

Productively “slow,” or just bourgeois?

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Dear friends,

I am fortunate to hold a role which affords me the ability to take leave. And gladly, I have a few days off this week, mostly to pack up our house as we move twice in the next six months. But, I can't help but ponder the capitalist transformation of universities into profit-driven, productivity-obsessed institutions. You can think of this blog as a form of therapy, right? “They’re on a break but still harping on about capitalist infatuation with destroying academia, like, go lay on a beach you loser”. This capitalist interference in academia, again not suggesting there ever was a golden era, has led us to the latest in a very long line of hellish thought technologies imported wholesale from the corporate world – a culture of “publish or perish,” or “teach while underwater”. In this model, emphasis is given to “quantity” not quality, and certainly not to diversity. Amidst a litany of responses to this –the first, most common, being capitulation under the weight of hegemony, the second, being the exodus of the ruling class from the profession as their ill-gotten hoards support them, and competing thirds, for our discussion today, activist and “slow” responses.

“Slow academia” [1] is a concept which stems from the broader “slow movement” (that, according to Wikipedia authors, anyway, originated with “slow food” in the 1980s). This approach advocates for a more reflective, deliberate engagement with scholarship, pushing back against the commodification of knowledge and the erosion of time for deep thinking. Hot stuff, yeah? Well, maybe. Let’s dig into it.

Slow academia seeks to counter the quantification and marketisation of academic productivity, the precarious employment conditions pushing scholars to overwork, and funding models that prioritise quick, “impactful” results over long-term inquiry, sustained scholarship, and contributions into communities. The movement seeks to emphasise work-life balance, rejecting the always-connected culture that has colonised our world –after all, the hegemon suggests, if you’re not working, or scrolling Zuck’s propaganda orifices, you not really worth existing as a human. However, as is often the case with movements that challenge the status quo, capitalism has found ways to co-opt and twist aspects of slow academia to serve its own ends.

We talked previously, in passing, about the seizing of “mindfulness”, “work-life balance” and other leisure initiatives which have been co-opted into mini-industries, and which fundamentally place responsibility on individuals for failures, burnout, and “problems”, rather than addressing systemic issues. The concomitant rebranding of exploitative practices as “flexible” or “autonomous” work, are just a few examples of how the language of slowing has been commodified and stripped of any critical edge. Remember when everyone was super excited that Google’s corporate offices had pingpong tables? But then you realise no one could use them because they were so over worked? Nah, but notions of “happy work environments” are so frequently propagandist that the grim reality of forced return to office mandates, ever increasing despotism and micromanagement, and psychological torture carried out on behalf of the CEO are just the status quo –at least in most universities, and the Go8 with a pool table and game room for the professional staff that’s only gathered dust since the VC did the photoshoot in there shows that these glossy addons add one thing: propagandist dust –not lived realities.

We must confront the uncomfortable truth that the slow academia movement, which in its current form, often reflects and reinforces existing privilege structures within the academy. It’s lovely to suggest taking it slow, publishing where there’s a community impact, engaging with students in more meaningful modes, and so on –but the institutional rules do not reflect

this. For instance, my institution does not recognise publications in platinum OA journals, rather if it's not in Scopus, it's not an academic output –and there's no pathway for retort. The ability to “slow down” requires job security, financial stability, and flexible KPIs not available to many academics, particularly precarious workers, early-career researchers and those from marginalised backgrounds [2].

Moreover, scholars facing intersectional challenges are doubly, triply exploited and often end up picking up the slow, or rather, slack of the tenured professor, thus the luxury of resisting productivity pressures is a bourgeois and race/gender/ability/class-gap exacerbating relation – not a distributed socialist reality. The movement has been rightfully critiqued for centring the experiences of white, Western, tenured academics, inadvertently reinforcing the very power structures it seeks to challenge [3].

To truly transform academia and resist the deeply corrosive effects of capitalism on scholarly life, the slow academia movement must evolve an intersectional, socially reproductive, and/or class consciousness. This means advocating for structural changes to academic employment and funding models, centring the voices and experiences of marginalised scholars, and recognising how “slowness” as a bourgeois construct amplifies extant vulnerabilities, oppression, and practices which the academy exploits with glee. While, of course, not all “slow” scholars can be tarred with a bourgeois brush, the majority of bourgeois older white men who colonise and tumefy all over academia's spaces gleefully adopt a “slow” moniker as they put their feet up on the backs of black women, and so on. Rather than allowing yet another progressive, activist, practice to become colonised by the hegemon, we need to find systemic solutions to overcome overwork, micromanagement, manipulation, psychological torture and stress in academia, reimagining “slow,” perhaps, not just as a personal practice but as a radical critique of capitalist values in higher education.

Short thoughts for a *fast day*,

Aidan.

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1. Berg, M., & Seeber, B. K. (2016). The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy. University of Toronto Press.
 2. Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., ... Curran, W. (2015). For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14(4), 1235-1259. <https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v14i4.1058>
 3. Martell, L. (2014). The Slow University: Inequality, Power and Alternatives. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-15.3.2223>