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The Inertia Movement

by

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Sub-theme 17: Organizing Slow Answer(s)

Four slows

The fast/slow distinction in the call for papers reminds us of the contrast Lévi-Strauss ([1962] 1966) made between 'hot' and 'cold' societies. For him and for many others, the Western, European-American worlds are characteristically 'hot', in that they valorise 'progress' and radical change. In such societies, technology is celebrated as a primary motor of progress and change; it is the 'fuel' that keeps the 'hot' society motoring. In contrast, so-called 'primitive' societies are 'cold', being steeped in a mythic mode of thinking that suppresses time, creating an unwillingness to change long-standing traditions. This hot-cold distinction provides us with a frame for

unpacking slowness. We use it to identify four separate but related understandings of slowness which we will explore in the paper: rejection, antidote, symptomatic and deconstruction of the hot.

First, slow can be understood as a *rejection of the hot*. Slow, in this sense, is a repudiation of modernity's valorisation of progress, it's optimistic take on change, and its celebration of technology. Slow, then, is a return to older ways, and usually revolves around re-instituting a romanticised vision of traditional, 'colder' societies. Simply put, if hot is bad and cold is good, then slowness will make us 'colder' and thus better. We see this form of slowness in, for example, the exaltation and restoration of traditional farming practices, and in neo-luddite and technophobia communities that reject modernity and new technology. Within this paradigm, slowness represents a hostility to modernity, which is always understood negatively. The intellectual tradition feeding this perspective includes Thoreau's *Walden* (1854/2007), the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973), and Ivan Illich's critiques of western medicine and schooling (Illich, 1971; 1976).

Second, one can understand slowness as an *antidote to the hot*. More precisely, slowness is a way of tempering the excesses of modernity, rather than a rejection of, modernity *per se*. While various forms of slowness are advocated, this is done through judiciously integrating slowness *within* modernity, which is still understood positively. In this respect, the emergence of 'slowness' as a philosophy of living in the contemporary world might be interpreted as a 'cooling down' of modernity, or as an antidote of sorts to the gushing world of postmodernity, liquid modernity, hyper-modernity, hyper-consumerism, reflexive modernity and the like. Thus, slowness as antidote seeks to mitigate the collateral damage caused by a high-speed society. Typical of this position is Honoré's *In Praise of Slowness*, which, while praising slowness, is far from antagonistic to modernity as the author clarifies in this early statement: "Before we go any further, let's make one thing clear: this book is not a declaration of war against speed. Speed has helped to remake our world in ways that are wonderful and liberating. Who wants to live without the Internet or jet travel?" (Honoré, 2004: 4).

A third take on slowness is that it is *symptomatic of the hot*. If hyper-modernity is about radical and rapid change, then a quick deceleration from

very fast to very slow is about as rapid and as radical a change as one can get. Thus, we can expect a book called *Slower* to be published in the near future - coming to an outlet near you, right now! - as an alternative to Gleick's best-selling *Faster* (1999). And if, as Lipovetsky (2006) argues, fashion has replaced metaphysics, then 'slow' is perhaps best understood as just the latest fashion. If individual consumers want to consume slowly (or slowness), well then the usual marketing machinery can be mobilised to effect this, just as with any fashion item. Indeed, teaching cases on the marketing of slow food are probably already in development (and if they aren't, they will be, soon!).

The fourth perspective on slowness, and this is the perspective that we will most develop in our full paper, is that the slow modus best represents the *deconstruction of the hot*. In our first three modes, the slow rhetoric takes as a given that the contemporary western world is speeding up, and it is this empirical reality that provides the foundation for both the rhetoric of slowness and particular 'slow' practices (e.g. slow food, medicine and the like). In other words, slow is a derivative and hence secondary concept that both pits itself against and feeds off the hegemony of speed. Slow, then, can have no existence without fast, which, of necessity, is depicted as primary. However, another approach - our fourth slow - is to recognise that the slow modus is symptomatic, not of the hot, but of an *attack* on the assumption that contemporary modernity is liquid, hyper hot, and moving faster than ever before. In other words, slow is a manifestation of what we refer to as an *inertia movement*. What is curious about the empirical movement to inertia is that it is paradoxically coincidental with gushing talk about speed and velocity. Thus, we refer to this phenomenon as *accelerating to inertia*, which we will explore in the latter part of the paper.

Accelerating to Inertia

But let's slow down a bit first, since talk about speed, rapid change, and acceleration can lead us to forget how problematic these terms can be. Two issues complicate any analysis of change and related concepts such as 'fast' or 'slow'. First, there is the ontological question of whether change is a derivative or primary phenomenon. While the commonsensical view is that

entities exist and change over time (and we can somehow measure this change and label it as 'fast' or 'slow') an alternative perspective is that change is primordial and that 'entities' are nothing but our (conceited) attempt to mark rather arbitrary boundaries in a world of flux. This latter approach goes back at least as far as Heraclitus (540 - 480 BC) who made the well-known observation that one cannot step in the same river twice and that "nothing endures but change". A second issue is epistemological, and is concerned with how we can know that the world is changing at a 'fast' or 'slow' pace. What could these terms mean, since measures of speed (and slowness) necessarily have relative rather than absolute meaning? Quite clearly, what is 'radical' or 'rapid' change for one person may be inconsequential for another. Most of the talk about change ignores these ontological and epistemological issues and considers change as an objective rather than subjective phenomenon. We talk about economic change, social change, technological change as objective, independent phenomena and gloss over the reality that each individual experiences change in a profoundly personal way. And once 'change' is detached from subjective experience it floats off into its own independent existence where, ironically, it is invariant. A third issue relates to the difference between actual change and *talk* about change, or the difference between the reality and rhetoric of change. If we accept Thomas's theorem -- "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Janowitz, 1966: 301) -- then, by extension, if we all say that our current world is rapidly changing then it *is* rapidly changing. The rhetoric becomes the reality. But while we recognise the power of Thomas's theorem, we argue that it doesn't necessarily have to be so (it's a theorem, not a fact). Specifically, in relation to talk about speed, we assert that there is now a quite massive disconnect between the reality and the rhetoric, between the walk and the talk. In the remainder of the paper we will develop our thesis, arguing that the talk about change (the rhetoric) is accelerating, but that the reality is that, relative to previous eras, our time is one of relative stasis (or inertia). To make this argument means that we are perhaps falling into the ontological and epistemological traps we have already identified, and maybe such traps are unavoidable. To address the issue somewhat, we circumscribe our argument by stressing that we are broadly speaking about those living in the

developed western world, most specifically the United States of America. And of course, even in this region we recognize that the empirical reality of particular places and individuals will be at variance with our overall thesis.

Let us begin with the talk. There is no shortage of proclamations about how things are changing rapidly today -- faster than ever before (Kurzweil, 2001; 2005; Virilio, 2006). For example, Tom Peters, the uber-guru of management, has made a lucrative career out of publishing books with titles like *Re-imagine! Business excellence in a disruptive age* (2003), *Thriving on chaos* (1987), and *Liberation management: necessary disorganization for the nanosecond nineties* (1992), and producing quotable quotes like "We pursue preservation. But the old order is doomed. We value permanence. But "permanence" is the last refuge of those with shriveled imaginations. We practice change. But "change" is not enough. (Not nearly)" (Peters, 2003: 30). Bill Gates feeds in the same trough, as he peppers his book, *Business @ the Speed of Thought: Succeeding in the Digital Economy* (Gates, 2000), with sentences like the following: "If the 1980s were about quality and the 1990s were about reengineering, then the 2000s will be about velocity. About how quickly the nature of business will change." What is interesting about such claims is that, first, they tend to be made by those in positions of power; second, they are rarely supported by empirical evidence; and third, they skip over the epistemological issue of how one could possibly measure and compare social change across time and place. Everyone knows that the world is rapidly changing, so why the need for evidence?

We have collected some evidence, not about speed per se, but about *talk about speed*. To get a handle on this, we counted how often the words 'fast', 'speed', 'acceleration', 'rapid', and 'quick' (and variants of these words) were present in the citation and/or abstract of publications extracted in the ProQuest database (which includes ABI/Inform, Dissertations & Theses, and ProQuest Newspapers) since 1920. While this is an indiscriminate search, the prevalence of these words does indicate the extent to which speed is infused within the rhetoric of a particular time period. The solid bold line in Figure 1 shows a count of these words in the database in 5-year periods (the actual count is adjusted by multiplying the count of articles identified in each 5-year period by an adjustment factor, namely the ratio between the total

number of articles indexed in 2004-9 and the total number of articles indexed in the 5-year period). What this shows quite dramatically is how *talk* was relatively 'slow' from 1920 to 1975, but that talk became alarmingly 'fast' after 1975. One possible explanation for this shift is that it reflects changes over time in the type of publication that makes up the ProQuest database. For instance, trade publications accounted for only 5% to 12% of all publications in the database up to 1975, but this increased rapidly at that time, and since 1990 such publications account for over 40% of the database (see Figure 2). Moreover, these trade publications tend to engage in 'fast talk' much more than other media, as illustrated in Figure 3. However, even when these are excluded (see Figure 1), the major step change in the rhetoric is still evident during the 1970s and, importantly, the 'fast talk' has continued since then.

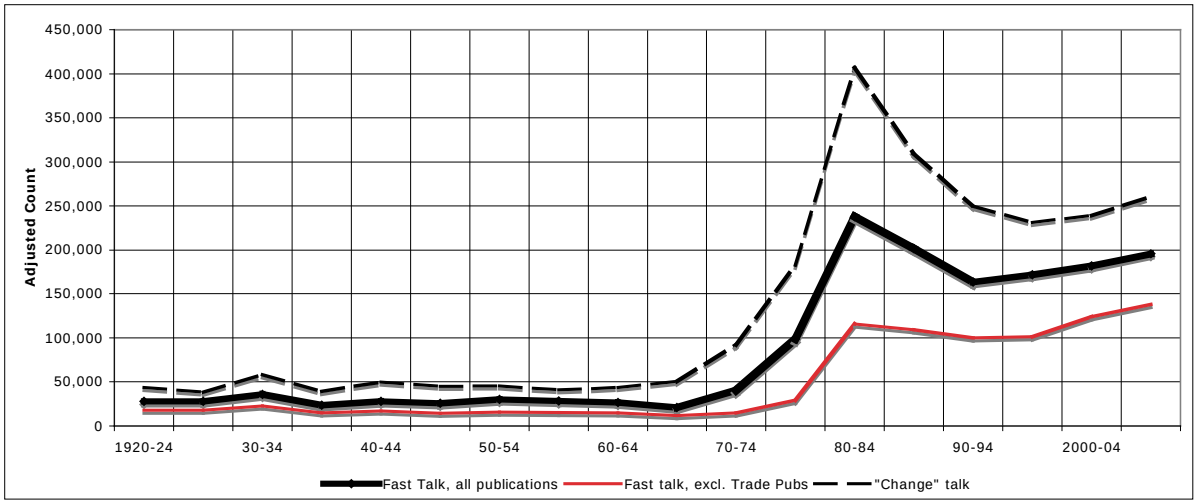


Figure 1. Fast Talk and Change Talk in the ProQuest Database

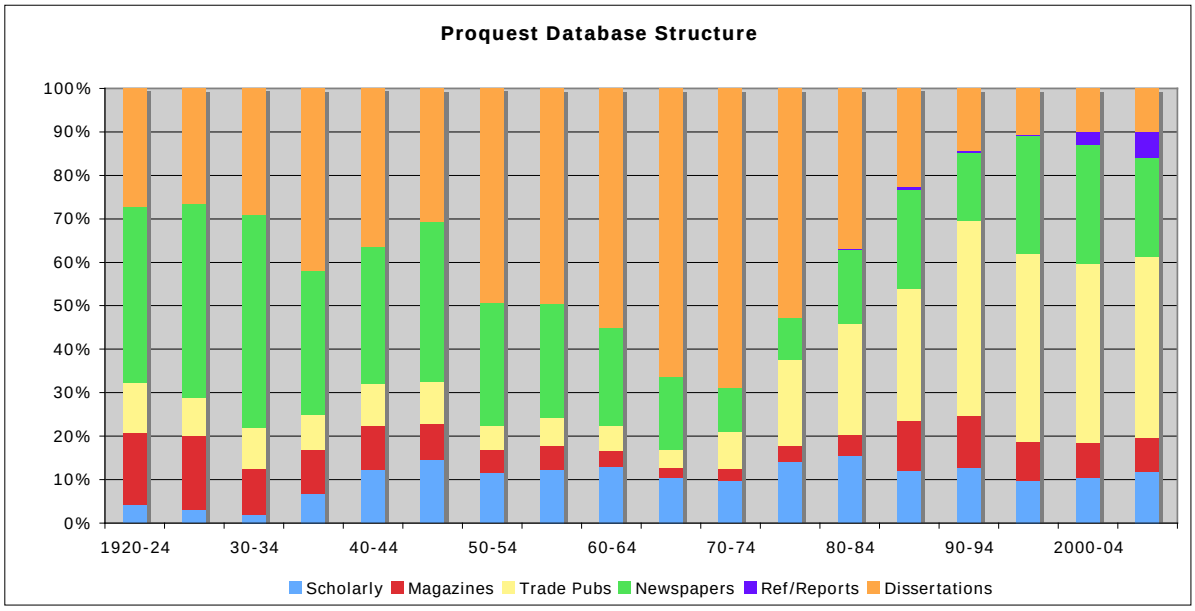


Figure 2. The changing structure of the ProQuest Database.

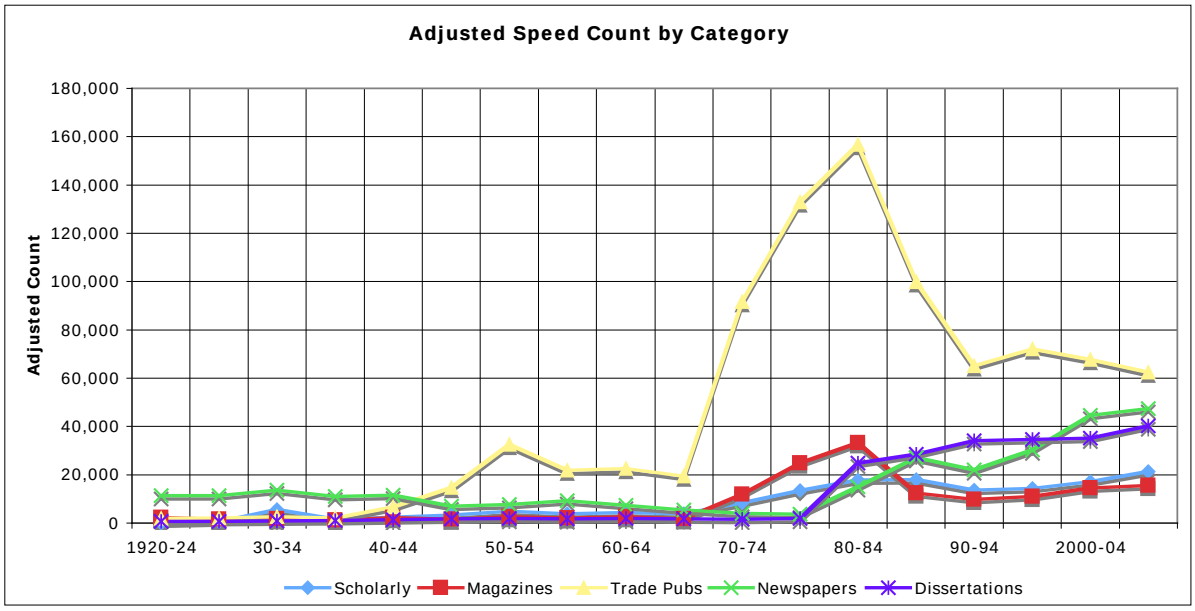


Figure 3. Fast Talk by media category.

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn wrote his classic study of scientific revolutions and he was the first to coin the term 'paradigm shift'. The popularisation of the phrase and Kuhn's book since the 1980s is perhaps symptomatic of the move to 'fast talk' in the last 30 years or so. The curious phenomenon is that while the phrase is now a grossly overused buzzword (Google found 2.2 million instances of the term in May 2010, while cnet has listed it as one of the top 10 buzzwords of the digital age -- http://www.cnet.com/1990-11136_1-6275610-1.html), Figure 1 does depict one clear instance of a paradigm shift.

It shows that a few years in the late 1970s marked a rapid transition from a 'slow' discourse, where fast talk was not prevalent, to a 'fast' discourse characterised by a high incidence of speedy language. What happened between 1975 and 1980 to account for this paradigm shift? A number of possible explanations warrant consideration. First, the step change may be linked to relatively steep rises in the US consumer price index during the 1970s (from 3.2% in 1972 to 11% in 1975 and from 6.5% in 1977 to 13.5% in 1980 (source US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics). That said, the US inflation rate during the last quarter of the twentieth century was unremarkable in the context of the inflation rate over the past 100 years (Figure 4) and indeed the relatively stable and low inflation rate since 1984 contrasts starkly with the very high levels of inflation and deflation that characterised the period from 1910 to 1960. Moreover, the speed rhetoric continued apace after 1984 even though this period had low and relatively stable inflation, which suggests that we should attribute the paradigm shift to the particular economic circumstances of the late 1970s.

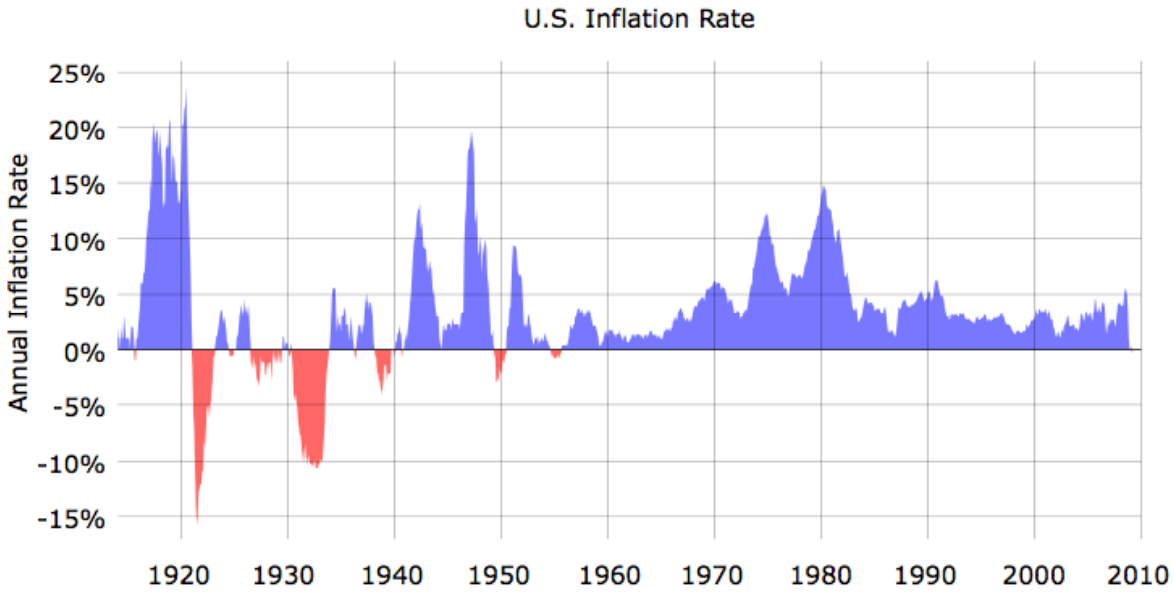


Figure 4. US Inflation Rate 1910-2010.

One potential link between inflation and change does, however, tie in with this dateline. In 1965, Ian Macleod coined the term *stagflation*, linking for the first time in populist rhetoric inflation and stagnation – previously held

theoretically distinct under prevailing Keynesian economic thought. The linking of the two, most notably promulgated by Friedman, swiftly became part of the Conservative and Republican economic orthodoxy, whether the solution was seen through supply-side theory or control of the money supply. Although inflation was not at historically surprising levels in the US, the connection with stagnation may arguably suggest that any diminution in inflation would also be seen as a move away from stagnation – hence acceleration!

However, if, as Karl Weick and others have argued, sense-making is a *retrospective* activity, then the surge in fast talk that occured around 1975 may be because rapid change has to be experienced before it could be made sense of, recognised, labeled, described and analysed. In other words, talk about rapid change probably reflects *prior* rather than contemporary experiences of the phenomenon. Hence, the changes of the 1960s and early 1970s may have only been articulated years or even decades later. Allied to this, it is clear that analysis of social, technological or economic change requires substantial comparative data across time, and that some temporal distance is required to see trends in social change and to dismiss outliers. More precisely, maybe there was significant discussion about 'change' in the 1960s, but written comment on the *rate* of that change -- which is reflected in our search for terms like 'speed', 'rapid', 'accelerate', 'quick' and 'fast' -- only developed subsequently. To investigate this we counted the number of documents with the words 'change', 'changes', or 'changed' in the ProQuest database, which produced the dashed line in Figure 1. What is notable about this is how similar the 'change' and the 'speed' graphs are, with the rise in the former only preceding the latter by a few years. Moreover, it seems that while many might now feel that Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are a-Changing* captured the spirit of the social and political upheaval of the 1960s, this sense of upheaval does not seem to have been reflected in the printed discourse of that time.

Technological advances provides another perspective on the issue. The impact of a new technology can only be properly recognised, described and analysed once the technology has become well established, if not ubiquitous, and there can be a long gap between the invention of a technology, its mass use, and analysis of its effect and impact. For instance, even though the

television was invented in 1923, it was 1970 before this technology had reached saturation level (in this year 95% of US households had a television and the US census stopped collecting this data). Likewise, even though the gasoline-powered automobile was invented in 1885 it took a century for this technology to saturate the market (as measured by the number of cars per capita, which rose from 0.08 in 1920 to a peak of 0.54 in 1980 dropping to 0.48 in 2000). Thus, maybe the paradigm shift in the late 1970s was because, while a myriad of new technologies were diffusing within the US during the first half of the twentieth century, it wasn't until then that the changes (partly) brought about by these technologies could be recognised and described. Perhaps.

In terms of the infusion of 'fast talk', it is hard to overstate the impact of the space programme, especially the Apollo programme that ran from 1961 to 1975, because it required such a sudden and public burst of technological creativity on a large scale, and because speed and acceleration were so central to the discourse of space travel. In addition, photographs of the Earth from space, especially the 'Blue Marble' photograph from 1972, presented a radically new image of our world as fragile and isolated, which at once inspired (or panicked into action) the environmental movement and advocates of greater technological change.

A full explanation for the paradigm shift that occured in the late 1970s would require a forensic analysis beyond the scope of this study, but it seems clear that a shift in the discourse did occur and has been maintained up to the present. In so far as the world is constituted through language, then our analysis of the ProQuest database suggests that the last quarter of the twentieth century *was* radically faster than the first 75 years. However, an alternative and more compelling explanation is that 'fast talk' became fashionable around 1975 and that this snowballed as commentators, academics, practitioners and Joe Soap jumped on a self-referencing and accelerating bandwagon. For example, in 1969 Neil Postman wrote his influential book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, in which he observed that "It is the thesis of this book that change -- constant, accelerating, ubiquitous -- is the most striking characteristic of the world we live in" (Postman and Weingartner, 1969: 13). It seems likely that this and similar comments of the

time colaesced, and, once a tipping point was reached, it became a 'social epidemic' (Gladwell, 2002). Tom Wolfe (1975) makes a similar observation in his acerbic study of fashion in the art world, where a small clique or *cénacles* can set a trend that, in turn, is taken up by the bohemian world, the art world, and ultimately *tout le monde*. The power of fashion and bandwagon effects is also recognised in the management literature (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993; Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001), as is their potential to create speculative bubbles, irrational exuberance, and groupthink. As Charles Mackay put it in his classic study of mass delusions, "Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one." (Mackay, 1841/2003: viii). Slowly indeed.

Figure 1 shows that the rhetoric of change and speed -- what we refer to as 'fast talk' -- has continued apace since about 1975, to the point where we can now interpret it as a 'fetish' (Grey, 2003). This is interesting because if the present is depicted as speeding faster than the recent past, and that was speeding faster than the more distant past, then we can talk not only about a rhetoric of speed, but a rhetoric of *acceleration* (as in ever increasing speed). Of course this is the rhetoric, which we see as quite some distance from the reality, to which we now turn.

Surprisingly, there is much evidence that, far from speeding up, the world is actually slowing down. Earlier we argued that change is experienced at the individual level and this brings a particular methodological orientation. One useful basis for data collection is the well-know Stress Scale developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967) which scores different life events in terms of the stress each event is likely to cause individuals, measured in 'life change units'. The top eight 'life events' on this scale are: (i) death of a spouse; (ii) divorce; (iii) marital separation; (iv) imprisonment; (v) death of a close family member; (vi) personal injury or loss; (vii) marriage; and (viii) dismissal from work. This suggests that we might usefully study data on death, divorce/marriage, crime, disease and unemployment to see how these have changed over the decades. Again, we will focus exclusively on the United States.

First, data on deaths -- and death of loved ones surely has a profound effect on how individuals perceive change in their lives -- indicates that the United States, which is routinely considered the 'hottest' place on the planet, is actually 'cooling down'. The fact is that the *rate* of annual population change in the United States changed much more dramatically from year to year -- reflecting the turmoil of the period -- in the first half than in the second half of the twentieth century. Over the century, the US population steadily increased, but what was different about the first 50 years was that there were quite dramatic shifts in the *speed* of this change, with the population dropping in some years while in other years there were very large increases. The hard evidence is that the standard deviation on the annual population change between 1901 and 1950 is over *three times* the standard deviation of the annual population change between 1951 and 2000. Put bluntly, the last fifty or sixty years haven't been ravaged by the wars and pestilence of the first half of the twentieth century. This is also reflected in the death rate in the US which showed a 38% drop in the first half of the 20th century and only a 10% drop in the second half, reflecting the dearth of 'breakthrough' medical research over the last sixty years, at least in contrast to earlier eras. And changes in the rate of suicide -- which, following Durkheim ([1897] 1970), we can take as a good surrogate measure of the rate of social change -- presents the same picture. While the average suicide rate in the US dropped from 13.3 to 11.4 per 100,000 population between the first and second half of the twentieth century, a more striking figure is that the standard deviation in the first half was *2.3 times* the standard deviation in the second half (reflecting high peaks in suicide rates from 1910 to 1920 and from 1933 to 1940).

Divorce and marital separation rank second and third after death of a spouse on the Holmes and Rahe stress scale, and, notwithstanding variations in legal contexts, data on divorce rates over time give another useful indicator of change, because divorce clearly has a profound individual and social effect. Figure 5 plots the divorce rate in the US since 1950, which shows that the divorce rate in that country has steadily *decreased* since 1980 (interestingly, the rise in the divorce rate during the 1970s was contemporaneous with the popularisation of 'change talk' as exhibited in Figure 1).

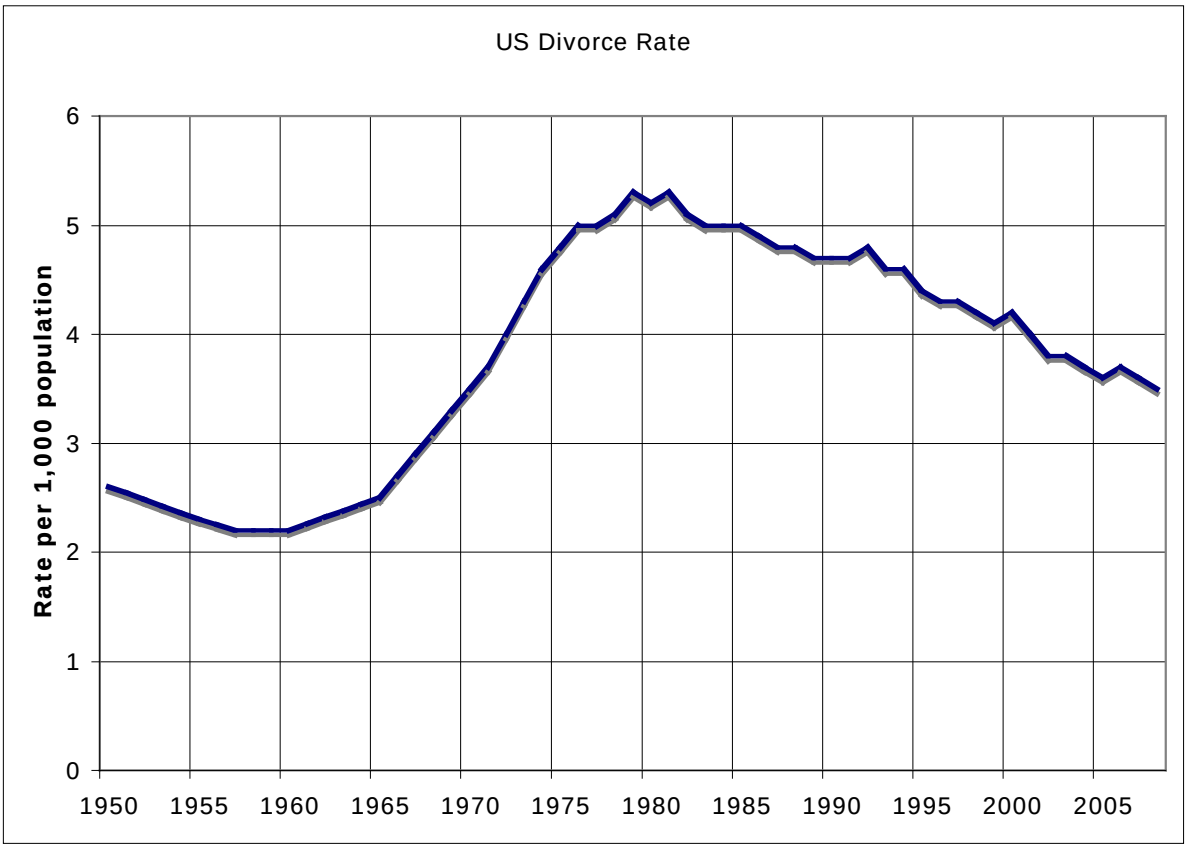


Figure 5. Divorce rates in the United States. Source: US Census data.

Marriage rates have also decreased over the last quarter century, but this has been largely offset by increasing levels of cohabitation (Bumpass et al., 1991). Moreover, the median age of marriage and the proportion ever marrying is now about the same as it was in the late 1800s, and in this context the high marriage rates of the 1950s are anomalous (Popenoe, 1993).

Imprisonment is listed as fourth on the Stress Scale, and here again the crime figures give no indication that the US is experiencing major or rapid change. Indeed, the violent crime, homicide rate, and property crime rate have dropped each year since 1991 and are now similar to rates in the mid 1970s (for violent crime) or the late 1960s (for homicide and property crime).

Personal injury or illness is also ranked as a significant life event. To represent this we have plotted (figure 6) the rate of notifiable diseases in the US over the last century, which shows that the present generation has enjoyed an extended period of rude good health, with no major disease threat comparable to the deadly diseases that were rampant in the first half of the twentieth century, .

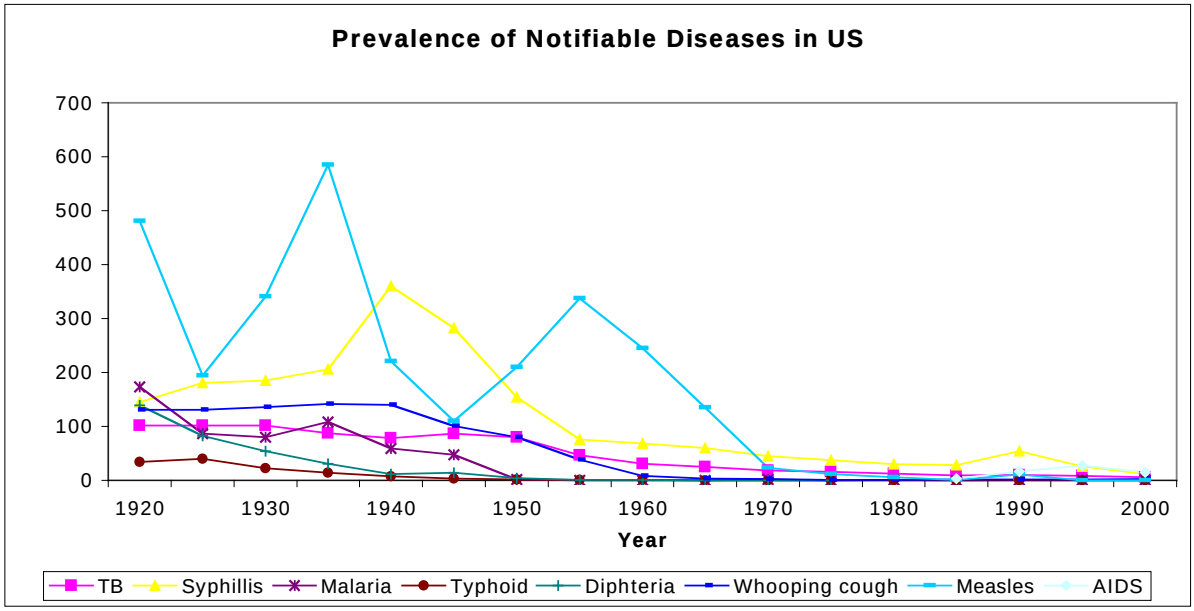


Figure 6. Prevalence of notifiable diseaseas in the US.

Finally, the eight life event on the Stress Scale is 'dismissal from work'. Figure 8 plots the unemployment rate since 1950 and again this indicates that recent decades are unremarkable.

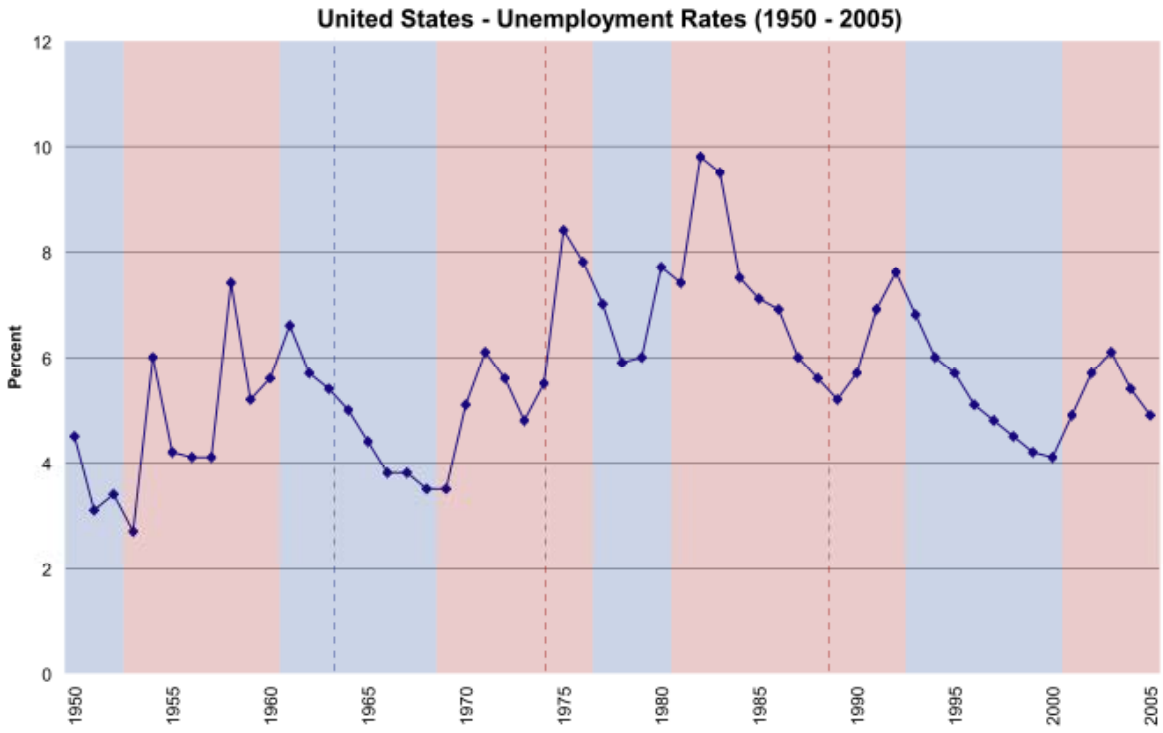


Figure 7. US Unemployment Rate (1950-2005)

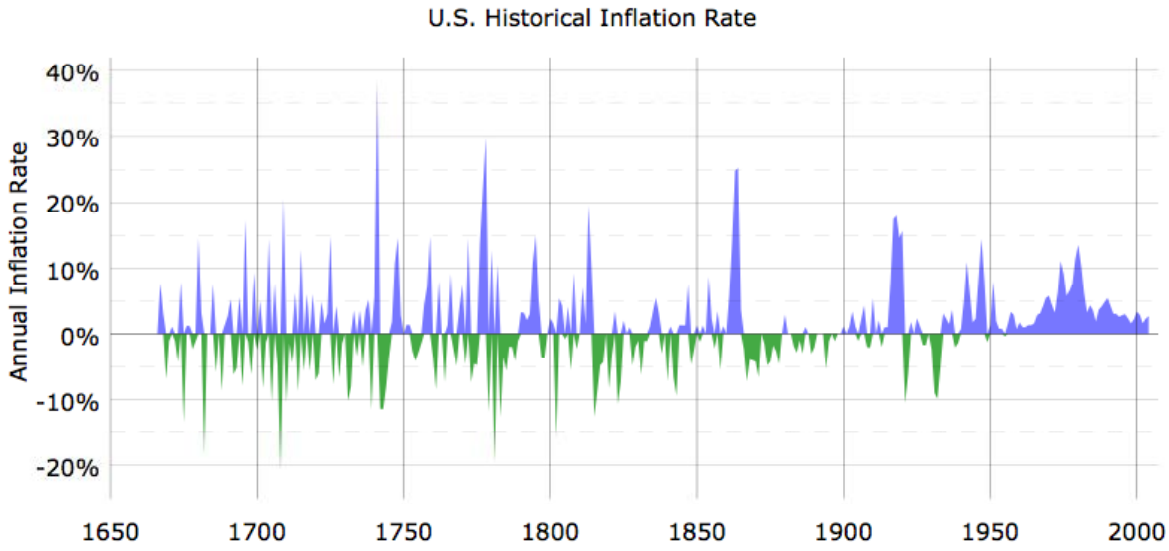


Figure 8. US Historical Inflation Rate

The inflation rate provides another indicator of economic turbulence, as we can reasonably assume that high levels of inflation (or deflation) or rapid shifts in the inflation rate reflect economic shocks experienced by individuals and corporations. Figure 8 plots the US inflation rate from 1666 to 2004, which shows that the highest inflation rate in the period 1950 to 2000 is less than the highest inflation rate in any previous half-century (since 1666) and that this period experienced no deflation, again in contrast to all previous half-centuries. These periods of high inflation and deflation reflect major traumatic change in the lived experiences of people. And these experiences were certainly turbulent in the hundred years from 1850 to 1950 which witnessed mass production and consumption, the development and crash of the stock market, the Long Depression (1873-39), the Great Depression (1929-1939), massive industrial change and restructuring, the communist experiment, the Holocaust, and more 'isms' than you could shake a cat at. Even the apparently relatively stable period of 1950-75, from the perspective of our current presumption, witnessed, among other things, the space race, the arms race, the Cold War, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the feminist and civil rights movements. While there has certainly been important economic and political change in recent decades, it is implausible to suggest that these changes are either more rapid or more profound than those experienced in other periods. Even phenomena that are routinely depicted as unique to and

definitive of the last few decades are, on examination, better understood as reworkings of old logics. For instance, Hirst and Thompson (1996) have presented detailed evidence that 'globalization' is a 'necessary myth' and is neither unprecedented nor fundamentally altering the logic of international commerce. And when it comes to banking and economic crises, this time is certainly *not* different, as Reinhart and Rogoff (2009) have compelling demonstrated in their comprehensive historical study of such crises.

One phenomenon missing from the Stress Scale is the effect of new technologies on one's life, which is important because much of the talk about speed and change is implicitly or explicitly linked to the purported rapid pace of technological change. However, much of this talk is maybe best understood as an institutionalised discourse that is founded on the reality of major technological change of *earlier* periods. Contemporary innovations like the iPhone, digital video and the Internet are important, but, in a historical context, it is hard to see them as more important than the invention of the telephone, movies or the electric motor. Indeed the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the unprecendented diffusion of a large number of major inventions that originated in the late 1800s. For instance, the following were invented or discovered between 1869 and 1909 but it usually took many decades for their impact to be felt: the first transcontinental railroad (1869), polyvinylchloride (PVC) (1872), the telephone (1876), the phonograph (1877), the light bulb (1879), the cholera vaccine (1880), the first electric power station (1882), the motorcycle (1885), the gasoline-powered automobile (1885), radio waves (1888), pneumatic tyre (1888), the punch-card computer (1889), photographic film (1889), x-rays (1895), wireless telegraphy (1895), A/C current (1895), radioactivity (1896), air conditioning (1902), the airplane (1903), the vacuum tube diode (1904), the electron (1904), helicopter (1907), and the Model T automobile (1908). What is passing for significant change today is not particularly novel and indeed many contemporary innovations were actually seeded by the Second Industrial Revolution, which is still playing itself out. Returning to Heraclitus, it is clear that change is, was and always will be a feature of the human condition and the cosmos. We need only think for a while about what life was like for those people who lived during the colonization of the Americas, the Reformation, the Renaissance, or the

(extended) fall of the Roman Empire. It is this historical context that compels us to posit the contrarian position that we live in a period of *relative* inertia. Moreover, just because previous generations lived through a period of rapid change, this is no guarantee that our society or future ones will do likewise, however much we might like to live in interesting times. In short, our world isn't particularly 'hot' or fast at all. It's just we talk as if it is.

To explain the enduring divergence between the rhetoric and the reality, we first return to the discussion of fashion that we briefly introduced earlier. And, in the spirit of slowness, we take a cool and leisurely stroll through contemporary readings to return to some of the original inspiration. We begin with Abrahamson's (1996) piece in the *Academy of Management Review*. After first attributing to Sapir (1937) the insight that 'fashions gratify competing psychological drives for individuality and novelty, on the one hand, and conformity and traditionalism, on the other' (Abrahamson, 1996: 271), he moves on to Simmel's (1957) 'more *sociological* explanation', which apparently 'suggests that fashions serve not only to reveal who is in fashion, but also to distinguish high-status from low-status individuals' … '*Proposition 6: New management fashions will tend to emerge when old management fashions have been adopted by lower reputation organizations*' (1996: 272, original italicisation). The writings of Georg Simmel are without doubt amongst the most subtle and insightful - and the most resistant to simple static interpretation - that one is ever likely to have the pleasure to read. They stand head and shoulders above those of the majority of not only his contemporaries but also his predecessors and successors. They are, quite simply, an enduring delight. It is somewhat discomfiting to find such a barren reading in what is one of the most widely cited articles on management fashion. And this is not unique to Abrahamson, of course.

Simmel's reflections on the *process* of fashion were first published in 1904 and in 16 pages of text, without a single full reference, remain as close as one is ever likely to get to the last word on a subject. Simmel shows the ways in which distinction and indistinction are always co-implicated as they act as each other's motors and brakes. Simmel situates fashion in the broadest possible terms, beginning, as in much of his work, with an articulation of an unceasing, de-centred, dialectic to apprehend our (social)

world of 'two antagonistic forces, tendencies, or characteristics, either of which, if left unaffected, would approach infinity' (1904/1971: 130). Such apprehension is essential for Simmel if we are to fully realise our potential:

Human life cannot hope to develop a wealth of inexhaustible possibilities until we come to recognize in every moment and content of existence a pair of forces, each one of which, in striving to go beyond the initial point, has resolved the infinity of the other by mutual impingement into mere tension and desire. (130)

The whole history of society is reflected in the striking conflicts, the compromises, slowly won and quickly lost, between socialistic adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands […] Each in its sphere attempts to combine the interest in duration, unity and similarity with that in change, specialization, and peculiarity. It becomes self-evident that there is no institution, no law, no estate of life, which can uniformly satisfy the full demands of the two opposing principles. The only realization of this condition possible for humanity finds its expression in constantly changing approximations, in ever retracted attempts and ever revived hopes. It is that that constitutes the whole wealth of our development, the whole incentive to advancement, the possibility of grasping a vast proportion of all the infinite combinations of the elements of human character, a proportion that is approaching the unlimited itself. (131 – 2)

The ceaseless movement of fashion thus appears as an exemplary case of the deferral and extension of the vicissitudes of human life – 'the continuous movement that characterizes all aspects of human existence' (Cooper, 2008: 1); the ability to affect and be affected as an inherently social being whose identity, as entity, is always and forever only momentarily grasped as it is motivated to exceed itself by the simultaneously shifting context from which it is forever wrested in a congenitally failing and thus ongoing process.

[T]here is good reason why externals – clothing, social conduct, amusements – constitute the specific field of fashion, for here no dependence is place on really vital motives of human action. It is the field which we can most easily relinquish to the bent towards imitation, which it would be a sin to follow in important questions.

Yet designation of a phenomenon or approach thereto as sinful does not in itself delegitimate that phenomenon or one's approach to it sufficiently to make the sin impossible or even unlikely. For as Simmel also notes, 'the whole style of human expression' is 'constantly transformed by fashion'; and ideas about appropriate and effective management techniques and practices, if they are to be communicated, must of course be expressed, and expressed by humans. Indeed, Simmel is crystal clear that fashionableness in itself

provides no direct indictment of an object, practice or process. Rather the notion of fashion must be transformed, generally through construction of a more positive foil – primarily the utile for the futile in the case of a practice so practical as management – if it is to function effectively as a term of opprobrium.

[A]n object does not suffer degradation by being called fashionable, unless we reject it with disgust or wish to de-base it for other, material reasons, in which case, of course, fashion becomes an idea of value (1904/1971: 139)

Despite the risk of fashion becoming a (negative) ideal of value, humans, in their human expression, are most likely to be drawn to its virtues and seek its display when their (privileged) current status is at risk: 'Segregation by means of differences […] is expedient only where the danger of absorption and obliteration exists' (Simmel, 1904/1971: 137) justified on the basis of a world seen to be experiencing an ever increasing rate of change in and of its nature (Grey, 2003; Kavanagh et al, 2007).

[T]he more nervous the age, the more rapidly its fashions change, simply because the desire for differentiation, one of the most important elements of all fashion, goes hand in hand with the weakening of nervous energy. This fact in itself is one of the reasons why the real seat of fashion is found among the upper classes (Simmel, 1904/1971:138).

The real variability of historical life is… vested in the middle classes, and for this reason the history of social and cultural movements has fallen into an entirely different pace since the tiers êtat *assumed control… Classes and individuals who demand constant change, because the rapidity of their development gives them the advantage over others, find in fashion something that keeps pace with their own soul-movements. Social advance above all is favorable to the rapid change of fashion, for it capacitates lower classes so much for imitation of upper ones, and thus the process… according to which every higher set throws aside a fashion the moment a lower set adopts it, has acquired a breadth and activity never dreamed of before (Simmel, 1904/1971: 151)*

And it is this sense too that fashion is also inevitably timely in its thrall. For what is at stake is the perpetuation of distinction and its attendant privileges in the face of the endless degeneration of the prior grounds on which they depended and their re-establishment through the fickle friend of novelty and the pseudo-stability of a ceaseless procession of the new (and, by implication, better):

[L]ife according to fashion consists of a balancing of destruction and upbuilding; its content acquires characteristics by destruction of an earlier form; it possesses a

peculiar uniformity, in which the satisfying of the love of destruction and of the demand for positive elements can no longer be separated from each other (Simmel, 1904/1971: 142)

Fashion always occupies the dividing-line between the past and the future, and consequently conveys a stronger feeling of the present, at least while it is at its height, than most other phenomena. (Simmel, 1904/1971: 139)

The break with the past, which, for more than a century [remember we are here in 1904], civilized mankind has been laboring unceasingly to bring about, makes the consciousness turn more and more to the present. This accentuation of the present at the same time emphasisizes the element of change, and a class will turn to fashion in all fields, by no means only in that of apparel, in proportion to the degree to which it supports the given civilizing tendency. It may almost be considered a sign of the increased power of fashion, that it has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which comprised only personal externals, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, over theoretical convictions, and even over the moral foundations of life (139 - 40)

In making its presence so central to our times fashion becomes imperial in its reach, becoming an obligatory passage point that must be traversed by all, regardless of whether they seek to stand with fashion or against it. And once we are within this empire, what happens when we are confronted by strangeness without? Marshal Sahlins tells a captivating story of how the South Sea Islanders (a supposedly 'cold' or static cultural system in Lévi-Strauss's terms) absorbed their initial engagement with European adventurers (representatives of a 'hot' culture) through the islanders' existing concepts and categories. Importantly, the meetings actually *reinforced* these categories, in that the Hawaiians perceived Captain Cook as a reapparance of their Year God, Lono, and was thus "a tradition for Hawaiians before he was a fact" (Sahlins, 1985/1987: 148). Thus the cold culture stayed cold by interpreting and incorporating 'evidence' from the hot culture within their world view. Indeed this is Kuhn's wider point about paradigms: evidence that questions or contradicts a paradigm is either ignored or, more potently, assimilated into the paradigm, which is strengthened through the process. This leads us to the challenging idea that *maybe the world is actually slowing down, but the paradigm within which we live cannot accept this*. Just as the South Sea Islanders interpreted Captain Cook as part of their pantheon -- and thus stayed 'cold' -- maybe we believe we live in a 'hot' culture and so dismiss or

re-interpret any evidence of 'coldness' so that our belief is not compromised. This, centrally, is the idea of *accelerating to inertia*. On the one hand we talk about speed -- and speed on top of speed, or *acceleration* -- while our lived experience is one of relative *inertia*. Change is a constant, but, as Gandhi gently reminded us, 'there is more to life than increasing its speed'.

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