

# **Neither Fast nor Slow**

## **Democracy, Governance and the Social Acceleration Debate**

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**Abstract**

Popular conceptions that we live in a ‘high speed society’, ‘runaway world’ and are ‘time poor’ have inspired a new wave of theoretical and empirical research on the relationship between modernisation and social acceleration. Taking this renewed level of interest as my starting point, I explore why it has been argued that social life is ‘speeding up’ and the implications of this argument for democracy, governance and public policymaking. Whilst the connection between modernity and acceleration remains contested, most scholars and public commentary on the issue has argued that accountable democracy, effective governance and good policymaking requires ‘slow thinking’, which is thoughtful, deliberative, and, at the very least well considered, if not rational. The phenomenon of ‘social acceleration’ is thus seen as a threat to be resisted. In this paper, I argue that neither fast time nor slow time present universal solutions to the democratic and governance challenges that we are currently witnessing in western liberal democracies. The argument that we should

'slow down modernity' might seem progressive, but participation and governance in slow time can also: (a) smuggle in a conservative agenda by reifying existing social and political arrangements; (b) fail to keep pace with rapidly changing domains of life; and (c) not accurately reflect what motivates us to engage as individuals in social and political action. Whilst I argue that we need to better understand accelerationism and its consequences, accelerationism, as a process, is also not without its problems. I conclude by arguing that charting a middle ground between 'slowing down' and 'speeding up' is the most effective response to understanding the opportunities as well as the constraints that both fast and slow politics presents for democracy, governance and the policymaking process.

## **Introduction**

This article is an intervention into the 'uneasy dialogue' that exists between speed, democracy and governance. In popular culture, speed has become a defining feature of contemporary living. Success is connected with doing more in less time and we are regularly implored to do things at faster and faster rates. Doing things at speed is also presented as something exciting, innovative and cutting edge whereas doing things slowly appears dull and boring. Sometimes speed is even associated with certain virtues, such as being witty and intelligent. This valorisation of speed is illustrated in political dramas and comedies such as *The West Wing* or *The Thick of It*. Nevertheless, when it comes to practices of democracy and governance, it is more often than not the case that speed is viewed as a threat. Speed is viewed as something that corrupts democratic practices because they threaten processes of deliberation, collective will formation and consensus making. Similarly, quick decisionmaking is often viewed as hasty, ill-informed and half-baked. The 'slow movement' is celebrated from this vantage point as 'time pioneers' and as bulwarks against neoliberalism's pernicious and distorting effects. Hence, the call to 'slow things down' from slow democracy to slow pedagogy and from slow scholarship to slow cooking (Harland 2015; McIvor, 2011; Berg and Seeber 2016). Conversely,

participating in politics in fast time is viewed as shallow, vapid and inconsequential. The optimal response is to try to move citizens away from the more distorting, extreme and emotional views that come with thinking in fast time and move them towards the more reflective, balanced and considered judgements that come with thinking in slow time. Acting and thinking in fast time is generally seen as something that should be guarded against, rather than embraced.

Whilst students of governance, policy and democratic theory have always been interested in questions of time and temporality – its timing, sequence, duration, limits, budget and horizons (eg Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009; Majone 2001; Jacobs 2011; Pollitt 2008; Howlett and Goetz 2014; Howlett and Rayner 2006; Schmitter and Santiso 1998) – my particular interest, in this paper, is more narrowly confined to a particular set of questions about the accelerating *pace* of change. In other words, it is a paper that aims to tap into a growing number of studies that have argued that the ‘speeding up of social life’ has become a prevalent phenomenon in many/most parts of the Western world (e.g. Bertman, 1998; Agger, 2004; Eriksen, 2001; St. Clair, 2011). By engaging with this debate, it is my aim to make governance scholars more attuned to social acceleration as both a phenomenon and potential driver behind the growth in more rapid forms of policymaking and modes of political participation. However, contrary to studies which conclude with the argument that we should either ‘slow down modernity’ or ‘embrace speed’, I argue that there is no theoretical reason for arguing that slow is normatively better than fast, or fast is any better than slow. There maybe more ambiguity and ambivalence towards speed in modernity, but speed also has many positive and enabling effects.

This paper also argues that core questions about the accelerating pace of change and its consequences would benefit from a more interactive dialogue. Questions about the pace of change and its consequences on governance and democracy are best studied together because they are related: the speed at which governance and the policymaking process takes place enables and constrains the speed at which democratic processes take place, and vice versa. Slow and fast politics presents different *types* of opportunities and constraints on the practices of governance and

participation. This article can also be seen as an attempt to kick start a wider dialogue about speed in relation to both democracy and governance theory.

This article therefore aims to advance a more nuanced and sophisticated discussion about social acceleration that doesn't posit a simple choice between either slow or fast politics. The central argument of this article is that there is no theoretical reason for arguing that slow is normatively better than fast politics, or fast is any better than slow politics. The tendency for slowness to be unquestionably embraced as 'good' and fast as 'bad' is unhelpful because acceleration and deceleration exist as a duality and not a dualism. Privileging slow over fast may also do more harm than good as it can reify an existing state of affairs, fail to keep up with rapidly changing domains of life, and not accurately reflect what motivates us to engage as individuals in social and political action. A more ambiguous and ambivalent approach to speed in modernity is needed that recognises the positive and enabling effects of governing and participating in slow and fast time. I develop these points over the remainder of this article by: first, showing how a new wave of more sophisticated theorising on social acceleration has identified a range of different ways in which social acceleration operates and manifests itself; second, showing how social acceleration has largely been viewed as a threat to liberal democracy even though I will argue that it can actually offer a way of challenging conservative attitudes and may actually be a better reflection of what motivates individuals to engage in political action; third, showing how bureaucratic organisations may struggle to keep up with rapidly changing domains of life whilst also noting some risks that come with doing policy in fast time.

## **The Social Acceleration Debate**

The argument that everything is 'speeding up' has permeated into most, if not all, aspects of social, political, economic and cultural life. Many books in management and leadership implore organisations and their leaders to adapt to the imperative of

speed where speed is presented as one of the defining features of modern individual and organisational life (Peters 1987, 1992; Christensen, 2013; Linkner 2014). The overall argument in these books is that organisations and individuals that adapt to this new environment will grow and prosper whereas those that don't will decline and fail (Sullivan 2013). Linkner's (2014, 1) book, *The Road to Reinvention*, is typical in this respect, in how it confronts its readers with the following ultimatum: 'Change is inevitable. You need to decide. Will you drive that change or be driven away by it? Will you disrupt or be disrupted?' Linkner (2014, 1) notes several imperatives that are driving this trend, including: 'fickle consumer trends, friction-free markets, and political unrest...dizzying speed, exponential complexity, and mind-numbing technology advances' (Linkner 2014, 1).

The prophetic, hyperbolic and epochalist arguments presented in these texts, as well as popular culture more generally, have been legitimately criticised for treating speed and change as generic and highly abstract phenomenon (eg Wajcman, 2008; Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009). However, they have also presented somewhat of a 'strawman' for those who have wanted to argue against the idea that we have seen a more general acceleration in the pace of change (see, for example, du Gay 2017, 87-90). This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. The first is that, whilst contemporary debates about acceleration may have taken on a particular form, it has been shown that similar debates about acceleration and its relation to modernity have actually been around for a very long time. For example, concerns about modernity and acceleration have regularly featured in classical (eg Marx, Weber, Simmel and Benjamin) as well as contemporary social theory (eg Castells, Bauman, Giddens and Urry) (Tomlinson 2007, 5-9; Dodd and Wajcman 2017). So, this is hardly a 'new' debate, although I do believe that there are important reasons why we would want to re-engage with it now. The second reason to engage with this literature is the much more sophisticated level of theorising has taken place on the acceleration thesis over recent decades. Indeed, there is now an extensive body of academic literature that uses the lens of speed to make sense of the contemporary world (e.g. Tomlinson, 2007; Vostal, 2014; Agger, 2004; Hassan, 2009; Eriksen, 2001). Speed and acceleration have been used to distinguish how capitalism operates in the present

day distinct from other time periods (e.g. Agger, 2004; Luttwak, 1999), the growth in 'short-term' production, consumption and employment strategies (eg Toffler, 1970; Luttwak, 1999; Agger, 2004) and the proliferation of faster and more extensive communication and transit systems (eg Jensen, 2006; Eriksen, 2001; Heylighen, 1998). However, the latest wave of theorising also develops more sophisticated ways of theorising the social acceleration concept, including a more explicit definition about what was actually at stake as well as a more adequate description, precise specification and rigorous application in concrete cases – in other words, in a much more scientifically rigorous and convincing fashion (eg Hassan, 2010; Hsu 2014).

Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration is one of the more prominent examples of this latest wave of more sophisticated theorising (Rosa 2003, 2005, 2013). Rosa's argument is that the structural and cultural aspects of our institutions and practices are marked by a 'shrinking of the present'. He identifies three specific and distinct ways in which social acceleration operates and manifests itself:

- *Technological acceleration*, which refers to 'the speeding up of intentional, goal-directed processes of transport, communication and production'. In essence, this form of acceleration encompasses the various practices that humans have developed for governing the world around them and their impact in reducing the amount of time it takes to complete certain tasks. Technology is accelerating the pace of change across many domains of life, including transport (by land, sea or air), communication (eg social media technologies), industrial techniques (eg robotics and automation), financialisation (eg high-speed trading), household amenities and food processing – with 'faster' technological artefacts replacing 'slower' ones at a much faster rate. The exponential growth in computer processing power is a typical example of this phenomenon, although we can also see it in cognate areas such as in the current policy debate about robotics, automation and a living minimum wage.

- *Social acceleration*, which refers to the functional differentiation and decline in collective social solidarities as reflected in changing 'attitudes and values as well as fashions and lifestyles, social relations and obligations as well as groups, classes and milieus, social languages as well as forms of practice and habits' (Rosa, 2003, p.7). Rosa (2003, 7) argues that this form of acceleration this had led to 'an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of *experiences and expectations*' (Rosa, 2003, p.7). In other words, social acceleration has disrupted the class cleavages, identities and social solidarities that were once used to anchor, orient and inform action and practice. One example of this phenomenon is the increased contestability that surrounds experts and expertise around core policy issues such as climate change. An increase in the reliability of experiences and expectations generates increased contestation around the science of climate change and a scepticism towards science and scientific expertise.
- *An acceleration of the pace of life*, which refers to a contraction in the amount of time that it usually takes for social change to occur. This happens because society's rate of change quickens as 'the speed and compression of actions and experiences in everyday life' fastens (Rosa, 2003, pp.8-9). This phenomenon is also experienced subjectively in how 'People in Western societies feel under heavy time-pressure and they *do* complain about the scarcity of time' (Rosa 2003, pp.8-9).

Rosa's tripartite distinction is important because it positions social acceleration as a multi-faceted process (and not just a digital or technological phenomenon). Further, Rosa argue that these three distinct forms of social acceleration are driven by different motors: a 'cultural motor', an 'economic motor', a 'socio-structural' motor, and by the State and military forces. The feeling that time flows ever faster is a product of these phenomena, which combine to make our relationships to one another and the world seem more fluid and problematic. Importantly, Rosa also uses his model to critique the alienation and social-psychological pathologies generated by social acceleration. So, whilst Rosa offers one of the most sophisticated

perspectives on social acceleration, he is also sceptical about its consequences, often highlighting its negative outcomes and socially destructive tendencies, rather than its potentialities.

The growing support for the slow movement has emerged against this background. Slowness in a fast world is presented as reflective, contemplative, calming, and a place of refuge from the chaos elsewhere in the world. Honoré is perhaps one of the most important proponents of 'slow ideology' who has consistently advocated an ethic of slowness as an antidote to the malevolency of speed. In *The Slow Fix*, Honoré (2013, 11-12) argues that: 'The time has come to resist the siren call of half-baked solution and short-term palliative and start fixing properly. We need to find a new and better way to tackle every kind of problem. We need to learn the art of the Slow Fix.' Similar ideas have also permeated into popular culture in the form of mindfulness retreats, digital detox courses, life-coaching and meditation. Virtues such as creativity, inventiveness and wisdom are thought of as inherently slow activities. Whilst they may sound alluring, these arguments often suffer the same epochal tendencies as those that argue that we have no option but to adapt to an acceleration of social life.

Overall, more sophisticated theories of social acceleration, like Rosa's contribution and the debates that they have fostered, are important because they introduce a conceptually complex and empirically verifiable framework for engaging with the social acceleration debate. Whilst Rosa's framework exists at the macro social-structural level, it has been extended to investigate the more micro-elements of social acceleration (eg Hsu and Elliott 2014). Others have also shown how it can be used in specific areas of empirical enquiry (eg Vostal 2014; Czarniawska 2011). However, more sophisticated theories of social acceleration, have also served a broader purpose by positioning the dynamic between acceleration and deceleration as a self-standing phenomena and important object of analysis and social critique *in its own right*. The analysis below starts by recognising this dialectic and the important and distinct set of questions that it raises about the relation between speed, democracy and governance. My argument is that we need to find a way of recognising that both



fast and slow have always existed in modernity. There is no theoretical reason for normatively privileging slow over fast or fast over slow: it is not about one being 'bad' and the other being 'good'. Whilst slow maybe suited for certain tasks, a faster approach maybe better suited for others.

## **Speed and Democracy**

Most scholars who have examined the relationship between social acceleration and liberal democracy have reacted with concern (Scheuerman, 2004, 2005; Schmitt 2009; Rosa 2009). This concern boils down to the difference in time taken between the processes of deliberation, consultation and negotiation that underpin the liberal democratic ideal and the requirement to respond to an increasingly high speed society. Wolin (1997, 2) and others have argued that:

political time is out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture . . . [i]n contrast to political time, the temporalities of economy and popular culture are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through obsolescence.<sup>1</sup>

This form of 'temporal desynchronisation' generates winners and losers: policy actors who can operate within compressed timescales gain power whereas those who cannot respond fast enough get excluded from the democratic process. For example, Schmitt (2009) notes a 'motorization' of the legislative process as it reacts to the time pressures placed upon it whilst Scheuermann (2004) notes how the executive branch of government gains power given its capacity to more rapidly respond to different policy concerns as and when they emerge. White (2014) has also shown empirically that the time pressures associated with formulating a response to the global financial crisis in the EU led to significant deviations from policy and

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa makes a similar point arguing that the time taken to work through extensive deliberation and mediation of diverse interests is limited by 'the acceleration of the surrounding systems - especially

procedural norms and a greater reliance on executive discretion. Scheuerman (2005) consequently notes, with concern, that many of the more time-consuming demands of democratic citizenship lose their feasibility. The net result is a major asymmetry between decision makers and opposition voices, reduced opportunities for reflection, but also more power for the executive over the legislature and the judiciary, mobile finance capital over industrial capital, and short term over long term investment (Jessop 2008). In short, the 'slow' system of checks and balances that underpins liberal democracy is out of sync with rapidly changing domains of life elsewhere in the system.

One reaction to this 'problem' of 'temporal desynchronisation' is to assert the primacy of politics and the democratic process over the 'faster' domains of social life that exist elsewhere in the system. Put simply, the argument is that 'democracy needs time' and because time is 'an intrinsic precondition of genuine democratic policy-making', democracy should not 'surrender blindly to speed' (Chesneaux 2000, 411). So, whilst Chesneaux (2000, 409, 411) and others (eg Wolin 1997; McIvor 2011) recognize that 'speed has become a top-ranking concern', they also argue that democracy has to 'stand up' to speed by taking the necessary time to ponder and reflect on the right decision (Chesneaux 2000, 411). In other words, democracy should not be 'intimidated' by the 'speed-oriented imperatives of the *technocosme* or the world market' because instant modes of communication cannot 'shorten the time required for proper reflection and maturation, which are the essence of democracy' (Chesneaux 2000, 412).

There may, however, be ways in which these arguments have underestimated the resilience and adaptive potential of democracy. Saward's (2015) emphasis on the role of political agency in deploying and manipulating temporality towards slower forms of democratic design and more time-sensitive forms of democratic politics is particularly instructive here. Building on the call for 'slow democracy', Saward suggests eight institutional reforms that develop new capacities in a high-speed world at the same time as they preserve the principles of inclusive and deliberative

decision-making. Examples of the types of institutional reforms that Saward recommends include:

- *extending localism and federalism* – on the grounds that, if more, and more genuinely guaranteed or protected, autonomous local decision-making were to characterise democratic development then the protection of local traditions and new forms of local innovation would be more likely.
- *creating more opportunities to deliberate* – in other words, radically extending a mode of institutionalising temporality, a range of devices are and have been used which require due time being given to structured and more-or-less inclusive debate over policy agendas and options.
- *designing-in temporality* – such as instituting formal moments of delay within decision procedures, inviting public comment or allowing for further inquiry into the practical implications of different policies, or to conduct pilot projects.

Chesneaux and Saward both want to defend ‘slow democracy’. However, my argument is that they lose out on the opportunity to think about fast politics and participation as something that also has its own role and place. Whilst fast politics is generally perceived as vapid, shallow and inconsequential, there are important reasons for thinking about what fast politics maybe able to deliver, which slow politics cannot. Fast politics has an urgency about it that slow politics does not, people can actually enjoy engaging in ‘fast politics’, they can get a ‘thrill’ and find it fun, and fast politics can also help dislodge otherwise conservative agendas.

One way to think about fast politics is to reflect on the changing nature of political participation (Halupka 2015). In the field of political communication, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have shown how the Occupy movement was able to scale from local to national and then transnational with great speed through the sharing of collective action memes. They argue that this illustrates the emergence of a new form of ‘connective action’. Connective action can also be viewed as a form of ‘fast

politics' that is more expressive, communicative and project oriented when compared with collective action, which requires a thick sense of identity, ideology and a long-term organisational commitment (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Bennett and Segerberg (2013) show how this shift towards connective action has been achieved through crowd-enabled movements and large-scale social networks that operate at all levels from the local to the global (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 47). They also argue that these new forms of connective logic present new ways to reinvigorate what it means to be political and participate in politics (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). More recent examples, such as the Indignitos and the Women's March on Washington, also serve to illustrate the broader significance of a connective logic.

Chadwick (2013, 192-93) has also argued that, contrary to fast politics being vapid and shallow, the ability of activist organisations, such as 38 Degrees in the UK, to engage with the public on a real-time basis is crucial in them being able to convey their organisation's responsiveness and *authenticity*. By recalibrating its strategy on the basis of perpetual online feedback from its members, 38 Degrees is able to rapidly react to emerging news agendas. Chadwick (2013, 190) notes how timeliness thus becomes 'essential' to how 38 Degrees operates. Illustrating this point, Chadwick (2013, 193) quotes from an interview with one of 38 Degree's co-founders:

Lownsborough goes on to describe speed as "the contribution that online activism can bring to the activism table" and a force that can restore to those who have become disengaged from politics "some sort of the excitement that comes from being right in something when the decision's getting made"...Real-time response is *itself* a mechanism that generates the substantive resources of authenticity and legitimacy required by the leadership, as well as the ethic of solidarity between the leadership and 38 Degrees members.

In the words of one of its other co-founders, 38 Degrees aims to make it easy for people to do something when they see something on the news that they really care about (Chadwick 2013, 190).

Participating in fast time also gives citizens an opportunity to participate in politics in different ways. For example, Halupka (2014; 2015a) has argued that clicktivism – the act of clicking on social buttons (such as ‘Like’ on Facebook) or creating memes – are legitimate political acts but ones that remain largely ignored by the mainstream Political Science literature due to its normative grounding in ‘slow forms’ of liberal democracy. Halupka (2015b) argues that clicktivism is forcing us to reconsider the very meaning of political participation:

It does not overtly engage with the political arena, but provides avenues through which to do so. It does not incite genuine political change, but it makes people feel as if they are contributing. It does not politicize issues, but it fuels discursive practices. It may not function in the same way as traditional forms of engagement, but it represents the political participation aspirations of the modern citizen. Clicktivism has been bridging the dualism between the traditional and contemporary forms of political participation, and in its place establishing a participatory duality.

The recent interest in gamification also shows how fast politics can be fun (Lerner 2014; Kaprf 2016). Whilst games have been widely used in other fields, such as education, their application in other fields, such as participation and governance, is still in its infancy (Kapp 2012, de Sousa Borges, 2014). Su and Cheng (2015) define gamification as: ‘the use of game design elements and game mechanics in nongame contexts in order to engage people and solve problems’. So, gamification is not about using a game in a classroom, but, rather, about *making the class itself a game* (Hanus and Fox 2015). McGonigal (2011) develops this point when she argues that successful games are underpinned by: an *urgent optimism*, namely the desire to act immediately to tackle an obstacle combined with the belief that you have a reasonable hope of success; *blissful productivity* - a desire to spend time on the game

but without it becoming a burden or chore to do so; and an *epic meaning*, which is the feeling that one gets from participating in the game's 'awe-inspiring mission'.

Gamification and its application in the public sector is still an emerging area, but Lerner's (2014) book, *Making Democracy Fun*, is a recent attempt to engage in the questions that it raises. Lerner (2014, 5) makes a compelling argument for why governments could benefit from the greater use of game mechanics arguing that when 'governments and organisations use[d] games *and* designed their programs more like a game, they tended to make participation not only more attractive, but also more effective, transparent, and fair'. Karpf (2016), in his book *Analytical Activism*, also provides a series of insights into how gamification could be used to encourage greater political participation. Outlining an ambitious gamification project by the AFL-CIO's Workers Voice Political Action Committee (PAC), Karpf (2016, 41) argues that gamification represented a 'massive reorientation of how an advocacy group interacts with, listens to, and incentivizes its members'. Karpf argues that the game was authentic because it made a direct connection between points gained in the game and actual changes in the strategic direction of the organisation. These examples point to the potential of gamification. The key challenge, as Lerner notes, is that any approach to gamification that aims to improve democratic relations must also have the principles of transparency, efficacy, and fairness at its core. The game must also be authentic. Participants in the game need to believe that their participation is not tokenistic in nature, that the outcomes will lead to real change, and that their perceptions and or actions are not being manipulated.

Fast politics may therefore present alternative ways for greater engagement but it could also act as a bulwark against the tendency of slow politics to reify existing social and political arrangements. The current appeal of populism with its focus on nationhood and nativist politics that hark back to a bygone era and shared national-cultural imaginary is one prominent example of how appeals to slow politics can also be used to smuggle in an inherently conservative agenda (Vostal 2017, 10-12). Populists often contrast their offer with a global form of fast politics that is

characterised as external, distant, uncontrollable and dangerous. Vostal (2017, 11) argues that populists have effectively deployed a rhetoric:

...which is appealing to a localist mindset: slow and sedentary practices, often rituals, associated with local ceremonies, festivals, convivial events cementing local identities, local “totems” sustained by home-made spirits and folk costumes used as counter-punches against the alleged threat of social speed-driven dynamics of both multinational capital and displaced persons.

However, as we have shown acceleration can have positive effects and fast politics presents not only threats but also opportunities: it has an urgency; people actually like participating in fast time; it can be fun; and it may help disrupt conservative and parochial agendas. The arguments presented here suggest that there is merit in problematizing the underlying preference for ‘slow’. It is not about choosing slow above fast, but about recognizing that a well functioning democratic system is likely to need both fast and slow forms of participation.

## **Speed and Governance**

Du Gay (2017) has argued that speed, change, innovation and disruption are fashionable mantras in governance whereas core task, distribution of work and exercise of authority are viewed as anachronistic, fundamentally misguided, even nostalgic. In many ways, this setup captures the challenge that the social acceleration thesis represents to many of the fundamental principles of bureaucratic organisation. From this perspective, fast policy is seen as a threat to the ideals of a well functioning bureaucratic machine, such as rules and procedures, due process, proper record keeping, evidence based decisionmaking, and long term planning. Whilst very appropriate in many instances, it is my argument that fast policymaking also presents some very important opportunities in areas such as prototyping, ‘learning by doing’ and the use of more iterative design processes. These more pragmatic and

intuitive forms of policy development are important in their own right, although they may too invoke certain pathologies towards more technocratic and hyperactive forms of governance.

In a staunch defence of bureaucracy, Paul du Gay notes how speed and change have become the *leitmotif* of management and leadership studies. Du Gay (2017, 93) criticizes these latest preoccupations arguing that 'the bureaucratic ethos and the pause it engenders in the impatience of things' remains a valuable organisational stance both 'here and now, and probably in the future'. He draws on the Hutton and Butler inquiries into the events surrounding the UK's decision to go to war in Iraq to support his argument. When taken together, du Gay (2017, 95) argues that these two inquiries revealed (or served to confirm) an informal 'sofa style' at the heart of government, a lack of established lines of authority, a 'near-exclusive focus on "delivery" at the expense of attention to structure, system, and due process' and an equally 'striking and worrying' disregard for the 'traditional bureaucratic practices of careful and precise note-taking and writing of minutes'. Whilst adopted in the pursuit of greater speed, flexibility, adaptation and innovation, du Gay (2017, 97) argues that these informal styles of governing created a situation in which 'politics literally ran riot':

A cocktail of inexperience in government, suspicion of official machineries of administration, and a remarkably uncritical belief in the powers of their own favored forms of managerial "modernization" proved lethal to established conventions framing the conduct of governmental business...Changes in the machinery of government, often reflective it was noted of a *marked impatience with due process and collective, deliberative decision-making*, appeared to have some serious downsides, though, ones that could have been predicted in advance, if due consideration had been applied (du Gay 2017, 95, emphasis in original).

Du Gay's argument largely rests on the bureaucratic ethos and the protections that it provides for a slower and more reflective organizational culture. Arguments in



favour of creating non-majoritarian institutions have also partly rested on the argument that 'good' long term decisionmaking, driven by credible commitments, needs to be shielded from 'bad' short term decisionmaking driven by political incentives (Majone 2001). Here, the argument is that politicians will switch policy settings in response to short term electoral incentives, rather than optimal long-term outcomes. Non-majoritarian institutions have been posited as a solution to this problem because they can provide a credible commitment not to act in the short term. Thus, Majone (2001, 69) has argued that: 'Delegation of powers to an administrative agent...will not in general be sufficient to resolve the government's ... problem. Only an independent delegate, not subject to the power of direction of the delegating authority, can provide credibility to long-term policy commitment' (Majone, 2001, p.69).

These two perspectives provide different ways of thinking about 'slow policy' in organizational hierarchies, but I would argue that slow policy also meets its limits when bureaucracies are faced with making decisions about rapidly changing domains of life. Whilst the structured decisionmaking within an organisational hierarchy favoured by du Gay may work in many instances, reasserting the need for due process, collective and deliberative decision-making may also unnecessarily slow practices of governance down to the extent that they become ineffective in governing other more rapidly changing domains of life. In economic affairs, for example, Tomba (2014) has shown that the Greek state struggled to retain its own 'time sovereignty' in the immediate aftermath of the Euro-crisis. He shows how organisational hierarchy struggled to develop policy at a speed fast enough to keep pace with hyper-mobile financial capital. In other instances, we can see how governments and organisational hierarchies have implemented strategies to try and cope with faster domains of life by promoting new temporal horizons of action. For example, reforms like the Tobin Tax, have been specifically designed to try and slow down the movement of finance capital (Jessop 2008). Many governments have also compressed their decision making cycles so that they can respond more quickly to new and emerging problems as and when they emerge. Bob Jessop (2008, 193) has characterized these changes in the nature of contemporary policymaking process as

involving: 'the shortening of policy-development cycles, fast-tracking decision-making, rapid programme rollout, continuing policy experimentation, institutional and policy Darwinism, and relentless revision of guidelines and benchmarks'. Thus, what we maybe witnessing are adaptations in the way that governance is practiced that are being driven, at least in part, by the need to respond to faster domains of social life.

Peck and Theodore's (2015) book, *Fast Policy*, analyses this phenomenon in greater detail. They argue that policymaking processes 'seem to be accelerating' at the same time as it has 'promiscuously spilled over jurisdictional boundaries'. Their favored term for describing this phenomenon is 'fast policy regimes'. They argue that fast policy regimes are:

marked by pragmatic borrowing of "policies that work," by compressed development and implementation horizons, by iterative forms of deference to best practice and paradigmatic models, by enlarged roles for intermediaries as advocates of specific policy routines and technologies, and by a growing reliance on prescriptively coded forms of front-loaded advice and evaluation science (Peck and Theodore 2015, 3-4).

These characteristics are underpinned by a 'deepening "relationality"' in the policymaking process, in which: 'New, mutually responsive connections are forged across dispersed policymaking sites, as the frontiers and hinterlands of policy innovation shift, and as the makers and followers of models interact, yielding new hybrids' (Peck and Theodore 2015, 225). Policymaking is thus represented as a highly polycentric and relational process, but also one in which ideas circulate at a much faster rate, reach and speed.

There also appears to be some evidence to suggest that governments are experimenting with more iterative design processes that incorporate ideas such as prototyping, learning by doing, and 'real time' evaluation (Sabel and Zeitlin 2010). By way of illustration, the Australian Government's *Try, Test and Learn Fund* was

launched in late 2016, with the express aim of incorporating a ‘flexible and iterative policy design process’ that makes it ‘open for ideas several times over multiple years’. The Fund’s webpages state that: ‘The Try, Test and Learn Fund will support trials of new or innovative policy responses to help people live independently of welfare. The Fund will seek to support groups who have the capacity to work and are at risk of long-term welfare dependence.’ The Fund incorporates an accelerated co-design process, hypothesis testing and ongoing evaluation. Funding is contingent on interventions being able to demonstrate that they have improved workforce participation through regular testing and ongoing evaluation.

Whilst fast policy may present opportunities to experiment and ‘learn from doing’, such efforts at continuous learning may also contribute towards what Matt Wood has called ‘hyper-governance’. Hyper-governance is a term that attempts to capture the state’s response to the multiple and growing range of political pressures that threaten its authority. The argument here is that social acceleration increases the number and speed of inputs into governments, which places greater pressures on their time. The state has responded to these time pressures by making a series of rapid interventions and ‘symbolic changes’ aimed at stabilising the system as a whole, rather than in engaging in a more ‘deep’ and systematic policy reform. So, it is not so much that the state ‘dominates’ or ‘steers’ society inasmuch as it tends to protect the ‘core’ of ideas in each policy area and avoid more substantive reforms.

Fast policy may also privilege technocratic elites who have the know-how and capacity to deliver policy advice under the pressure of time (Esmark 2016).<sup>2</sup> For example, Peck and Theodore (2015) have argued that fast policy benefits ‘a kind of networked technopolitics’ over more ‘organically grown, endogenous approaches to policy innovation.’ Thus, the kind of networked technopolitics privileged by fast policy is largely disconnected from democratic control and popular oversight (Peck and Theodore 2015, xxxi-xxxii). A cognate, yet somewhat different argument, can be found in Henrik Bang’s notion of problematisation (Bang 2015a, 2015b; see also,

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Virilio also noted how technocracy and bureaucracy join together to bring about a new dimension of elitism in an era of speed.

Jensen and Bang 2013, 2015). Bang (2015a, 2015b; see also, Jensen and Bang 2013, 2015) argues that problematisation (rather than politicisation) is linked to the chronic questioning by laypeople of how issues and risks are handled by policy elites and professionals. This involves what Bang calls a 'quest for self-governance in the lifeworld' in which democracy is not only tied to morality and law but also ethics and action. Fast policy is a requirement in instances where contingency and the logic of immediacy prevail and where the overriding ethic is the ability to show that one's fast actions have been taken on the basis of mutual acceptance and the recognition of difference. Bang argues that technology has enabled problematisation to take place on a 'grand scale' thereby enabling laypeople to intervene promptly, intuitively and at multiple levels (from the local through to the global) wherever they see that a critical issue or risk appears.

In the field of governance studies, the state's reliance on rules, fortified walls separating policy fields, and the lack of adaptation and improvisation, leads to a regularly cited critique that public bureaucracies are not always the best vehicles for a rapid response to an existential threat, transboundary problem, or, the problematisation of policy issues at far greater speed and in far greater number than in the past. du Gay correctly challenges the assumption that bureaucracy is not innovative or cannot respond to policy problems as and when they arise. However, fast policy is still often placed in the shadow of slow policy. What I have argued here is that fast policy is actually important in its own right. It is not about choosing between slow and fast policy, or placing one in the shadow of the other, rather it is about recognizing the inherent opportunities and constraints presented by these two different approaches to policymaking and governance.

### **Conclusion: Neither Fast nor Slow**

In this paper, I have argued that we need to problematize simple claims that everything is speeding up, or everything should be slowed down. My main

argument is that there is no theoretical reason for arguing that slow is normatively better than fast, or fast is any better than slow, when it comes to the question of how democracy and governance should be practiced. Instead, we should adopt a more ambiguous and ambivalent towards speed in modernity.

To be clear, my argument is not a rejection of slow politics. Wacjman's (2014) argument that speed and slow down have always coexisted in society, rather what has changed are the meanings and values that have been attached to them still stands. Similarly, Rosa is also correct when he argues that 'the simple claim that in modernity "everything goes faster and faster"...is both undifferentiated and transparently false' (Rosa, 2013, p.300). What I have sought to argue is that there is a greater need to problematize those perspectives that embrace slowness unreservedly or place fast politics in the shadow of slow politics. I have tried to argue this point by showing that practicing participation and governance in slow time is not always progressive. In fact, conservative agendas can be smuggled in under the cover of slow politics, slow politics can fail to keep pace with rapidly changing domains of life, and may not always reflect what motivates us to engage as individuals in social and political action. I have used various examples to illustrate these three arguments from populism to connective action and from iterative and experimental approaches to policy formulation to gamification. Thus, my argument is that there is no inherent opposition to fast and slow but more of a boundary problem about how to connect them with one another.

This then lead us directly into questions of power, which have been implicit through the discussion, as it becomes clear that those who are able to connect fast and slow are more likely to be to exercise power than those who cannot. Chesneaux (2000, 412) views this as a problem of speed: 'The dominant social groups, through who enjoy wealth, power and prestige, also happen to have access to the highest level of speed, socially and in their personal life; they make use of that speed to acquire even more wealth, more power, more prestige'. However, in the more agnostic tradition that I am advocating here, I would argue that it is actually more about having the

resources necessary to be able to influence the pace of change. Chadwick (2013, 87) refers to this as the 'political economy of time' in which:

Those who recognize the importance of time and the circulation of information – when to act quickly, when to delay, when to devote intensive attention to the pursuit of a goal, when to repeat, when to act alone, and when to coordinate – are more likely to be powerful...In the contemporary era, those who have the resources to intervene in the political information cycle are more able to exercise power; those who lack these resources are less able to be powerful in political life.

This raises a range of other important issues that I cannot address here but are worthy of more detailed attention. For now, I have argued that a more agnostic stance towards slow and fast time is required that recognizes both the opportunities as well as the constraints that each present for democracy, governance and the policymaking process.

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