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Slowing down: Yes, but why, what and how?



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Mots clés

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État du projet

Research notes

Visuel



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Présentation longue

What do the experts say about desires to slow down?

The workshop held in Paris brought together a dozen French and European researchers (from Germany, France, Italy) from different disciplines (sociology, urban planning, law, philosophy, history), all specializing in issues relating to the pace and rhythms of life, as well as the director of the film *Tout s'accélère* [Everything's getting faster], a former trader turned teacher. The experts gathered to discuss this desire to slow down that was expressed by citizens in the international survey on "Aspirations for mobility and lifestyles," commissioned by the Mobile Lives Forum in 2015.

The researcher in charge of this workshop, Jean-Yves Boulin, a sociologist at the University of Paris Dauphine, organised the discussion into several parts. For him, the goal was:

1. to diagnose the feeling of acceleration (in relation to society's pace of life in the past) and its corollary, a persistent sense of urgency. Researchers had known about this feeling for several years and the workshop aimed to identify the most impacted aspects of daily life, highlight the main symptoms and understand which social groups were most affected. The diversity of countries represented at the table also provided an opportunity to discover if these perceptions were shared uniformly.
2. to diagnose the desire to slow down, in other words to analyze what rhythms of life were desired for the future compared to those of today, and then to identify avenues of action, observable and/or conceivable political orientations to make this desire to slow down a reality.

DIAGNOSIS: FOR THE RESEARCHERS, THE DESIRE TO SLOW DOWN RESPONDS TO A SOCIAL REALITY, THE ACCELERATION OF LIFE IN SOCIETY

What to slow down and why?

The phenomenon of acceleration manifests itself at the heart of daily life (family life, social life, work life, leisure, etc.) by:

- the intensification of activities (things are being done more and more quickly, as reflected in the acceleration of speech on television).
- the densification of activities (everyday activities are more numerous, think for example of how parents care about their children's welfare well beyond their health and education, encompassing now their sense of fulfillment, their sociability, etc.) - the "multi-tasking".
- instantaneousness (the tendency to want "everything, right now" without delay, the best example being same-day delivery by Amazon). The researchers also agreed on the consequences of this "spiral of acceleration":
- the boundaries between personal and professional life becoming less and less clear-cut, with harmful effects and work increasingly encroaching on times that were previously protected.
- the different actions of daily life losing their meaning.
- an overall decline in well-being and increase in stress levels. .

Who's affected?

The standardized management of time through evaluations and figures (at school, in business, even in the family) puts increased pressure on individuals but that is experienced differently depending on one's social group:

- the intensification and densification of people's pace of life is accepted and valued in higher social echelons but is reluctantly endured by the lower classes.
- the challenges of balancing work life and personal life can be offset by members of the higher echelons who can afford to buy some time (e.g. childcare, housekeeping and other home services).

While all areas of daily life may be affected, the challenge is to identify the activities that really structure lifestyles and to assess which activities must be acted upon first,

particularly in light of individual concerns. In their view, the main problem is work and travel.

Work plays a structuring role

Work continues to play a structuring role in our societies by organising daily life, and several forms of changes have taken place around it that contribute to the feeling of acceleration:

- the intensification of time at work with increasingly short timeframes to complete required tasks.
- the densification of time spent working, with jobs becoming increasingly versatile but also the preeminence of electronic communication tools that reinforce the feeling of accumulation and multiplication of tasks to be accomplished (receiving emails, for example, disrupts the workflow).
- the flexibilization of work (short-term contracts, mixed shifts, etc.) that contributes to the loss of temporal rhythms and disrupts the balance between family/social life and work life.

All these aspects of contemporary work are the result of a productivity-driven economy that is recognized as being the main cause of acceleration mechanisms.

For work, mobility, consumption, in short for all activities of daily life that are subject to acceleration, the question for this workshop was then: how can we get to a place where people have greater control of their social times and rhythms of life?

HOW TO SLOW DOWN: SOME PROPOSALS FROM THE RESEARCHERS

The challenge here is to find other ways of life, as well as other ways of working, travelling and consuming, balancing work life and social/family life, and speed and slowness.

Reconsidering the place of work

- Giving people back control over their work schedules: designing and organizing work schedules in relation to other social times. This includes policies aimed at reducing work times and policies aimed at giving employees more autonomy in the organization of their work times - on different time scales (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and throughout life) - and even more broadly in the organization of their work itself by relaxing hierarchical relationships of subordination (by establishing autonomous working groups, for example).
- Rethinking time at work with the right to disconnect or teleworking: this would allow people to live better ("time-quality") rather than to live fast ("time-quantity").
- Replacing human work with robots and artificial intelligence, which would require, among other things, the introduction of a universal basic income. This avenue, which could be called the technological avenue, does not preclude the other avenues.

Rethinking daily travel

One reason for targetting mobilities in policies on time management and slowing down the pace of life is that mobilities are currently one of the main factors disrupting our schedules. We could therefor favor:

- The use of digital tools during travel, which, by allowing people to multitask while on the move (working or engaging in leisure activities), can make transit times less boring and constrained.
- Soft mobilities (walking, cycling or, others), provided we don't reinforce social inequalities in a society where, to quote John Chambers, "today it's the fast that eat the slow."
- Reducing forced trips by enabling telework or home deliveries via the Internet, while paying attention to the fact that in excess, this can lead to social isolation

and health problems associated with a lack of movement.

- Remote working - this appeared to be one of the best avenues for alleviating the intensity of life, provided that it is regulated (for example, on the model of the German administration). Another suggestion was to integrate it into local time policies so that it would be an element of urban planning and be integrated into a more comprehensive discussion of mobilities and transport options.
- Experiments with temporal policies, such as those implemented by time bureaus and chronotopic analyses of territories that are particularly concerned with mobility. For example, in Italy, from the instigation of these policies in the early 1990s, mobility pacts were drawn up by involving all mobility-related actors - both public and private -, other relevant stakeholders (employers, inhabitants' associations), and all sectors of activity. Cities such as Bolzano, Cremona and Bergamo, to name but a few, have rethought the question of mobility both in relation to the territorial scales of service and to the modes of transport."

AND MORE GENERALLY

- Rethinking the spatial distribution of activities in order to favor proximity, again taking care not to shelter or isolate fragile populations.
- Finding the time that is appropriate, the time that is right for each activity, given that sociologists of work consider that there is an aspiration, advocated for by trade unions, to give employees more autonomy in the way they schedule their professional time in relation to other social times (time to care for others, leisure time, time to learn other activities, etc.). We could even turn the tables entirely and give a central place to non-marketed times - times that are free of measurement - rather than work. This radical suggestion would ultimately mean questioning contemporary production methods.

The experts must now find ways of ensuring that the initiatives proposed during this workshop aren't paralyzed by the financialization of the economy, the emphasis on

short-term goals and the primacy of ever-more consumption, which are the main causes of social acceleration.

Download the full report of the workshop (in French only)

[Download the full report of the workshop \(in French only\)](#)

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Chapô

In 2018, the Mobile Lives Forum launched a day-long workshop on people's desire to slow down, a desire that came to light in the international survey on aspirations for mobility and lifestyles. The findings we are publishing here take on a particular significance today, particularly because of the health crisis linked to Covid-19, through the need to regulate telework or the need to think differently about the spatial distribution of activities, demonstrating that it is time to rethink our rhythms of life and mobilities, and to (re)claim a balance between our social life, family life and professional life.

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