

Review of *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* by Maggie Berg, Barbara Seeber (University of Toronto Press, 2016)

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There is a delicious irony in agreeing to provide a review to a super tight deadline where the text in question is subtitled *Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. On this occasion, for us as reviewers, the inherent irony was embellished by the fact that one of us had recently declared, uncompromisingly, to cease working beyond scheduled hours, and the other had committed, categorically, to fulfilling another writing project which could only accurately be described as gargantuan. Yet, despite the crazy paving of good intentions, we agreed to devote some time to considering *The Slow Professor* for a number of reasons including that the book itself might be enjoyable, that we might learn something valuable from our interaction with it and the practical consideration that we each had a copy of the text. We should also admit that the head turning caused by Berg and Seeber's work was a welcome distraction from other, albeit squeaker-wheel tasks, which were unbearably tedious. Hence, the reading of four turgid journal articles in one case, and the writing of an ever-expanding data analysis in another, was bounced down the To Do list, and the slim, snail-bearing volume was elevated in status to both urgent and important.

And our efforts were rewarded.

The title of this book is engaging, resonating with the good food and lazy days we associate with holidays. The argument of the book, however, is more closely linked to politics than it is to gastronomy, though it is probable that the holistic view of life to which the authors subscribe

would reject any such dichotomy. With inspiration drawn from the Slow Food Movement, which from its beginnings in Italy in 1986 has spread far and wide, its opposition to industrialized and globalized food production, and its promotion of local products, sustainability, fair workplace and trading practices offer a framework for the rejection of the neoliberal culture and the corporatization to which the beleaguered contemporary university has been subjected. The authors offer a 'Slow Professor manifesto' which promotes three aims: 'to alleviate work stress, preserve humanistic education, and resist the corporate university'(ix). As with other books named as manifestos, this is an intervention and a call to action. The authors tell us that 'the argument of *The Slow Professor* is supported by empirical studies conducted in fields such as sociology, medicine, information science, and labour studies,'(viii), while it also has roots in personal experience, and includes testimonies and anecdotes that are a crucial part of its evidence. Berg and Seeber remark that they 'took a lesson from Marc Bekoff's comment about the emerging science on animal behaviour: 'the plural of anecdote is data'(Animal Studies Reader 76), (viii). In the feminist tradition that recognizes that the personal is the political, *The Slow Professor* takes the standpoint that the 'purpose of the testimony... is not to reveal 'individual characteristics''. Rather it is to 'amplify the political context' and supply a platform for a collective conversation about 'the current social, political and intellectual life in the academy'(15), (viii).

Throughout, the book's narrative is propelled by two imaginary protagonists. The first is that of a besieged professor who is 'managed, frantic, stressed, and demoralized'(ix), the product the authors argue of the corporatization of higher education. A stressed state infiltrates every aspect of this academic's life, twisting it to match the language and conceptual landscape of the market. The corporate university where she works is dominated by the language of crisis, urging action before it is too late. Although it might well be argued that the language of crisis has been favoured in university circles for a very long time, and certainly predates the contemporary neo-liberal terrain, this description of higher education is certainly one that resonates.

The contrasting image is that of the character of the Slow Professor who advocates deliberation over acceleration and who needs time to think. This alternative identity is one where time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what academics do. The Slow Professor is envisaged as acting purposefully, while cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience. Thus, 'by taking the time for reflection and dialogue, the

Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university' (x).

Situating the text in such a manner, one is reassured that the writers have some consideration for the reader and this makes for a good start. Such awareness should be so commonplace as to not merit a mention in a review, however, no doubt we have all had experiences where due regard for the individual on the receiving end of the writing has been blatantly, and sometimes it appears wantonly, neglected. Fulfilling other rhetorical considerations, Berg and Seeber are deliberate in identifying the purpose of their book, which is 'to explore the ways in which the principles of Slow philosophy ... as well as the emphasis on conviviality and the local, are relevant to addressing faculty stress and to transforming academic practice' (12). Finding oneself in the Introduction's parlour along with Stefan Collini, David Lodge and Martha Nussbaum, amongst others, reassured us that we were at the very least at an interesting and evidence informed gathering. Berg and Seeber suggest that their book might uncover 'the secret life of the academic, revealing not only her pains but also her pleasures' and that the project is, in part, 'a self-help book for academics ... structured for reader ease' (12-13). Though many of us, in our latent but sometimes ill-disguised intellectual snobbery, might balk at the notion of 'self help', the suggestion of reader ease was sufficient to more than muffle the calling of the aforementioned abhorrent articles and data and so we happily read on.

Berg and Seeber's book is organised into four chapters, 'Time Management and Timelessness', 'Pedagogy and Pleasure', 'Research and Understanding' and 'Collegiality and Community'. Like many of us, Berg and Seeber are unable to resist a 'last word' and the book is wrapped up with a 'Conclusion: Collaboration and Thinking Together'.

In Chapter One on 'Time Management and Timelessness' the authors suggest that much of the writing on time management advocates ways to cram more and more into one's day, asserting that time is at a premium and that each minute should be wrung out. Berg and Seeber suggest that 'We need to challenge the success stories of time management that promote multitasking and long hours' (22). The first half of this chapter captures the frenetic character of standard time management advice which is associated with a sense of 'fragmentation' (24) and the 'feverish sense of being always behind' (25). The second half, advocates an alternative way of not just viewing but interacting with time which is proposed in a five point plan which includes getting off line, doing less, sessions of timeless time, timeouts

or time to do nothing, and the need to change the way we talk about time.

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Pedagogy and Pleasure'. Here the authors remind us of the value of finding enjoyment in our teaching and learning; they suggest that 'the courses which are a joy to teach are those in which we feel most connected to others' and they back up such assertions with research that draws on the work of Teresa Brennan, Barbara Fredrickson, Robert Boice and Parker J. Palmer. The authors devote the second half of this chapter again to practical advice, rooted in personal experience, on how one might enjoy teaching through its necessary phases of preparation, pedagogy and assessment.

In Chapter 3 'Research and Understanding', the impact of corporatization, which has infiltrated all aspects of the academy, but none more so than the area of research, is discussed. It has influenced the way that research is conducted, emphasizing output, and prioritizing certain areas of research above others. There is a drive towards the quantifiable and marketable which is, in the views of the authors, 'at odds with the spirit of open inquiry and social critique'. In the third chapter 'a counter-discourse of Slow scholarship, understanding, and ethical engagement' (14) is proposed. By ending the constant busyness and critiquing the work we undertake, we may be able to provide the conditions for creative and original thinking. The corporate university, it is argued, makes it virtually impossible to become engrossed in the task at hand and to experience timelessness. Protecting 'a time and a place for timeless time, ... is not self-indulgent but rather crucial to intellectual work' (28).

Although the corporate university has made research, albeit in a narrow definition, the top priority, this has, in the view of the authors, made academics more, rather than less, vulnerable. The language of corporatism can 'colonize our minds' (56). They agree with Collini, who describes current academic life as 'distracted, numbers-swamped, audit-crazed, grant-chasing ... far removed from classical ideals of the contemplative life (What Are Universities For?)' (57) The counter position of the Slow professor and slow scholarship offers a rebalancing:

Slowing down is about asserting the importance of contemplation, connectedness, fruition, and complexity. It gives meaning to letting research take the time it needs to ripen and makes it easier to resist the pressure to be faster. It gives meaning to

thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition. (57)

Chapter 4 turns to the theme of collegiality. Collegiality in the context of this book is not confined to the organizational: it goes well beyond a particular way of managing a university as a community of scholars. Summarizing the corporate view of relations within the academy the authors reference Susan Robinson who in *The Peak Performing Professor*, offers a chapter on how to 'Engage Others' and then on how to 'Collaborate for Mutual Benefit'. It is interesting to reflect that when we think of 'peak oil' and 'peak water', we are thinking in terms of these valuable resources running out. The picture of the 'peak performing professor' is equally bleak:

[Robinson] advises those of us who are shy to attend social functions with a clear idea of 'what outcomes ... you want' from the event (142); keeping our eye on the goal will motivate us to greet people, remember names, begin conversations, and ask questions. Robinson suggests that we counterbalance a colleague's reserve by asking questions, and after listening to 'a few sentences, summarize what the person has said so far using active listening' (79).

Collegiality, so much beloved of academics in the past is redefined into a marketplace where every interaction is a transaction designed to help in the attainment of ones individual goals. The market place at its most crass is identifiable in the suggestion from Robinson of keeping of 'a database with 'a subfile of people who can help' with a project. We will need to 'clean' up this file 'from time to time eliminating contacts who are not relevant to the goal of mutual support (154)' (79). We are counselled not to be taken in by the type of corporate language that references more human experiences such as the life of the village: 'We should not be lulled by the metaphor of 'villages' for groups of colleagues: we are advised to 'mine the gold of your own village' while also_occasionally targeting' other 'villages'' (155) (79).

However, there are other models that the authors identify as 'emphasizing the affective aspects of collegiality' which may be more appropriate in addressing the widespread feelings of isolation. Frank Martela's 'new and, we believe, more constructive way to think about collegiality' is a case in point. Martela 'points out that existing research on well-being at work focuses on employees' cognitive assessment of the characteristics of their jobs or on how they

manage their own well-being'. This personal well-being is downplayed in 'individualistic and rationalistic paradigm' which marginalizes the role of emotions and 'human relationality'(82), (81). They, with Martela, reject the model which characterized the emotions as 'enemies of reason,' and a threat to organizational life. The authors note that in the current context, in which universities are faced increasingly with justifying their existence, and the public money they absorb, to speak of professors' stress might appear self-indulgent. It is unsurprising that, as the authors report, 'some colleagues have suggested that we stop whining, while others have described our project as brave' (3): although they do not say so, brave may mean 'courageous' in the sense that Sir Humphrey might have intended it in *Yes Minister*. However, in any definition of the word, resisting the corporate model's effacement of the role of the professor is brave. The values of productivity, efficiency, and competition, the common thieves of time, have 'sped up the clock'. The discourse of urgency, it is argued, causes a feeling of powerlessness whereas Slow Professors who, 'act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience,[are] able, as Collini puts it, to hold our 'nerve' (What Are Universities For? 85)', (11).

In conclusion, in the spirit of authentic collaboration, this joint review has been a joy for us, both in the reading of Berg and Seeber's work and in the writing of this commentary. If you read nothing else this summer, devote a little time to keeping company with *The Slow Professor* authors and the colleagues they have referenced. Such engagement will, we hope, contribute to enhancement in your research, your teaching and above all your interactions with colleagues and friends in our great educative community.