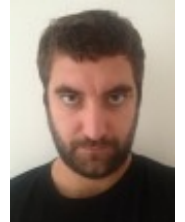


# Should academics adopt an ethic of slowness or ninja-like productivity? In search of scholarly time

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/11/20/in-search-of-scholarly-time/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/11/20/in-search-of-scholarly-time/)

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When viewed in the broader context of late modernity, responses to the increasingly frenetic academic workload can be more clearly understood, argues [Filip Vostal](#). Rather than choosing between the regressive ethic of slow scholarship on the one hand, or the time management productivity trainings on the other, academics may benefit from a more level-headed approach that emphasises autonomy over their use of time.



There is little doubt that proliferating audit cultures, rampant managerialism and ubiquitous metrics transform the life of the university. One of the [frequently reported](#) implications of such change is excessive workload which, in turn, results in the experience of [time-shortage and hurry sickness](#). Additionally, academics often seem to complain about the meaninglessness of the little bureaucratic tasks ('time thieves') that they need to perform, endless form-filling and useless meetings to attend. This rising culture of haste assuming constant speed-up is also accompanied by the rise of '[bite-size science](#)', academic '[speed-dating](#)' and the emergence of so-called '[business accelerators](#)'. For many, the intuitive downside of such a shift is evident: rushed or [fast scholarship](#) would potentially end up as incomplete and/or irrelevant – fast scholarship lacks scholarly quality and has a fairly short shelf-life, due to its hastiness. There are two reactions to these predicaments. Let's begin with the first one – calls for slowness.

Some authors argue that in the present academic situation some form of [academic slowness](#) needs [to be reclaimed](#). Notwithstanding its appeal and attractiveness, slowness remains a deeply problematic rival to the culture of speed, due to how speed has been perceived throughout the modern era. Regardless of the widespread intellectual unease with speed, the will to accelerate has comprised one of the constitutive features of modernity. As [Enda Duffy](#), [Stephen Kern](#) and [John Tomlinson](#) incisively note, speed was a particularly important motive throughout early modernity's *belle époque*. Speed has often been chosen, desired, appreciated – either as an instrument or as goal in its own right. Think about a diverse spectrum of 'speed craftsmen', such as the artistic movements such as the Cubists and the Dadaists; Muybridge and Marey's invention of the motion picture. Or consider the bicycle, steam engine, automobile, telephone, electricity; FW Taylor's 'scientific management'; and even the connection between the idea of progress and realization of the better future – all of these were, in one way or another, driven by the commitment to speed.

Of course speed has its dark and problematic side, which is apparent in the openly fascist Futurist movement or as famously reflected in Georg Simmel's essay on [metropolis and mental life](#). Some scholars, such as Hartmut Rosa, convincingly demonstrate that the positive virtues of speed have metamorphosed into a new form of social evil in the [present conditions of oppressive 'acceleration society'](#). And yet on a more capillary level it also appears that the commitment to speed – either expressed by desire or by necessity – remains a powerful motivational force even today; a force profoundly entrenched in the modern individual's calculating and strategizing mind-set. The logical flipside of this historical legacy of speed perception, then, is that slowness has traditionally tended to be understood as regressive, idle and reactionary (as Walter Benjamin [noted in the case of flâneurs](#) who, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, protested against increasing 'industriousness' by taking turtles – that set up the pace for them – for a walk). Slowness appears somewhat remote from the disciplined and path-dependent organizational tactic postulated by



Image credit: David Falconer (U.S. National Archives)

modernist speed-up. Is it therefore conceivable to imagine it as an organizational principle of academic life? Now I want to draw attention to the second proposed – and connected – remedy for academic busyness.



Le Flaneur

University senior managers seem to understand the busy academic and offer the typical managerial solution: attention and time management training. However, rather than questioning the very causes that lead to and co-produce the conditions of hurry sickness, academics are advised to adapt by keeping up, going faster, press ahead, be resilient and agile, boost productivity. Using the uncanny #HigherEdBiz Newspeak, staff development departments encourage academics to clench their teeth and become undestroyable time warriors. Training sessions such as ‘How to be a productivity ninja’ and courses offering time management techniques to enable regular academic writing, effective reading and to help handle information overload emerge. Not only that: these initiatives present themselves as cures for hurry sickness – as new-age-ish zen-like ‘time therapies’ for ever-busier academics: ‘A “Productivity Ninja” is calm and prepared, but also skilled and ruthless in how he or she deals with the enemy that is information overload’ we can read in the ad for this training. The key problem with such programs is that, next to producing a group of fast-moving response-able ‘speed winners’, they also render the increasing academic workload and associated time-shortage, alienation, burnout and demotivation

(experienced diversely at different institutions; variables such as gender and academic rank dramatically affect this experience) as a personal and individual issue – rather than stressing their origin in the structural transformation of the academic environment.

When asked, many academics do not like either option: Neither sluggish turtles nor a fast ninja-style of work seems compatible with preferred tempo of work. Instead they seek something akin to *scholarly time autonomy*, enabling them to determine how temporal resources should be used. What are the parameters of such scholarly time? Even though scholarly time needs to be conceived as unhasty in principle, the current calls for slowness do not seem to be viable avenues – largely due to the modern perception of speed. Scholarly time is not slow by default as it needs to accommodate ‘accelerative’ moments of inspiration and intuition (consider *eureka* and aha moment) and attend to practical features of academic work such digital search engines and scholarly databases. Simultaneously, scholarly time would ideally account for a counter-strategy against reported haste resulting from the structural and institutional transformation of academic work – currently dealt with by productivity trainings originating from the world of business. In this sense scholarly time autonomy would probably need to be categorically conceived as a critical resource for academic work and therefore as a measured instrument resisting the convergence of the university, corporate culture and managerial rationality.

Democratic decision-making, deliberation, will-formation and policy implementation need to be underpinned, as [Robert Hassan says](#), by natural unforced rhythms (which do not have to be slow). This principle seems entirely salutary – if not straightforwardly necessary – in the academic environment. However, if academics and universities are not taking the lead in such a program, one wonders whether anyone at all can resist oppressive nature of late modern fast time. In order to resist academic hurry sickness, it would perhaps have to be those academics holding senior administrative positions who need to legislate the principle of scholarly time autonomy as an explicit political demand – and perhaps as an ethical principle integral to the education and science governance.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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[Filip Vostal](#) is postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Sociological Studies, Charles University. His research interest lay on the intersection between sociology of time, history of speed and transformation of the university.

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