

Globalization: The Fast Track To Nowhere

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#),
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Modern culture is an advocate of speed. From urban planning and transport systems, to the food industry and beyond, 'fast living' cuts deep and affects almost every aspect of life.

In terms of distances, things today are more spread out yet are more interconnected than in the past. This interconnectedness has had the effect of shrinking even the largest of distances and is ably assisted by digital communications technology and rapid transit systems. Airports and metro transport links are being extended or built, huge concrete flyovers cut through neighbourhoods and separate communities from one another and employment is being centralised in out of town business parks or city centre office blocks. Speed of communications and transport narrows the distances.

Encouraging further urban sprawl is of course highly profitable for the real estate, construction, automobile and various other industries (1). It is not that we need this type of urban planning and development, but powerful economic interests and their influence in/over governments dictate it's the type we get.

Speed and high-energy living have become an essential fact of life. In the process, our communities have become disjointed and dispersed. We have sacrificed intimacy, friendship and neighbourliness for a more impersonal way of accelerated living. And the process continues as rural communities are uprooted and hundreds of millions are forced into cities of ever-increasing sizes to indulge in the fast life.

In the virtual world, friends possibly half the world away are made and 'defriended' at the click of an icon. Likes and dislikes are but passing fads. Meaningful social activism has been trivialised and reduced to the almost meaningless clicking of an online petition. It's more convenient and quicker than taking to the street. After the near destruction of working class movements in many countries, this is what 'protest' has too often become.

In the 'real' world, where 'clicking' just doesn't cut it, how to physically move from A to B as quickly as possible dominates the modern mindset – how to get to work, the airport, to your kids' schools, the hospital or the shopping mall, which are increasingly further away from home. Many now appear to spend half their lives in transit in order to do what was once achievable by foot or by bicycle.

It's all become a case of how to eat fast, live fast, consume fast, text message fast, Facebook fast and purchase fast. Speed is of the essence. And it seems that the faster we live, the greater our appetites have become. The mantra seems to be faster, quicker, better, more. In a quick-paced, use-and-throw world, speed is addictive.

But there is a heavy price to pay. We are using up the world's resources at an ever greater

pace: the materials to make the cell phone or flat screen TVs; the water to irrigate the massive amounts of grain and land required to feed the animals that end up on the dinner plate as the world increasingly turns towards diets that are more meat based; the oil that fuels the transport to get from here to there, to ship the food over huge distances, to fuel the type of petrochemical agriculture we have come to rely on, or the minerals which form a constituent part of the endless stream of consumer products on the shelves. Greed and the grab for resources not only fuels conflict, structural violence imposed on nations via Wall Street backed economic policies and death and war, but high energy, accelerated living takes a heavy toll on the environment and, if we are honest, on ourselves, in terms of our health and our relationships.

If the type of high energy living outlined above continues, we are heading for a crunching slowdown much sooner than we think. It will be catastrophic as current conflicts intensify and new ones emerge over diminishing resources, whether water, oil, minerals, fertile land or food.

The term 'slow living' was popularized when Carlo Petrini protested against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in Piazza di Spagna in Rome in 1986. This reaction against fast food sparked the creation of the Slow Food movement. Over time, this developed into other areas, such as Cittaslow (Slow Cities), Slow Living, Slow Travel, and Slow Design.

What was Carlo Petrini actually originally arguing against? Fast food is food that is grown quickly, eaten quickly and prepared quickly. It is convenience food of dubious nutritional quality that fits in with the belief that the 'good life' equates with fast living. It is food that tends to rely on petrochemical pesticides, fertilizers and transport across huge distances.

Food that is chemically processed and which relies on hormones, steroids and other similar inputs in order to 'speed things up' in terms of crop or animal growth and delivery to plates that may be half a world away from where it is produced by agricultural workers who themselves are undernourished or malnourished (2). It is nature speeded up, but also nature that has been contaminated and distorted and pressed into the service of big oil and agribusiness interests.

On the other hand, slow food tends to imply food that is grown or produced locally and with minimal bio-chemical inputs. It tends to rest on the sourcing of local foods and centuries' old traditions and ideally sold by neighbourhood farms and stores, not by giant monopolistic retailers that are integral to the fast food industry. Slow food also implies more nourishing and healthy food and agriculture that places less strain on water resources and soil to produce better yields (3) and which does not pollute either body or environment as a result of chemical residues (4) or uproot communities or destroy biodiversity (5).

Slow food is associated with lower energy inputs. It is less reliant on oil-based factory-processed fertilizers/pesticides and oil-based transportation across lengthy distances, not least because it is organically produced and locally sourced. In their ultimate forms, slow food and living slow can arguably best be achieved via decentralization and through communities that are more self-sustaining in terms of food production/consumption as well as in terms of other activities, including localized energy production via renewables or industrial outputs such as garment making or eco-friendly house building. In this respect, slow living extends to remaking the communities and relearning the crafts and artisan skills we have often lost or had stolen from us.

Ultimately, urban planning and the 'local' are key to living slow. No need for the automobile if work, school or healthcare facilities are close by. Less need for ugly flyovers or six lane highways that rip up communities in their path. Getting from A to B would not require a race against the clock on the highway that cuts through a series of localities that are never to be visited, never to be regarded as anything but an inconvenience to be passed through en route to big-mac nirvana, multiplex overload or shopping mall hedonism.

Instead, how about a leisurely, even enjoyable walk or cycle ride through an environment free from traffic pollution or noise, where the pedestrian is not regarded as an obstacle to be honked at with horn, where the cyclist is not a damned inconvenience to be driven off the road or where 'neighbourhood' has been stripped of its intimacy, of its local 'mom and pop' stores, of its local theatres?

Having jettisoned the slow life for a life of fast living, we are now encouraged to seek out the slow life, not least for example through tourism. The trouble is that with more and more people seeking out the slow life for two weeks of respite, destination slow suddenly became a complete mess. Instead of genteel locals, pristine forests and refreshing air, what you experience is sprawling hotel complexes, endless buses and taxis clogging up the place along with thousands of other tourists.

And the locals – they abandoned the slow life once mass tourism arrived and jumped on the bandwagon of fastness to rent out their rooms at inflated prices, to open restaurants serving fast food that caters to fast tourism. The slow mindset suddenly became abandoned in the quest to make a fast buck from the tourists, and before you knew it, six lane highways arrived, water was gobbled up by tourist complexes and urban sprawl sprawled even further across the once pristine hillsides or beaches.

But that's what fast living or, to be precise, the system that creates it does. It corrupts and destroys most things that get in its way. It recasts everything in its own image. Even 'slowness' has become a bogus, debased commodity sold to the fast living, fast consuming masses.

What can we do on a practical level that does not result in the debasement of the slow life? Is living slow nothing more than the dreamers mandate for taking us all back a century or two?

For some advocates of slow living, it is about trying to live better in a fast world, perhaps making space to enjoy 'quality time'. For others, however, it comprises a wide ranging cultural and economic revolution that challenges many of the notions that underpin current consumption patterns and 'globalization'.

Loosely defined, slow living is nothing new. From Buddha to the social philosopher Ivan Illich in the 1960s and 70s, the philosophy has always been around in different guises and has been accorded many labels. Whether it is anti-globalization, environmentalism, post-modernism, the organic movement, 'green' energy, localization or decentralization, these concepts and the movements that sprang up around them have embraced some notion of slowness in one form or another.

In India, the Navdanya organization is wholeheartedly against the destruction of biodiversity and traditional farming practices and communities and presents a radical critique of consumerism, petro-chemical farming and Western agribusiness (6). The views of Vandana

Shiva, Navdanya's founder, are well documented. Shiva advocates a radical shift of course from the one the world (and India) is currently on. Navdanya has even opened a Slow Food Café in Delhi.

On a general level, again taken loosely, slow living might involve improving the quality of life by merely slowing down the pace of living. In urban planning, for example, it may mean pedestrianising urban spaces and restricting motorized traffic, especially car use. In many European cities cycling is encouraged by offering the public the free use of bicycles. Visit any Dutch city to see that cycling is a predominant mode of transport, which certainly makes a positive contribution to the easy going ambiance.

In the UK, in part as a response to traffic congestion and the negative impacts of motorized transport on communities, a movement emerged in the early nineties to 'reclaim the streets', to hand them back to local residents who felt a need to claim ownership of their communities and public spaces, which had essentially been hijacked by commuters or large corporations.

Living slow may entail slowing down in order to develop some kind of spiritual connection with one's inner self. It might also involve opting for more environmentally friendly products while shopping, living in more eco-sensitive housing, developing small cottage industries or just generally leading a 'greener' lifestyle as a consumer.

But it's no good adopting a piecemeal, watered-down approach. The root of the problem needs to be addressed. The slow life, whether slow food or slow urban environments, is impossible if we fail to realize that decisions about urban planning, economic activity, investment, products and services, etc, are made through the capture of governments, regulatory agencies and courts by corporations adamant on expanding and perpetuating their dominance (8,9).

In order to achieve any semblance of genuine, lasting change towards a better, slower world, we must eradicate the material conditions that produce and perpetuate class-based exploitation and divisions on an increasingly global level. These conditions stem from patterns of capital ownership and the consequent flow of wealth from bottom to top that occurs by various means of 'accumulation by dispossession' (corruption, tax evasion/avoidance, bail outs, 'austerity', 'free trade' agreements, corporate taxpayer subsidies, capital market liberalization, etc).

What we need is proper democracy achieved through, for example, common ownership of banks and key industries and a commitment to 'green' policies and renewable energy. This entails challenging the oligarchs and their corporations that have colonized almost every aspect of modern living, from healthcare, urban planning, food and agriculture to education and development, in order to effect change that is beneficial to their interests and thereby enslaving us all in the process.

Take action and be informed:

<http://corporateeurope.org/get-involved>

<http://www.navdanya.org/campaigns>

Notes

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