

Putting Time at the Heart of Political Ecology

Article by Robert Magowan

April 10, 2020

To curtail the spread of Covid-19, much of the world's movement has come to a halt and many lives have moved online in an enforced break with a long period in which the pace of life was growing faster. In Britain, with its deregulated, flexible labour market and on-demand service economy, time accelerated more than elsewhere in recent decades, with grave consequence for health, inequality, and the environment. In this essay, Robert Magowan considers the social costs of hectic lives and traces the new politics pushing back. Though proposals such as the four-day week struggled in 2019, changing our relationships with time and work remains a key task for progressive forces everywhere.

In his book *The Great Acceleration*, Robert Colville argues that the world is getting faster, faster. He painstakingly details the incursion of raw, unmitigated speed, and the evidence of its impact on the seemingly innate rhythms of life. Between the 1990s and 2006, for example, the walking pace of inhabitants of the world's largest cities increased by 10 per cent. A third of UK workers say they work at a "very high speed" all or almost all the time, up from 17 per cent in 1992. The "productivity puzzle" occupying economists in the UK and across Europe belies the fact that output per worker hour has more than doubled across the continent since the 1970s.

Leisure itself has not escaped this encroachment into time and pace. If the UK population's billions of hours spent on digital platforms were reframed as labour (in aid of advertising-ready data accumulation), they would amount to the country's sixth biggest export. (All that just to feel "hurried and alone".) Lightning-fast home delivery services no longer aim simply to expand choice and reduce prices but, as Samantha Subramanian writes, to "continually compress time". News, shopping, journalism, relationships, entertainment, politics: all of it is increasingly available or occurring at breakneck speed. Even sleep – the "uncompromising interruption" to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism, as Jonathan Crary writes – is under attack, at both ends of the candle. Children and teenagers are sleeping on average over an hour less than a century ago across Europe, Asia, and the US.

The most strident response to this comes from the "New Optimists", a mostly male and right-wing lobby which emerged from the apparently overly gloomy 2010s armed with upbeat statistics on health and history. Characters such as Johan Norberg, author of *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*, describe a collective failure to recognise that the quality of life today is significantly better than the past, a result he puts down to a diet of bad news and misplaced nostalgia. Colville himself writes that a "cult of speed marched out of Silicon Valley" to become the "defining feature of our society" – but concludes, eventually, that it "will make all our lives better". Unsurprisingly, given the New Optimists' heritage (Norberg is a fellow of the free-market Cato Institute, and Colville is Director of the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies), they defend the technological innovations of consumer capitalism as our exciting version of the 20th Century's "engines of liberation" production line. As the Big Swinging Brains driving what Andrew Marantz calls our "clickbait death spiral" articulate at its wanton crudest, they exist because we want them to.

Speeding towards a cliff

In ecological terms, it is hard to see the innovations of the 21st Century as anything but engines of destruction. A few years ago, a relative living in New York told me how he realised he'd forgotten his headphones at work. He simply ordered a new pair; they were with him by lunchtime. It seemed at the time a disturbing reification of the idea that immediate, cheap and supply chain-less delivery can obscure the reality that anything is being created at all. But it seemed also a novelty well-suited to the City That Never Sleeps. Now though, an astounding half of all American households subscribe to Amazon Prime. The company's carbon footprint exceeds that of Denmark. Van miles in the UK have risen by 56 per cent since 2000. The emissions of data centres now rival that of aviation, because – same as it ever was – the rapidity of demand growth has gobbled up energy efficiency savings, and then some.

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Part of this lies simply in the scale of cities and their global growth. But the original Colville-cited study on walking pace found that a city's "personality" mattered beyond population. The more advanced and industrialised the economy, and the more individualistic the culture, the faster the speed of life. But such personalities – and the lifestyles they deliver – are not necessarily established by a cognisant shift in collective mindset, or even by any real democratic consensus. This is the juncture where economics meets the soul. The power of the modern phenomenon of the "econocracy" lies in its ability to entrench thick strains of essentially political and philosophical thought far beyond the reaches of the population it governs.

Take time-as-resource logic, for example. Over half of the "total user benefits" of the UK's High Speed Rail 2 (HS2) boondoggle, a planned train line connecting London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds whose projected costs have doubled to over 100 billion pounds, are to come from reductions in travel time. Cost-benefit analysis on the whole is as riddled with absurdities as the rest of neoclassical welfare economics. But the one undertaken for HS2 occupies a special place. First, the calculation accounts only for business travellers, even though they will form only one fifth of HS2 users. Further, it assumes that travel time, in contrast to work time, is of no value whatsoever. This is preposterously at odds with the hard-nosed economic basis for the analysis: work can, of course, take place on the train. But to go further, so can rest. So can the latent joy of idleness. So can – god forbid – the subtle luxury of boredom. The economic benefits of HS2 are determined (or wildly overestimated) on the basis of a quite radical and instinctively nonsensical phenomenological judgement of the value of time.

There is evidence that this obsession with speed and time has infected the ecological personality of the household as well. Sociologist and economist Juliet Schor describes two mechanisms by which work hours, and the time-culture that surrounds them, drive ecological footprints. The scale effect operates linearly through growth. Work generates output, income and consumption, causing resource depletion and emissions. The compositional effect relates to the changing use of leisure time caused by working more. The causal pathways hypothesised for the latter are multiple, but they revolve around what Schor identified as perhaps the most important and instantly recognisable characteristic of modern industrial life: the "work and spend cycle". It only takes a little interrogation of the social formation of our preferences (something the aforementioned economic orthodoxy criminally absolves itself of) to see how the force of this phenomenon exerts itself.

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One pathway is through the powerful social status of labour and its fruits. Humans are positional beings, as all advertisers know, and income is a positional good – much more so in fact than leisure. It is not easy to work and consume out of step with peers when one’s culture is defined by both. Another pathway is that carbon “soft” activities– convivial ones like sport, contemplative ones like art, and the softest of all, sleep – tend to be time-consuming. Long hours and overwhelmed minds deny access to these well-worn routes to wellbeing. Finally, “production time” implies an equivalent “enjoyment time”, as Mario Cogoy theorises. Especially where jobs are inane, non-instrumental, or just plain bullshit, they instead generate a desire for “compensation” through more intense, high-carbon leisure: short-lived thrills and spills such as weekends away. (That high income is clearly an enabling factor here hints at a tension between blanket working-time reduction policies which do not also redistribute wealth away from reckless consumption.) A growing body of evidence emerging in the field of ecological economics demonstrates this link between high work-hour societies and households on the one hand, and carbon emissions and ecological degradation on the other, with the most recent study estimating a 0.3 per cent reduction in emissions for every 1 per cent reduction in work hours.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the greatest abyss in New Optimist thinking is between their vision of progress and ecology. The idea that infallible preferences are behind this rapid deterioration is one that cannot logically survive visible humanitarian crises. Some, like Colvile, seek bravely to bridge the gap with accelerationist solutions, but crumble quickly into a dystopia of geoengineering, artificial trees, and “pig cities” – almost all of it to be driven, of course, by the creative destruction of Silicon Valley. Others, such as Matt (Viscount) Ridley, author of *The Rational Optimist*, former hereditary chair of Northern Bank and a leading light of British climate denial, take the blithe optimism inherent in their ethos to its logical conclusion and reject the very science to which they claim to adhere.

More surprising is how little they have to offer to the undeniable losers of this regime’s social pathology. “What we need most is not to slow things down,” argues Colvile, “but to develop the strategies to cope.” Never mind that we should be “coping” with that which we supposedly bring upon ourselves. The contradictory maxim seems to be that technology will save us, just as we will master it. A little grit and sanguinity and human resilience can get a handle on this confused and constant competition for attention, the “contested present” described by *McMindfulness* author Ronald E Purser. But what of the recipients of the 71 million antidepressant prescriptions dispensed in the UK in 2019 (more than double that of 2006)? What of the third of UK adults who report feeling too tired from work to enjoy the things they would like to do at home (more than any other European country except Greece)? What of the 85 per cent of the population who cannot (or will not) indulge in the high-carbon escapism of frequent flyers, who take 70 per cent of UK flights? And what of the temporal injustice of the single mother who has, on average, access to 20 hours less discretionary time per week than her “DINK” (dual income no kid) sisters? The onus to cope better falls heaviest on those with the least capacity to do so.

The politics of time and ecology

If we have demonstrated the importance of an ecological appreciation of time, then what political ecology demands is contextualisation – and contestation – in the face of power. Here the British have historical form, from the eight-hour day movement to Bertrand Russell’s praise for idleness. Following stagnation in the long-term decline of work hours, the last decade in the UK saw the return of this emancipatory, transgressive politics of time. Emerging first from the post-growth and degrowth literature of Schor and Tim Jackson, the New Economics Foundation think tank published a trailblazing report on the subject in 2010, “21 hours”. It called for a break in the cycle of a modern hyper-capitalist model that locks-in pressure to “live to work, work to earn, and earn to consume”.

The Green Party added the four-day week to its existing support for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) in 2017, and the Trades Union Congress followed suit in 2019. A new think tank, *Autonomy*, was established in 2017 as a hub for both the diagnoses of the crisis of work and ideas for what comes after it. It collaborated with the New

Economics Foundation to create 4DayWeek, a campaign pushing the multiple dividend potential of working time reduction: mental and physical health, democratic participation, justice (in the distribution of leisure time), gender equality (in the distribution of home and care work), and even productivity.

The significance of this final argument – made explicitly by the New Economics Foundation in its 2019 Time for Demand report – is that it marked a substantial shying away from the degrowth case for working time reduction. To increase labour productivity and hourly wages under a four-day week is to maintain aggregate production and consumption, cancelling Schor’s scale effect. To the “new left” economists seen as the ideological architects of the Labour party’s policy development following the ascendancy of Jeremy Corbyn, “a politics of degrowth has not yet been invented that will carry the public.”

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Nevertheless, a policy for working time reduction made it to the Labour party conference floor and into the party’s 2019 manifesto: a reduction in average working hours from 42 (one of the longest in Europe) to 32. It would take place over a decade and “with no loss in pay”. However, as Autonomy director Will Stronge describes, the policy floundered. Without inclusion in manifesto costings and the star treatment afforded to free broadband and the National Health Service, “it was seen as an exciting idea ... then left out in the wind.” Worse, under pressure from a sceptical press and hysterical public sector costings (produced by none other than Colvile’s Centre for Policy Studies!), key Labour figures failed to defend the concept. Shadow Health Secretary Jon Ashworth, for example, effectively denied that NHS staff would be included at all.

In the wake of Labour’s crushing defeat, the attention of the British left has turned to extra-electoral activity, the community building and activism that can speak to the practical concerns of the voters it lost to the Conservatives in 2019. But there can be few greater factors defining the material existence of modern British life, and no better lens through which to present an alternative vision of prosperity, than the unending, unsolicited encroachment and speeding up of time. Just as the challenge to globalisation’s “placeless places” must account for and invest in leisure as well as work, so should the politics of timeless times. Otherwise, to paraphrase futurist Arthur C Clarke’s prediction at its grimmest, the whole world will shrink to a point. To present seeming luxuries like convivial infrastructure, social ageing and “unproductive” time use in an age of discord might appear indecent. But as the intimate relationship between time, speed, consumption and ecology demonstrates, it is precisely this discord that makes their presentation necessary. “All utopias,” as Stronge argues, “pivot off a crisis.”

Political movements in the coming months and years may seek to jettison these utopias in the name of incrementalism and pretensions of realism. But policies of parties across the European green-left show practical steps are possible, and through them a delicate road to ambition is visible. The “Right to Disconnect” introduced by France, Spain, and Italy is meagre in scope, but at least a symbol of intent, one which looks set to become a basic standard as Ireland, Belgium, and Malta consider following suit. Austria’s freizeitoption, won via sector-by-sector collective bargaining, allows employees to opt for additional leisure time instead of a wage increase. Its environmental potential is powerful but low uptake is a reminder there is no silver bullet for the work and spend cycle. If the world leaders of Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark have demonstrated anything however, it is that work and leisure policies can boast of network effects of their own, edging hours ever lower and the capacity and

desire for further agitation ever higher. Deteriorating circumstances mean these can be framed not as progressive niceties but social and ecological imperatives. This is, perhaps, not degrowth in name, but the early days (as Danny Dorling now seductively suggests), of degrowth in practice. The profound but subtle empowerment of low-hours, livelihood-focused cultures, and their multiple-dividend potential presents a golden opportunity for ecological politics, widely accepted as necessary, to suddenly become urgent, sensible and attractive all at once.

None of this constitutes a rejection of the enabling capacity of technology, nor the directing of it towards “slow” and unpopular targets, such as the lingering tedium of menial work. But it is to refuse, as *Social Acceleration* author Hartmut Rosa does, to limit the “horizon of possibility” that technology expands to a selection of “optimistic” dystopias, unruffled by oncoming crises and accelerating chaotically off a cliff. If there is any nostalgia in the rejection of these visions, it is not some misplaced adulation of the past. Today’s boisterous (and rational) pessimists are too young for that. Rather it is the nostalgia for a future that has been gravely mis-sold. Time is the lodestar for a political ecology that can retake that future.

Post-script

“All utopias pivot off a crisis,” said Stronge. In the month since writing this article, COVID-19 has shown the true meaning of that word. A line of paradigmatic dominoes is falling as nations at the epicentres of the pandemic are forced to reckon with a threat more visceral and immediate than inequality or ecological breakdown ever managed to pose.

Where is the Goddess of getting-on, as John Ruskin called it, amid this great pause? Early wobble from the UK aside, the chorus for a response that elevates public health above economic growth has been remarkably united. That itself is a tacit and embarrassing testament to the public’s disrespect for capitalism’s talisman. But almost overnight in Europe, the closing down of discursive space to question government shutdowns, and the value judgements implicit in them, marks a rare and telling concession: one of capital to life.

The backlash is already arriving, exacerbated by governments that do not or cannot continue acting in solidarity with the majority of their population. But the sudden upending of that defining factor of material existence – time and speed – has the potential to anchor and arouse change in the long-run.

Millions are already working from home, consistently, for the first time. Much of the continent is also activating reduced-hours schemes, while almost half of UK companies expect to take advantage of the government’s pledge to pay 80 per cent of wages (up to 2500 pounds per month) by furloughing half their staff. At its simplest, this will surely instil in home-workers an unprecedented antipathy towards unnecessary commuting as employers scramble to “level-up” the practice. More uncertain is the distinct antagonisms with worktime possible in the furloughed and work-light (who will see society’s essentials met without them) and the newly unemployed or precarious (who may see the economy’s needs met but not theirs). Either way, time-consuming, carbon-soft leisure is the order of the day, its positional value soaring as families and friends try to be more than “alone together”. Meanwhile the model of speed, accumulation, and hyper-mobility that high-income emitters instinctively defend is being held up to the harsh light of necessity and disoriented conceptions of wellbeing. Such mindset changes take place in individuals and households. But it must be conceived as a political act, with the capacity to engender sentiments of egalitarianism and redistribution just as the alternative of maladaptation can engender blame-shifting and self-enhancement.

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A further challenge is to the dogma of productivity. Much has been made of the shameful pay devoted to the workers who have emerged as the most impossible to do without: nurses, teachers, carers, couriers, cleaners, shelf-stackers, vegetable-pickers, and so on. But many of these professions are also the most feverishly overworked. Economists fetishising productivity see them as but a bane of Baumol's cost disease, doomed to grow in cost while the rest of the economy innovates itself away from labour. And yet here they are – no faster than before but never more barefacedly essential. In the months to come, a key test of any green stimulus is whether it not only forces the salaries and numbers in these roles up (as a bulwark to widespread unemployment as well as a pillar of social infrastructure), but also their workloads and hours down.

“We will not fight climate change with a virus,” said UN General Secretary António Guterres. This is a line to hold to as seeming opportunities abound in the heat of this pandemic and its fallout. What surrounds instead are lessons, and few more important than this: if we can stop when we need to, we can slow down when we want to. Learn that, and the recovery from this crisis won't run us headlong into the next one.



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Published April 10, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/putting-time-at-the-heart-of-political-ecology/>

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