The Culture of Speed
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The Coming of Immediacy

John Tomlinson
For Xian Tao
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Andrew Marvell *To His Coy Mistress*
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Introduction: The Cultural Significance of Speed

Sociological observations in the mouths of princes are events rare enough to attract notice. So when Charles, Prince of Wales, heir apparent to the British throne, spoke on the BBC of the need for, ‘a gentler, calmer approach to life in a world which has become frenetic’ he was widely reported. ‘[T]he aim seems to be to go ever faster, but’, mused Charles, ‘I often wonder, how much faster can we all go?’

This is a commonplace observation of people at a certain stage in the life course and so might be passed over as simply wistful retrospection; as the tendency for people to experience the world they live in as swifter paced, more pressured, than that of their youth, or of the world described to them by their parents. ‘Où sont les neiges d’antan?’ The Prince’s remarks are, of course, subjective and impressionistic and, no doubt, in part nostalgic – for as Richard Sennett wisely says, ‘what sensitive soul isn’t?’. But there is more to it. Charles is known for statements on a range of issues, from organic farming to architecture, which express a rather complicated – and by no means platitudinous – shade of cultural conservatism. His comments on the pace of life, then, inevitably constitute an intervention in cultural politics. They give the imprimatur to a current of thought that not only regrets the demise of a world we have lost, but wants to change the one we have.

This is a current of thought that has been present in modern industrial societies since their inception, and which gained perhaps its strongest organized form, in the shape of the ‘slow movement’, around the turn of the present century. But in all this time it has been a minority position. Though many people routinely complain about the pace of life, and though some try to organize against it, this has never, thus far, translated into a positive social philosophy potent enough to displace speed from its central position in the cultural imagination. Acceleration rather than deceleration has been the constant leitmotiv of cultural modernity.

This book explores the different ways in which speed has preoccupied the cultural imagination of modern societies, and the way in which this imagination has shifted decisively in recent years. In doing this it takes seriously the claim implicit in Charles’s intervention, that the sense of living ‘a faster life’ is not a sort of anthropological constant of generational succession, but a contingent state of affairs: a genuine and significant shift in temporality that occurs and accelerates specifically in modern societies.