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**Original citation:**

Saward, Michael. (2015) Agency, design and 'slow democracy'. *Time & Society*

**Permanent WRAP url:**

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**Publisher statement:**

SAGE Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0961463X15584254>

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## Agency, Design and ‘Slow Democracy’

**Abstract:** Can democracy be resilient in an increasingly ‘high-speed society’? Social acceleration, some critics argue, poses a serious threat to the idea and practice of democracy. Others invoke but do not develop the idea of ‘slow democracy’ as one important response to this threat. Despite its importance, the critique and response lack analytical depth. In this context, and in an effort to rebuild the debate on a stronger and more fruitful base, the article underscores the potential of political agency to shape democracy’s temporality, and reframes ‘slow democracy’ as a challenge of democratic design.

**Keywords:** democratic theory; social acceleration; slow democracy; time and democracy

### Introduction

Recent insights into, and critiques of, social acceleration, ‘fast’ life and ‘slow’ alternatives have included a series of claims about the impact of speed or social acceleration on the fate and potential of democratic politics (see for example Barnett 2005; Chesnaux 2000, Connolly 2002; Gane 2006; Glezos 2012; Hassan 2008; Rosa and Scheuerman 2009; Schedler and Santiso 1998; and Wolin 1997).<sup>1</sup> Paying close attention to speed, temporality and challenges of and to democracy is a good thing – mainstream democratic theory largely (and wrongly) sidesteps the issues involved.<sup>2</sup> In this article I seek to build on this still-emergent body of work through focused criticism and reconstruction, ultimately to offer a preliminary answer the question: to what extent, and (crucially) how, can the notion of ‘slow democracy’ be of utility to social scientists and social and political theorists, including but also going beyond those currently concerned by the impacts of ‘social acceleration’?

This is a large topic with many strands, and my focus is deliberately selective. My goal is to specify new directions in understanding democracy’s vulnerabilities, versatilities and potential resilience in the face of social acceleration. I do so by adding two new (and linked) elements to the debates, building on constructive criticism of key themes in existing prominent work. First, I propose a more textured account of both state and individual *agency*’s role in the experience and impact of time and speed pressures in democratic politics. By overemphasising macro social structures, influential existing accounts, I shall argue, largely overlook the important

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to two anonymous referees, the author would like to thank participants in the ECPR Joint Sessions workshop in Antwerp and in Warwick University’s Centre for Studies of Democratization seminar for their helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Arguably the most authoritative English language account (Dahl 1989) does not consider issues of acceleration or temporality beyond a highly general periodization of democracy’s key historical changes of meaning. The recent focus by democratic theorists on ‘deliberative democracy’ (see essays in for example, Macedo (1999), Fishkin and Laslett (2002) and Parkinson and Mansbridge (2012)), may be a partial exception in noting sporadically that strong forms of democratic deliberation require certain timescales to succeed.

role of political agency in mediating experiences and opportunities of temporality in democratic politics.

Second, I aim to reassert a view of democracy as a concept with a wide variety of credible conceptions, where the pressing work now needed is on detailed design and exploration of alternative *conceptions* (such as ‘slow democracy’). Democracy is practiced, evolves and is designed in different ways in different times and places, whether we consider ‘really existing democracy (Schmitter 2010)) or innovative future-oriented designs (e.g. Smith 2009, Fung and Wright 2003). The current speed/acceleration critique does not take this point sufficiently on board; its singular, implicit and largely undefended conception of democracy is a highly general abstraction of liberal, representative government. But, as I shall elaborate, conceptions of democracy are more productively and realistically viewed as *design challenge*. Configuring democratic designs that respond to and incorporate different temporal challenges – taking us to the core question of ‘slow democracy?’ as a potential response to the challenge of social acceleration – is the crucial next step in these debates. Of course, exploring alternative democratic *designs* is just one component of a wider process of democracy *building*; again, my critique is focused selectively on diverting the current debate in more fruitful directions.

### **Bringing agency back in**

The current wisdom on the deleterious impact of social acceleration on democracy lacks clarity and texture; it takes a highly ‘macro’ and resolutely structural form. It leaves little space for considerations of (democratic) agency or action to mediate, mitigate or otherwise address the malaise identified.

This tendency is particularly evident in the framing of a key concept in the debates: desynchronisation. The central claim is that forms of desynchronisation have developed between one set of social processes and another which may challenge or undermine democracy. For Wolin (1997, 2), these sets are politics, on the one hand, and economy and culture, on the other hand: ‘...political time is out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture...[i]n contrast to political time, the temporalities of economy and popular culture are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through obsolescence’. Rosa offers a similar diagnosis of, in his terms, the ‘spectre of desynchronisation’ which ‘threatens political autonomy’: ‘...social, economic and technological change, it seems, have become so rapid-fire in character that they can no longer effectively be steered by existing democratic institutions’ (Rosa 2009, 17). Hassan (2008, 14) argues that ‘[o]pen-ended and uncontrolled speed now drives the economy and society; and democratic politics simply cannot effectively synchronize with them.’ Scheuerman too discusses potential reforms to liberal democracy as responses to ‘the temporal misfit between liberal democracy and social acceleration’ (Scheuerman 2004, 194, 187). According to Rosa and Wolin, in their different ways, the challenge posed to democracy by desynchronisation arises from the particular time needs of democracy: democracy demands time to work through extensive deliberation and mediation of diverse interests (‘...the acceleration of the surrounding systems – especially economic circulation, and technological-scientific innovation – decreases the time given to politics to decide an issue’ – Rosa 2009, 105).

Regardless of whether it is understood as what I will call *sectoral* or *status* desynchronisation<sup>3</sup>, this thesis badly oversimplifies the phenomena it seeks to describe. It fails to account for crucial agentic capacities of (a) states in general, and (b) many key political figures within states. I will deal with each in turn.

With regard to states in general, behind prominent accounts of the desynchronisation thesis is the idea that the democratic state increasingly lacks control, or jurisdiction, or (better) steering capacity (Dahlström, Peters and Pierre 2011) with regard to other social or economic systems. Consider Figure 1.

### Figure 1 here

States may in principle find it comparatively easy or comparatively difficult to steer, control or regulate people, objects or processes variously configured. The object or process may in some manifest way be contained *within* the nation-state (in-jurisdiction), and display relevant features of speed or acceleration (from fast/accelerating to slow/decelerating) – see boxes A to D in Figure 1. Consider the development of educational techniques and technologies in public or state schools, for example. Similar distinctions apply for objects or processes which operate *across* (partially outside) the jurisdiction, such as internationalised markets for specific commodities – see Boxes E to H. For example, there may be features of fast-moving investment decisions by private companies within the jurisdiction of a democratic state over which, despite their velocity or volatility, political institutions may assert regulatory influence.

By the same token, slow-burning trends in culture or economy (such as the problems posed an ageing population profile in many Western countries) may create challenges that are *more* difficult for governments to address effectively. However exactly it is conceived from case to case, neither familiarity nor slowness necessarily equates with strong state steering capacity. To take a quite literal example: so-called ‘boat people’ (often refugees) making their way towards Australia from a number of Asian countries may not move erratically or quickly, but the policy dilemmas posed by their (impending) presence have proven to be far from straightforward, practically and

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<sup>3</sup>Sectoral desynchronisation is the most prominent approach, a core component of the work of Connolly, Rosa, Scheuerman and Wolin. Here, patterns of technological change have led to forms of social acceleration most evident in economic and social sectors. The time required by democratic debate and deliberation lags behind wider developments towards ‘instantaneity’ (Adam 2006) or ‘immediacy’ (Tomlinson 2007). The *status* desynchronisation thesis suggests that certain economic and social elites gain disproportionately from social acceleration. Those who gain least, or lose out, are the poor, the technologically deprived, and the comparatively immobile. Such changing status differentiations may overlap class and wealth differentiations, or be an increasing component of the latter. Rosa for example writes of how the poor decelerate, while others accelerate, a process that gives rise to ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’, and can create societies with ‘a mosaic of temporal ghettos’ (Rosa 2009, 104). We might regard *generational* desynchronisation as a special type of status desynchronisation. Accommodating the interests of both present generations and future generations is a key democratic challenge: ‘[d]emocracies are systematically biased in favour of the present. In giving greater weight to the present, they neglect the future. From the perspective of the future, this neglect appears as the dead hand of the past’ (Thompson 2005, 246).

ethically, for successive Australian governments. Similar considerations may apply to transnational trends. Notoriously, trends towards global warming developing over a longer time span have proven to be tremendously difficult for national democratic governments to respond to effectively (especially, of course, if they are not able to act sufficiently in concert with other states).

In short, there is no necessary negative relationship between speed and acceleration, on the one hand, and state steering or agentic capacity on the other (no one of boxes A-D in Figure 1 is in principle more likely to be instantiated empirically than another for cases within a state's formal jurisdiction. It depends on the features of particular cases). So, against the current wisdom, in terms of potentially damaging challenges to a democratic state's agentic capacities, nothing very general or structurally conclusive can be said regarding desynchronisation. It all depends.<sup>4</sup>

This critique can be pressed further by turning to the role of the agency of *key political figures within states* with respect to social acceleration and democracy. It is crucial that we are not misled into underestimating the capacity of democratic agents to act upon effective perceptions of time and speed. Through varied strategic practices, political actors can intensify 'moments', mark transitions, and redefine periods. They can act on time, as well as in time. Speed may do things to democracy, but equally democratic actors can do things to dominant and other consequential perceptions of speed. Consider the view that an institutional timescape (such as stages in electoral or legislative procedures) is not so much an objective feature of a political system as an inter-subjective experience of how a system works. Timescapes and their apparent features matter only if they are made to matter. And making them matter, rendering them politically visible or salient, can be a conscious strategy or project of situated democratic agents. Effective agents can for example intensify political moments by staging major speeches and events. They can mark political transitions which distinguish sharply that which is of the past and that which is of the future (speeches after election victories and defeats are often good examples). Political periods can be redefined, sometimes with and sometimes against the grain of an apparently operative political timescape.

Time is a 'culturally constituted' rather than a natural phenomenon (Wolin 1997, 1). Political time may well be structured, but it is also importantly evoked and experienced. Think of 'it's time for a change' and its variants as favoured campaign slogans. Or indeed of contestations of dominant perceptions of political time - recent Spanish anti-austerity street protesters proclaimed: 'We have internalised your haste, your rhythms, your speed. No more! We are going to go slowly because we are going to go far. We are going to go slowly because we want to all go together. We are going

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<sup>4</sup> This point is different to, but resonant with, Connolly's (2002) argument that 'asymmetries of pace' (i.e. desynchronisation) may carry positive democratic potential, and Glezos's (2012, 7) comment that: 'While it is true that technological acceleration produces new challenges to democratic governance, it also provides new tools, in some cases introducing the possibility of greater popular participation in politics'. But even where '[t]he intellectual challenge is how to come to terms productively with the ambiguous relations among time, pace, freedom, plurality and democracy' (Connolly 2002, 147), at best we have a very general and open-ended call to active and creative democratic citizenship, albeit informed rather than imprisoned by the imposing structure of large-scale desynchronisation. Breaking the extant arguments down, as in Figure 1, remains crucial whether or not the democratic state is seen as part of the problem (of speed and democracy), or potentially part of a solution.

to go slowly because the process is as important as the end result.’<sup>5</sup> In politics time can be manipulated and parcelled (Schedler and Santiso 1998). People and politics can change tempos. Urry (2009, 195) argues that there is a growing recognition of the need for ‘a greater performativity of glacial time’ for environmental reasons, for example. This perspective contrasts quite sharply with the neglect of agency and the positing of the strongly structural dilemmas common to diagnoses of democracy and speed.

Marking and making ‘moments’ is a crucial political strategy and, where it works, a meaningful political achievement. In all politics this marking and making tends to be institutionalised in well-observed rituals, such as election night acceptance and concession speeches. Resonating with Peter Brook’s (2008, 110) view of the theatre, the staged concession speech for example acts as a ‘magnifying glass’. Consider the concession speeches of losing Republican US presidential candidates John McCain in 2008 and Mitt Romney in 2012. After deeply divisive campaigns against Barack Obama, the prominent ritual concession offers congratulations to the successful opponent, a declaration of loyalty, and a profession of shared love of country. This is a magnified or heightened moment, ‘fixing’ time, marking an understanding of past, present and future politics. It is also a Brookian ‘reducing lens’, channelling prior partisan complexity into unitary simplicity.

Further, a crucial though neglected element of democratic politics is the difference between (a) the tempo at which democratic agents perform actions or procedures, and (b) the tempo at which they *present* themselves to audiences as performing actions or procedures. A city mayor, for example, may *assert publicly* (on the front stage – cf Goffman 1990) that she is acting fast, responding immediately, and seeking quick answers to pressing policy dilemmas. But she may, on the back stage, be *acting* more methodically, considering options carefully, consulting widely. As with the experience of political timescapes, inter-subjective perceptions and their *mediation* by agents matter greatly. Figure 2 crystallizes this point, noting through boxes A-I the range of potential combinations of front-stage mediation and back-stage action.

### Figure 2 here

A leader may present a strong public impression that she will take urgent action on a pressing issue. But equally she may be aware that a complex issue demands careful consideration of options (Box B in Figure 2). Juggling urgency and caution will rarely be straightforward, but such are the challenging arts of politics and the perception of time. Or, the leader may feel that a public appearance of taking calm, methodical steps in dealing with an issue will settle nerves and appease opponents, while at the same time proposing quick and decisive solutions behind the scenes.

Democratic politics veers between transparency and opacity. Opacity – the limited perceptibility of back-stage political activity – creates opportunities to exercise strategic political influence over perceptions of political speed (or urgency, or

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<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Georgina Blakeley for the quote and its translation.

‘timeliness’). Exploring these possibilities can be crucial to appreciating and highlighting the role of agentic capacity.

In short, temporality in a wide and varied range of cases is more or less *mediated* in and by states in general and key political figures more specifically. To be sure, different (individual and collective) agents have differing resources or capacities to mediate a particular sense of speed or urgency, an issue that requires exploration outside the confines of this article (I am not suggesting that the diagnoses of democracy’s limitations with regard to key features of social acceleration are *entirely* wrong).

It is striking how influential contemporary accounts of temporality sideline questions of mediation. *Immediacy* is taken as the dominant characteristic of time in the contemporary world (in the rich North, at any rate). Barbara Adam (2006, 125) writes that ‘... with the development of networked electronic information technologies that operate at near the speed of light the pre-conditions for temporal control have been eliminated. Cause, sequence, linearity and predictability have been swept away in the quest for the ultimate compression of time: the combination of instantaneity and simultaneity or, to put it differently, information transfer that is instantaneously dispersed across space has been achieved at the expense of hundreds of years of advancements in efforts to control the uncontrollable and predict the unpredictable.’ Tomlinson’s *The Culture of Speed* (2007) offers an extended treatment of (the ‘principle’ and ‘condition’ of) immediacy, defined in part as ‘freedom from intermediate agency’ (2007, loc1897), and conveying ‘a sense of directness’ (2007, loc1905). Tomlinson’s account of time and speed is complex, but it is not an injustice to claim that it neglects systematically the impact of state agency in mediating a sense of time or speed. Information and communication technologies, consumption patterns and speed dating are among the trends that prompt the condition and importance of immediacy, for Tomlinson; but they are considered only as impacting directly on individuals in largely everyday settings. Institutions and impacts of political mediation do not figure; there is a ‘redundancy of mediation’ (2007, loc2328). In other sections of his thesis, Tomlinson acknowledges mediation – e.g. where the electronic media are argued to ‘hide their mediation’ – ‘they obscure the artifice of their practice and present their product or their access to communication as pristine, untouched, *immediate*’ (2007, loc2527). So, on the one hand, immediacy is a fact; on the other hand, it is a factor of presentation. My suggestion is that the importance of the latter is downplayed, and state agentic capacities for presentation and mediation are absent from this analysis<sup>6</sup> – and that these features matter.

### **Democracy – and nuances of democratic design**

To highlight the role of political agency is not to ignore structures – the two are mutually enabling and constraining (Giddens 1984). *How* democratic agency is structured is a factor of design, evolutionary and/or deliberate. The second major focus of my argument centres on the need to acknowledge explicitly the particular models or conceptions of democracy being invoked, and the potential of a flexible

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<sup>6</sup> A minor exception is in a conclusion focused on the moral call to ‘balance’, where achieving balance in our personal lives is noted as having a link to potential ‘political-economic regulation’ (2007, loc4023). Political agency remains absent from the analysis in explanatory terms, and only a passing presence in moral terms.

democratic design approach to addressing democracy's character and resilience in the face of social acceleration. Dominant contributions to the debates do not make their conceptions of democracy explicit. As a result they largely miss the opportunity to explore democracy's multifaceted capacities for resilience, not least in the potential for a slow democratic design.

Fixing on a particular – often implicit or unexamined - conception *of* democracy leads to speed or time being *conceived as* a particular type of challenge *to* democracy. The same goes for proposed solutions to the problems identified. If one thinks that democracy is essentially X (rather than Y), and this thought conditions one's view that (e.g.) social acceleration poses problem A rather than B, then one will focus on solution P rather than Q. Such an argument may tell us something about democracy and social acceleration. But it may – and among key authors in the present debates I argue that it *does* - tell us just as much about a predilection to think in terms of a relation X-A-P (cf Hobson and Kurki 2012). The following discussion of democratic design and 'slow democracy' is prefaced briefly by a critique of the approaches to democracy, and their accompanying partial diagnoses and solutions, offered by authors such as Scheuerman, Wolin and Connolly.

### *Limited democratic conceptions*

For many of the critics of social acceleration and its impact on democracy, democracy consists in a stylized version of a familiar set of institutions which make up the liberal-democratic state. At the core of this set of institutions is the importance of free and fair (especially national-level) elections. Goetz and Meyer-Sahling, for example, state that '...the electoral term is the most fundamental unit of democracy and the electoral cycle to which the democratic limitation of time gives rise is its defining temporal feature' (2009, 183). The same authors (along with Adam 2004) have elaborated on the concept of the political timescape as the institutionalisation of time with respect to polity (e.g. electoral cycles), politics (e.g. parliamentary procedures) and policy (e.g. rapidity of policy change - such as refugee (Cwerner 2004) or genetically modified foods (Bingham 2008) policy). Similarly, Schedler and Santiso (1998, 9) focus on the state, and in particular the electoral term, as the core of democracy. According to them, electoral terms form the frame for further 'temporal micro-rules': 'They set the timetables of every day politics by defining schedules, structuring time budgets, allocating time slots, distributing speaking time, opening and closing political debates, setting deadlines, fixing maximum or minimum intervals....', and so on. This conception of democracy is shared by other writers on speed, social acceleration and democracy, notably Rosa (2009), Scheuerman (2009), Chesnaux (2000) and Thompson (2005).

There *are* different takes on democracy among observers of speed and democracy. Connolly (2002) conceives of democracy less in terms of specific institutional configurations (such as stylized liberal democracy) and more in terms of *practices*, attitudes and outlooks. *Deliberative* practices are emphasised by Scheuerman (2004). Wolin (1997) thinks of democracy as 'fugitive': an occasional and fleeting *moment* when non-state actors achieve a level of effective collectivity and press their claims on a state whose own claims to democracy are dubious. And advocates of slow food and slow cities think in terms of new, local and networked forms of association such as 'presidia' and 'convivia' (Andrews 2008; Miele 2008).



### *Limited democratic solutions*

So, without asking explicitly ‘what is democracy?’ these commentators provide a number of conceptions of democracy, the most prominent one being a stylized conception of statal liberal democracy. In turn, none of the conceptions are elaborated, or examined critically and comparatively. This fact leads directly to a thin and disparate set of would be solutions to the problems of social acceleration and democracy. From a liberal-democratic reformist perspective, Scheuerman canvases reforms such as strengthening the constitutional capacities of the state, decentralisation of regulatory activity to render it more reflexive, and enhancing citizen and legislative deliberative and decisional capacities (Scheuerman 2001, 64-66; 2004, ch.6 esp.). This may involve some acceptance that political executives in democratic states are better able to cope with social acceleration’s challenges than are legislatures (see Vatter 2005), but resisting a shift of power from legislatures to executives all the same (Scheuerman 2001, 58). On the other hand, working from outside mainstream liberal democratic norms, Wolin sees virtue in stressing the ‘fugitive’, sporadic nature of democratic collective power rising from below. According to McIvor’s expansion of Wolin’s ideas, such fugitive, local, insurgent moments foster robust forms of democratic citizenship. The ‘multiple civic self’ which expresses this form of citizenship can establish – though fleetingly, one presumes – a diffusion of political power such that ‘slow time negotiations’ are forced upon ‘the impatient megastate’, with the desired effect of helping to ‘slow the world down’ (McIvor 2011, 79).

Further, McIvor traces Wolin’s critique through to a resolution that invokes thinking behind the slow food movement: ‘The problem is now moving out from the example of food production to other areas of democratic concern...Along with slow food, we need slow housing, slow transportation, slow ecology, slow citizenship, slow democracy’ (McIvor 2011, 82). The slow food movement and the related CittaSlow networks value political localness, in terms of distinctive forms of local politics in towns, cities and other localities (Miele 2008; Andrews 2008). The CittaSlow movement has embodied a form of slow politics limited to towns and cities of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants which meet strict environmental, production, and architectural preservation standards (Knox 2005; Miele 2008; Pink 2009).

This brief résumé shows how prevailing accounts offer a mixed bag of partial and separate ‘solutions’ to a challenges of speed, social acceleration, and democracy. An alternative, more holistic and flexible, approach, framed in terms of design, may have more purchase on how democracy might best be conceived, in terms of both the pressures of social acceleration and the potential for specifying components of a ‘slow democracy’. I now turn to specifying that approach.

### *The promise of design*

Current accounts (at least implicitly) face in two directions: confronted by social acceleration, is the task to speed democracy up, or to slow the world down? Does social acceleration demand political structures that are more nimble, or rapid-response? Is the obvious answer to the pressures of high-speed society a high-speed democracy – or ‘fast democracy’? Dictators can decide and act quickly, because they

do not have to consult (many) others. (Whether they will have the legitimacy to have their orders acted upon effectively is another matter). Minimal, highly centralised democratic systems may be rapidly decisive and responsive to fast-burning events and challenges, for similar reasons. This thinking is for example behind Scheuerman's conjecture that more centralisation of power in an executive branch (and away from a legislative branch) may enhance democratic capacity in the face of social acceleration. The plausible view that democratic states may be 'faster' actors/deciders/responders on the international stage than on the national stage reflects a similar claim – the fewer interests need to be consulted then the quicker political action can be. But therein lies the rub. On this view, less democracy equals greater capacity to cope with key aspects of social acceleration. At what point does minimal democracy become sham democracy, or non-democracy? The more challenging, but for the democrat the more attractive, question is: can democracy be retained or enhanced in ways that enables it to respond to, and to shape proactively, social acceleration's challenges? Can it be adapted to develop new capacity to steer in a high-speed world, while retaining or enhancing inclusive and deliberative decision-making? If so, then 'slow democracy' becomes the core object of examination.

Democracy does not have just one core or settled justification, institutional structure, or geographical or cultural context. In empirical terms, it is structured, practiced and valued in many different ways in the contemporary world. In theoretical terms, no one 'model' (liberal, participatory, deliberative, and so on) can *alone* provide a definitive shape and rationale for democracy. The separation and opposition of underspecified (a) standard liberal (b) radical localist accounts of democracy in the works of critics canvassed in this article do not do justice to the complexity and promise of democracy as a design challenge: *What set of institutions or devices, in what order, for which people, enacting which principles, can be assembled into a workable democratic design that may be resilient in the face of pressures such as social acceleration?*

Exploring responses to this question is the most productive way to *begin* the task of considering 'slow democracy' as a potential ideal and set of practices. It is important to note, however, that democratic design cannot provide a full-blown account of any conceivable democratic system or society. As the extensive literature on democratization reminds us, *building* democracy at national or other levels tends to be a fraught and drawn-out process with no guarantees, one that requires design thinking (whether acknowledged or not) but involves so much more besides (transposing, adapting and implementing institutions and their relations, winning and sustaining support, building legitimacy, and so on) (Beetham 1999; Burnell 2004). That literature, focused largely on developing countries of the global South and former communist East, also reminds us of the comparative parochialism of reference of current debates on social acceleration and democracy, which have a narrow focus on developed or Western states. But design is nevertheless a good place to start, given the real sketchiness of ideas of democracy and slow democracy in the debates to which the present arguments are a response.

The democratic designer combines a commitment to democratic ideals – themselves contestable, but reasonably specified as political equality and popular control (Beetham 1999; Saward 1998) – and strong recognition of democracy's variability in practice. He or she must keep both a sense of value priority (enhancing democracy),

along with political and procedural openness and flexibility, even while tailoring designs to particular concerns (in the present case, the need for resilient democracy in the face of social acceleration). The key parameter is not more or less democracy, but rather differently tailored democratic designs. Designs may be tailored to different cultural, geographical, developmental, or technological contexts or challenges. Embracing the design challenge may involve departing from established theoretical, comparative and empirical ways of arguing, and entertaining a radical openness as to democracy's meaning and value.

A device is a mechanism which plays a part in constituting a more-or-less formal procedure by which binding collective decisions are reached for a political community. Some devices for enacting democratic principles are familiar. Others are novel, or prototypes, or a glint in the designer's eye. Clearly, devices such as an elected *parliament* with legislative authority, implementational (and other) public *agencies*, and *national and local elections* for representatives, are familiar (though by no means easy to sustain) devices for enacting specific visions (and versions) of equality, accountability, and other principles. Alternative devices may not be so familiar. Consider the *citizens' initiative and referendum*, *deliberative policy forums*, *electronic town meetings*, *participatory budgeting*, *autonomous associative governance*, or even formalised procedures for *delay* or *pause* when designing collective decision procedures for a community.<sup>7</sup>

A 'slow' democratic design that moves beyond limited current prescriptions is likely to include the following key devices or institutions as singly and jointly contributing towards meeting challenges posed by social acceleration.

1. *Minimum democratic standards.* These standards can be specified as a process of governance through which common decisions are proposed, made and implemented in a manner consistent with their ultimate determination by the members of a specified political community regarded as equals (see Lively 1974).

Consistent with the democratic minimum, all democracies make collective decisions. In a slow democratic design, key institutional features to consider ought to include:

2. *Designed-in temporality.* Efficient decision-making is important, but there are varied devices that democracy can include which require steady or deliberate consideration of policy options. For example, in parliaments there can be requirements for specialist or generalist committees of parliamentarians to consider details of proposed laws, insulated from outside economic pressures or indeed pressures from members of the political executive (presidents, prime ministers, cabinet members, etc.). A number of existing democracies have committee structure designs that might be adopted or adapted. Further, formal moments of delay can be instituted within decision procedures, for example to invite public comment or allow for further inquiry into the practical implications of different policies, or to conduct pilot projects. Special

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<sup>7</sup> Really existing political systems may be understood as specific and evolving designs with their own combinations of deliberate and evolving assemblages of devices or institutions. For example, the political system of the contemporary USA features a separation of powers, federal structure, forms of initiative and referendum in many constituent states, and so on.

decision procedures can be instituted, such as multi-stage referendums (Barber 1984) or referendums on key political issues once they have passed legislative phases (Budge 1996).

3. *Deliberative opportunities.* In recent years a sizable literature exploring, advocating and configuring deliberative institutions and processes has dominated democratic theory (for recent consolidations see Mansbridge *et. al.* (2010) and Bachtiger *et. al.* (2010)). In what can be seen as a mode of institutionalising temporality, a range of devices are and have been used which require due time being given to structured and more-or-less inclusive debate over policy agendas and options. For example, participatory budgets (created in Porto Alegre, functioning in a number of other Brazilian cities, and adapted to a range of other countries and contexts) are strongly local and participative devices (Abers 2003); citizens juries are well suited to careful consideration of specific policy proposals (Smith 2009); deliberative polls (Fishkin and Luskin 2000) foster local, national or transnational deliberation by non-politicians over controversial or critical shared concerns. Varied modes of deliberation are core to the work of prominent theorists of contemporary democracy, though as Scheuerman (2004, 200) notes such work ‘seems oblivious to temporal concerns altogether’. Deliberation takes time; different interests need to have their say, options need to be considered, perhaps minds changed. It is no surprise that Wolin warns against exchanging ‘the tempos of deliberation and contemplation for the temporal rhythms of contemporary culture and economy’ (Wolin 1997, 3). Formal institutions for popular deliberation, whether drawing on self-selecting or randomly sampled participant groups, are rarely granted a role in actual decision-making procedures, but there are such examples (Fishkin and Luskin 2000) and there is no democratic reason why they might not be radically extended.
4. *Localism and federalism.* This is a key design consideration stemming from the Slow movement. Many actually existing democracies are highly centralised – not just unitary systems such as the United Kingdom, but also a number of federal systems such as Australia and to a lesser extent Germany and Canada. But there are systems whose constitutions enshrine strong local government autonomous powers (notably Switzerland). Further, consider radical forms of decentralisation of political authority. If more, and more genuinely guaranteed or protected, autonomous local decision-making were to characterise democratic development, we can hypothesise that we would be more likely to see protection of local traditions, and new forms of local innovation (such as advocated by CittaSlow and Transition Town movements). The key supposition is that local actors and agencies have a stronger stake in sustaining distinct and valuable features of their localities; they are more prone to see them as a town, or city, or local region, than to see them as, or ‘like’, a state (cf Scott 1998). Radical decentralisation is an historic but today a neglected principle in democratic theory, though its close cousin subsidiarity had a flurry of interest when enshrined in the European Union.
5. *Functional decentralisation.* In addition to territorial decentralisation, devolving decisional authority to semi-autonomous associations covers a complex set of potential democratic design features which allow organized citizen groups to decide a range of matters of concern separate from government structures. In varying ways and to varying degrees, functional

decentralisation can operate for example with respect to schools, universities, worker cooperatives, local enterprises, religious organisations, welfare delivery and care agencies. In the vision of ‘associative democracy’ advocated by Hirst (1994; 1997), a range of semi-autonomous organisations may be funded by government but protected from government interference in the running of their affairs beyond respecting basic rights and accountability provisions. Associative governance holds out a promise to blur lines between political and economic realms, challenging the negative desynchronisation argument we have seen posed by writers such as Wolin and Rosa. The latter assume that polity and economy form separate or non-overlapping realms which move at different ‘speeds’ to the benefit of one (‘fast’ economy) and the detriment of the other (‘slow’ politics). Functional decentralisation may help to decentre democratic power ‘out’ (to a plurality of associations) as well as ‘down’ (to local units of formal governance).

6. *An expansive view of rights.* All democratic systems are to some degree, and in some institutional form, self-binding or self-limiting (Elster and Slagstad 1988). The scope or domain of popular or legislative decision-making is limited in order to protect features which are vital to the functioning and persistence of the very democratic values which underpin such systems. The terms and conditions of self-limiting democracy are normally specified in a written, formal constitutional document and/or in established conventions. Especially important are the rights which are constitutionally or otherwise guaranteed to citizens above and beyond legislation or democratic votes. The history and theory of rights is a huge topic, and I barely touch the surface here. But the critical consideration for present purposes is how far a constitution goes in specifying rights. Historically, western democracies have successively enriched civil (freedoms of speech, association and worship for example) and political (e.g. the right to vote) rights, and to some degree social rights (Marshall 1950). But a number of constitutions in today’s world are more expansive, incorporating economic, cultural and environmental rights, for example. Which rights are protected, and how strongly they are protected, is a complex and often controversial question; here, the main point is that democratic designers can consider in context less and more expansive sets of protections. From a Slow perspective, for example, consider the right to a guaranteed minimum income in the face of pressures arising from economic acceleration; or rights to recognise and protect local traditions, architectures, and languages.
7. *Protection of values beyond rights.* ‘Protectionism’ has a bad name in (to put it simply and broadly) an accelerating neo-liberal universe. But all states protect, through law and sometimes other means, core national or local values which are not, or are not appropriately seen as, rights protections through constitutional or other formal or legal means. Varied forms of protection – of wage levels, of specific industries or sectors of the economy, of social and cultural pluralism, of linguistic diversity, of indigenous or other traditional ways of life – may form part of situated or contextual democratic designs (there are no *other* forms of democratic design). The designed-in protection, in the name of democracy, of core rights and values is closely linked to forms of non-majoritarian institutions beyond constitutions themselves - central banks, for example, can operate to a degree ‘out of time’, taking a ‘longer view’ outside of electoral or even pressing economic constraints (Goetz and

Meyer-Sahling 2009, 186). Thompson (2005) for instance argues that a non-majoritarian ‘Tribunate’ focused on the interests of future generations would deepen democracy by leavening its degree of period-bias. Non-majoritarian institutions are not in themselves undemocratic; again, protected constitutional rights to the vote and to free speech, for example, are both non-majoritarian and utterly vital to the protection of the rights of (shifting or static) majorities and minorities. Majoritarian institutions may generate legitimacy, and therefore capacity, to address challenges, but non-majoritarian institutions may foster a sustained inclination to focus on those challenges.

8. *Practising ‘slow theory’*. Slow theory concerns the production of theory in a manner that stresses close consideration of the particularities of place, locality and culture, pausing over local and customary conceptions of social and political values, and taking the time to detect and take account of a range of perspectives (Saward 2011). It may involve, for example, immersive study of the meanings of ‘democracy’ in distinctive non-Western contexts (Schaffer 1998). It acknowledges that the speed of theory production may shape the very perceptibility of politics, peoples and problems. Questions of who can be, and who ought to be, the creators of democratic theory are raised; individual authors may produce democratic theory, but it may also be regarded as a co-production with professional and community collaborators, including indeed the subjects of research<sup>8</sup>. In the doing of slow theory, process can modify content; a theory is pieced together in conjunction with a context, including but not limited to other groups and actors in that context, rather than hatched independently of and subsequently applied to that context. Slow approaches to theory embrace the fact that theorists are always engaged in, and producing, *situated* knowledges (Haraway 1988; Walzer 1994). Situatedness is normally taken to be an issue of place, or placement. It is, I suggest, equally an issue about time and speed; the situated producer of democratic models will recognise the need to survey political terrain slowly (deliberately, mindfully) in order to understand the distinctiveness of locality.

These eight points offer an account of devices and practices in slow democratic design which hold the promise of providing real substance to more abstract invocations of slow democracy. Again, a keen sense of the limits as well as the promise of such accounts matters – to acknowledge its limitations is, crucially, to help to bring into focus the further work, beyond the remit of this article, required in this emergent field of concern and critique. Consider for example that a democratic *system*, as a set of political institutions and practices subject to design thinking, can be seen as just one part of a wider set of relationships and structures of democratic *society*. A wider democratic society perspective must for instance encompass further political questions about time, not least inequalities of class and gender (think of women’s time versus men’s time), which design perspectives tend to leave aside.

It might be objected that democratic design, as I have framed it here, is an elite exercise (who does it, or who gets to do it?) focused on elite political actors and institutions (parliaments and courts, for example). There is a notable – even

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<sup>8</sup> Research subjects may be regarded as co-creators in two broad senses: (1) their influence on theoretical perspectives can be acknowledged, and (2) they can be brought into the research processes as collaborators.

constitutive – ambiguity at the heart of democratic design. The above exercise, specifying potential slow democratic structures, is one of democratic *design*, where the design ideas matter more (or are highlighted more) than their provenance. *Democratic design*, prioritising wide inclusion and participation in the design process, is an important alternative, touched on only in passing here (e.g. in the views of Spanish street activists quoted above). If the two conceptions of democratic design form two ends of a spectrum, then a number of examples can be located at mid-spectrum, such as the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly (see Warren and Pearse 2008). *Who designs matters*. Scholars and elite practitioners have a role, but because democratic design is theory-for-practice rather than a more conventional theoretical enterprise, it should be a reflexive process bringing together a wide range of stakeholders.

In sum, no one feature of democratic design stressed in these eight points will (in theory or in practice) provide a key to the creation of a ‘slow democracy’ – or, a democratic system that is resilient in the face of varied pressures from social acceleration. But the combined effect of careful design and institutionalisation – creating, borrowing and adapting devices and ideas - might contribute significantly to that end. At least, within a design frame they suggest a more complex, rounded and fruitful way to move towards slow democratic designs than the partial and selective existing accounts on which they build in part.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

A number of prominent observers have expressed worries for democratic systems in a ‘high-speed world’ (Scheuerman 2004). A central concern is that democracies are too ‘slow’ – unadaptive, unresponsive, bureaucratically hamstrung - in an age of economic, technological and social acceleration (Rosa 2009, Wolin 1997). Others detect in the evocative but so far fuzzy idea of ‘slow democracy’ an innovative potential response to disaffection from, and inadequacies of, contemporary democracy (McIvor 2011), or opportunities for greater citizen and political creative politics in variable cultural, economic and political speeds (Connolly 2002). I have sought to build on such work by extending crucial but neglected or underspecified themes in these important debates. I have argued that political agents in democratic systems can often deploy and manipulate temporality, for example by heightening the intensity and impact of particular moments. And I have proposed a democratic design approach to ideas of ‘slow democracy’, including an account of a set of promising institutional features and innovations that democratic designers might consider. Such a refocusing is desirable in particular given the strongly structural and macro-level orientation of existing critiques, the partial nature of current proposed solutions, and the lack of joined-up thinking about democracy’s adaptive potential.

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<sup>9</sup> It might be objected that the design of democracy is the design of states, and the problem is social acceleration’s impact on states whatever their design. But designs can be performative: an intention and a plan to influence perceptions of temporality, and to contain undue speeds in varied activities, can help forge the effect they desire. Equally, ‘economy’ for example is not a clearly bounded or naturally-given feature of social life – influential strands of thinking, for example, stress the construction of our ideas of the economic through economic theory (Callon 2007).

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