

Book Review: Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration – And Why It's Good for the Planet, the Economy and Our Lives by Danny Dorling

In Slowdown, Danny Dorling challenges the idea that we are living through an era of unprecedented economic and technological acceleration, instead putting forward an argument in favour of the inevitability and desirability of deceleration. Published in the midst of a global pandemic, Dorling's insightful and persuasive book is a well-timed forecast that the storm will eventually subside and humankind will advance towards an era of peace and stability for all, writes Theo Curtis.

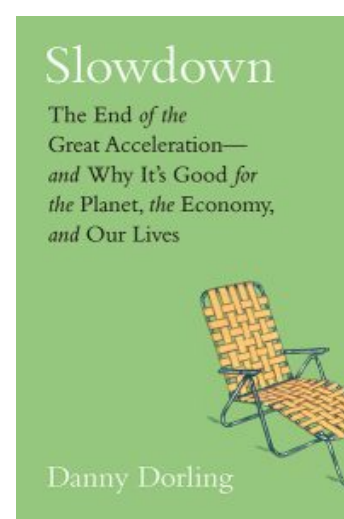
Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration – And Why It's Good for the Planet, the Economy and Our Lives. Danny Dorling. Yale University Press. 2020.

In [Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration – And Why It's Good for the Planet, the Economy and Our Lives](#), Danny Dorling, Professor of Geography at Oxford University, takes aim at the customary view that we are living through an era of unprecedented economic and technological acceleration. Instead, Dorling puts forward a profound and humane argument in favour of the inevitability and desirability of deceleration.

Dorling's central thesis is that we live in the shadow of the era of the great acceleration: a period of unparalleled progress and instability that heralded the birth of capitalism, the nation state and advanced technology. The great acceleration began with the 'discovery' of the 'New World' in 1492 and was attended by the handmaidens of acceleration: technological, economic and demographic growth. It is the diminishing vigour of this trio of forces that Dorling sees as defining our time as the era of slowdown.

The most obvious and least controversial manifestation of slowdown is the decline in demographic expansion. Fertility rates have fallen from 5.4 in the 1960s to just 2.5 in the 2010s, while [new estimates from the Lancet medical journal](#) show that we can expect to reach 'peak human' before the end of the twenty-first century, after which the global population will either stabilise or even decline. As Dorling correctly observes, this is a mark of progress: [falling fertility rates are a result of increased prosperity, education and reproductive autonomy for women](#). While the 'global baby bust' has led to mainstream concerns about ageing populations, and delusional conspiracies like ['the great replacement'](#), few people think that it would be efficacious or desirable to coax or coerce households into having more children for the sake of sustaining a rising population.

It is not just reproduction that has been slowing down in recent decades, but also the production of everything. The decline in GDP growth rates has captured a considerable amount of attention after the 2008 financial crisis, but the slowdown in this metric has much deeper roots that extend back to the mid-twentieth century. According to Dorling, global GDP growth reached its highest level in 1954 and has trended downwards (albeit in a wildly oscillating fashion) ever since. This is despite meteoric Chinese and Indian growth buoying global averages. Dorling suggests that although the decline in GDP growth rates may end the fantasy of infinite economic expansion, it need not mark the end of social progress. In the age of the great deceleration, 'true progress will not be so much through new inventions but in spreading the benefits of what are now old inventions to many more people and more countries' (269).



While most readers will be familiar with the trends of slowing demographic and economic growth, Dorling's third observation will come as a shock to many: the rate of technological progress itself has slowed down considerably and measurably in recent decades. This idea conflicts with the dominant narrative, as expressed in books such as James Gleick's *Faster*, Thomas Friedman's *Thank You for Being Late* and James Colville's *The Great Acceleration*. These narratives privilege the present moment as one of unparalleled technological dynamism, expressed primarily in the rise of digital technologies and the exponential growth in processing power known as [Moore's Law](#).

Some of Dorling's most insightful moments are when he pours cold water on the enthusiasm of the technophilic worshippers of Silicon Valley. The reality is that the digital wizardry of the twenty-first century, though certainly impressive and undeniably important, cannot compare with the wave of innovations of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the Second Industrial Revolution. Termed the 'special century' by the historian Robert Gordon, the period 1870-1970 was unique in the scale of its inventiveness, bringing us electrification, modern pharmaceuticals, the internal combustion engine, plastics and urban sanitation, among many others. Dorling is also sceptical regarding the claim that humanity is on the precipice of creating human-level artificial intelligence (AI). Such predictions are by their nature unverifiable, but Dorling seems to be tapping into [a recent general re-evaluation of the limits of AI](#) and the extent to which progress in this area has been overhyped.

After examining the manifestations of the slowdown and plotting their timelines, Dorling proceeds to tackle the question of where the 'great deceleration' leaves humankind. On this point Dorling is almost uniformly optimistic. The reader is reminded that 'war deaths, flu epidemics, mass starvation, and the last of the great famines – all peaked during the peak years of the capitalist transition' (214). But provided that the risk of climate change is 'addressed urgently', the world should become a safer and more stable place to live than either the past or the present (217).

As well as ushering in a new era of stability and security, Dorling believes that the slowdown will make life more equal and more cooperative. Now that the growth of wealth is declining, Dorling predicts that more attention will be focused on the proper distribution of that wealth. The likely result is the end of capitalism, and the creation of a social order where 'life is less precarious, with better housing, education, and less onerous work in the recent past' (10).

It is in this assumption – that declining economic growth will lead to an egalitarian social order – that the argument of *Slowdown* is weakest. It was during the zenith of demographic, economic and technological growth in the period 1870-1970 that income inequality was significantly compressed. This historic turn towards egalitarianism has attracted a range of explanations: historian [Walter Scheidel has particularly emphasised](#) the role played by total mobilisation during the two World Wars, while economist [Carl Benedikt Frey has stressed the influence of technology](#) in making labour more productive and thus more valuable for businesses (recalling Paul Krugman's famous observation that when it comes to rising incomes, 'productivity isn't everything, but in the long-run it is almost everything'). In his famous work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty theorised the fall in inequality as a result of the rate of economic growth exceeding the rate of return on capital ($g > r$). The idea here is that income inequality can only fall when the real economy is growing faster than returns on investment, for if the latter outpaces the former, then an ever-growing share of national income is destined to fall into the hands of the minority who own significant amounts of financial assets. None of these theories contains much to support Dorling's idea that the decline of war as well as technological and economic growth might result in a more equal society.

The experience of economic stagnation following the financial crisis suggests that disappointed economic expectations could also further fuel populist nationalism, xenophobic scapegoating and baseless conspiracy theories such as 'the great replacement' and [QAnon](#). There is certainly no guarantee, as Dorling seems to think, that the end of growth should propel social democracy rather than populist nationalism into the political mainstream.

While Dorling's book can be overly optimistic in some of its predictions, the arguments contained in *Slowdown* are insightful and often highly persuasive. While the terrifying spread of COVID-19 has focused global attention on the short-term effects on the coming months and years in anticipation of climbing death tolls or salvation via a vaccine, *Slowdown* will refresh readers with a hopeful long-term vision for humanity. The COVID-19 crisis will call for a grand re-evaluation of how we work, how we enjoy leisure and how we reward workers who provide services we consider 'essential'. Published in the midst of a global pandemic, Dorling's book is a well-timed forecast that the storm will eventually subside and humankind will advance towards an era of peace and stability for all.

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