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Article (Accepted Version)

Scott, Susie (2019) [Review] Maggie Berg and Barbara K Seeber (2016) The slow professor: challenging the culture of speed in the academy. *Sociolgy*, 53 (1). pp. 211-212. ISSN 0038-0385

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Book review

The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy

Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber (2016)
London: University of Toronto Press.

Every now and then, a book comes along that is like a breath of fresh air, challenging the way we think and saying something different. Some of the best of these contribute not to specific fields but to an entire discipline, or academia as a whole. They make commentaries not on what there is to know, but how realistically to approach it, given the social, practical and organisational constraints of academic life. Howard Becker's (1986) *Writing for Social Scientists* is one example, with its revelatory account of how good writing actually gets done (a mundane process of improving bad first drafts). The honest and confessional tone of books like these gives comfort and encouragement, by puncturing through intimidating myths. They resonate particularly with those of us who suffer from the impostor syndrome, offering reassurance that the unglamorous routines of academic 'dirty work' (Hughes 1962) are just an ordinary experience.

The Slow Professor is a welcome addition to this genre of academic self-help texts. It addresses the growing 'culture of speed' in higher education, whereby the structural demands of a marketised, commodified and bureaucratically administered system create impossible conditions of employment, with inevitably damaging effects. The 'supermarket model' of endless consumer (student) choice combined with managerial efficiency makes university staff increasingly accountable for the ways in which we use our time, and forced to deliver academic 'services' in bitesize, fragmented tasks. This combines with escalating expectations concerning product delivery and distribution, assessed by quantifiable metrics (such as the Research Excellence Framework, Teaching Quality Assurance and Impact agenda), causing feelings of stress, guilt, frustration and disempowerment. Berg and Seeber note with concern the tendency to individualise these experiences as mental health issues, rather than recognise their systemic origins. Academia has become a dystopian utopia of impossibly perfectionistic standards, against which we are doomed to fail.

The title of the book alludes to the Slow Movement, in which its message is contextualised. This is a counter-discourse of resistance against the accelerated pace of modern life and its alienating effects upon subjective experience. Like slow TV, slow food and slow travel, Berg and Seeber argue that we can practise slow scholarship, by resurrecting the values of deep, reflective thinking, mindful self-awareness and playful creativity. This means taking a stand against the 'culture of speed' in academia, and seeking an alternative mode of temporality. Instead of accepting as inevitable the state of time poverty, and the incumbent sense, observed by Dale Southerton (2006), of being rushed, stressed out and harried, we might halt in our tracks, pause and look critically around, before proceeding cautiously towards more carefully selected goals.

Slowness in research can be practised through an emphasis on quality rather than quantity: studying only those topics that genuinely interest us, and writing fewer,

better things, for specific purposes. We could cultivate more opportunities for 'timeless time', akin to the immersive state of flow, in which to think freely, deeply and reflectively, exploring ideas for their intrinsic value. We should venture out beyond our rigidly defined domains of expertise, reading around topics and being open to alternative perspectives. Instead of frantically downloading abstracts of electronic journal articles, we might visit the campus library: sit in a comfortable chair and read an actual book. Slowly produced knowledge meets the criterion of 'excellence' in different ways from fast research: like slow cooked food, it benefits from careful preparation.

Slow teaching could be practised by having more realistic expectations of our limited time and resources. The authors recommend reducing the time spent on (over-)preparing pedagogic materials, and giving up on the anxious, perfectionistic need to appear omniscient. By turning over greater responsibility to our students, we could be in the business not of instrumental 'knowledge transfer' but of creative exploration, shared experience and collaborative learning. Here, Berg and Seeber emphasise the embodied and emotional experience of *being* in the classroom, in almost the existential sense of the word. What students remember most about their university education is how they felt within this unique social world, their sense of belonging with supportive others.

The same principles apply to our collegial relationships. Instead of individualistically competing, we might cooperate and support each other, taking time to build research communities and networks. This action aims towards both social goodness and moral duty: an ethics of self-care that extends outwards. Of course, there are important critical questions to ask about the universal viability of slow scholarship, given the persistence of structural inequalities and institutional constraints. Can those on temporary or part-time contracts, for example, afford to practise such an 'indulgent' working pattern? Nevertheless, the message of the book is optimistic, and invites us to take seriously a different way of being academic.

Professor Susie Scott
University of Sussex

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