well done," he said. And when you see someone going fast, you shrug your shoulders, saying, 'What's the point?'



Speeding to disaster

Sachs argues that speed is an under-recognised factor fuelling environmental problems – "It's possible to talk about the ecological crisis as a collision between time scales – the fast time scale of modernity crashing up against the slow time scale of nature and the earth." In his view, genetic engineering, with all its potential for ecological havoc, is an example of how we interfere with natural processes in the name of speeding up evolution.

Sachs' recent report, *Sustainable Germany*, which maps a route to a green society, embraces slowing down as a key environmental objective. It proposes putting a 100-kilometre-an-hour (60 miles per hour) speed limit on

Germany's autobahns and scrapping plans for a high-speed rail network. Sachs also recommends strengthening local economies and cultures so that people won't have to rely as heavily on long-distance travel.

"A society that lives in the fast lane can never be a sustainable society," he told the conference, adding that a slower society would make life more pleasant and elegant. "In a fast-paced world we put a lot of energy into arrivals and departures and less into the experience itself. Raising kids, making friends, creating art - all run counter to the demand for speed."

There is growing recognition that faster speeds are not just a natural fact of the universe. It's an issue for public attention. What has not been discussed before now is – what kind of speed do we want?

Jogi Panghaal, a designer who works with community groups in India, defines the issue as not simply whether speed is good or bad, but whether the world of the future will allow a variety of speeds. He is concerned that a monoculture of speed will develop in which the whole world is expected to move at the same pace.

The culture shock of Speed

India and other traditional societies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa are already undergoing culture shock as the rule of Western efficiency bears down upon them. People who once lived according to the rhythms of the sun, the seasons, and nature are now buying alarm clocks, carrying pocket calendars, and feeling the pressure to move faster and faster.

Panghaal warned that inhabitants of the industrialised nations may feel this loss as much as the traditional peoples do because less modernised cultures provide inspiration of finding a slower, simpler way of living – including the two-week vacation in the Third World that has become a necessary ritual of replenishment for many of us.

Humans may not have opted for slowness in the past, but they have also never had to contend with constantly soaring speeds not only diminishing the quality of life, but also endangering the future of the planet.

As Wolfgang Sachs declared to the audience in Amsterdam, "Slow is not only beautiful, but also necessary and reasonable." ▶

About the Author : **Jay Walljasper** is editor-at-large of the *Utne Reader*, in which a longer version of the above article first appeared.

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