

Salutary Slowness

by Côme Souchier

Slowness is no mere lack of speed, but rather the highest degree of resistance to a world that is spiraling out of control and trying to drag people into an endless race towards acceleration.

Reviewed: Laurent Vidal. *Les hommes lents : résister à la modernité*. Paris, Flammarion, 2020. 306 p., €20.

Turner's 1844 painting *Rain, Steam and Speed*, perfectly illustrates the subject of the most recent essay by Laurent Vidal, a historian specializing in Atlantic cultural circulation. It is a famous scene: on a bridge spanning a river, a powerful steam engine pierces through the picture's blurry background, pulling the viewer's gaze into its movement. Pushed to the sides, as if by the speed of the machine itself, some human figures can just be made out, sitting on a small boat, dancing, or leading animals along the riverbank. The author highlights the contrast: "on the railway bridge, dominating and magnificent, the new epoch is already triumphant, and ignorant of those who cannot comply with the velocity it requires of them" (p. 109).

These people left behind by the speed of modern life are the *slow men* of whom Laurent Vidal here offers an original and usefully illustrated genealogy. Drawing on paintings, philosophical works and poems, he reveals to us how slowness has become a discriminating social quality, which has been attributed to various figures from the Middle Ages to today: the "lazy Indian" and the "indolent" black man, the "slow", "idle" or "inattentive" worker, the contemporary exile, etc. The author then carefully analyzes the semantic evolution of these numerous adjectives, which all gravitate around the central term *slow*. His attention to words is in fact reflected in the writing itself, which is clear and meticulous without being pretentious – but whose literary use

of analogies can at times pose a problem of interpretation, something we will come back to. Finally, we should note that the essay has a clear political thrust (“to face up to and confront a discourse that we are constantly bombarded with: the discourse of efficiency, of promptness”¹). It is thus an extension of the actions of these *slow men* who have found a way of subverting modern times through changes in rhythm, by slowing down the pace of work in factories, experimenting with new forms of music, or occupying the downtime in these “territories of waiting” (p. 198) constituted by the docks of port cities on the Atlantic.

Discriminating Against the Slow: a Genealogy

In the introduction to his essay, Laurent Vidal takes inspiration from the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos and the poet Aimé Césaire to challenge “the assumption that the *slow* are fundamentally unsuited to the modern world” (p. 12). In fact, he devotes his first chapter to the genealogy of this unsuitability, starting with the etymology of the latin term *lentus*: this originally designated a soft, flexible form in the plant world, until the 16th century, when its meaning grew more restricted to the purely temporal. Theologians such as the Dominican Guillaume Peyraud thus associated, as early as the 13th century, the sin of acedia with idleness and slowness (p. 37). To this religious struggle against guilty laziness was added a mercantile desire for promptness in the economic realm (p. 43).

An image is thus implicitly revealed of an early social figure of the *slow man*, the ideal of which is embodied, for Europeans in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, by the “lazy Indian” of the New World (p. 49). But the *slow man* can also be European and white, like the “*slow men of London*” (p. 63), the unhappy protagonists of a popular English ballad which mocked new arrivals to the capital for their lack of understanding of urban codes. In any case, from the 18th century, the conditions were ripe for “slowness in all its forms [to be] perceived as an obstacle to the proper functioning of society” (p. 72).

The unprecedented speed of steam and of its industrial applications encouraged a “war on the *slow*”, which is the focus of the second chapter. The machine age and the proliferation of watches and clocks imposed a new temporal discipline on the bodies

¹ Interview with the author, “Laurent Vidal”, <https://www.univ-larochelle.fr/recherche/nos-talents/laurent-vidal/>, viewed on 20/01/2021.

of workers (p. 107). The terms “*lambin*” (“slowcoach”) and “*lambiner*” (“slowcoaching around”) thus stigmatized, as early as the late 18th century, workers who were not fast enough (p. 99). A century later, the “*inattentive man*” stood for those who were not suited to industrial work (p. 113). Colonized people, Native Americans and Black people were also accused of “indolence” (p. 120), and relegated to the bottom of a social and racial hierarchy based in particular on speed, and celebrated by Georges Simmel, Filippo Marinetti or even Marcel Proust. In a theory that is audacious but could do with more justification, Laurent Vidal even suggests that we can view the “putting into camps” of a certain number of social undesirables by the Nazi regime as “the culmination of the metaphorical imprisoning within discriminatory categories of those whose movements at work and whose lifestyles did not seem to comply with society’s new rhythmic norms” (p. 141).

The Subversive Power of Changing Rhythm

The third chapter is appropriately titled “Impromptu”. Its brevity is in fact a direct echo of the rhythmic ruptures of the *slow men*, which it is introducing – ruptures “whose unexpected and abrupt use can become a way of challenging the fact that they are being sidelined” (p. 147). These ruptures, which are at the heart of the fourth chapter, could take a wide variety of forms. As early as the 18th century, for example, slaves slowed down work on the plantations in the United States and Brazil. Scottish workers did likewise at the end of the 19th century in order to obtain wage rises. They thus launched a movement called *Go Canny* (p. 156-157). The meaning of some pejorative terms was sometimes twisted, like in Paul Lafargue’s *Right to be Lazy* (1880) or Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Apology for Idlers* (1877).

But Laurent Vidal is mainly interested in Atlantic port towns, above all Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans, and their populations of low-skilled workers. These populations, which were composed of Black people and Europeans, former slaves and immigrants, alternated between frenzied activity and downtime. They also regularly patronized the “honky tonks” (musical bars) where ragtime, *criolés* and stink music were invented – all of them cultural, physical and perceptible forms that envisaged “the hypothesis of a different relationship to time – no longer as time that dominates, but rather as time that sets you free” (p. 191).

While up until this point the author has tried to distinguish different figures of *slow men* throughout history, as he comes closer to drawing his conclusion, he asks a fundamental question: “what if the category of *slow men* was a product of the very structure of human societies, rather than something that arises and develops in a specific set of circumstances?” (p. 199). The numerous examples that can be found of social classifications between fast and slow people, in particular among the Australian aboriginal tribes studied by the anthropologist Carl Georg von Braudenstein, suggest this could well be the case. Laurent Vidal nevertheless hastens to go beyond any opposition between the circumstantial and the structural: “[while] the habit of characterizing certain individuals as slow does seem to be immutable (in that we see it in different cultures and at different times), it ends up (at least in the Western world) changing and becoming, as it develops over time [...] a form of social discrimination (p. 202).

What About Slow Women?

In his conclusion, Laurent Vidal sketches the outline of what might be the contemporary figures of *slow men*: exiles (p. 207) and *Gilet jaunes* (p. 212), men and women. Why has he not spoken of the latter sooner? For the author, “it is men who are the main target of this putting-to-work discourse” (p. 209). This is a somewhat surprising claim. Women have never been excluded from salaried work, even in its industrial form. And by focusing on the urban salariat, the author neglects all of the nuances of work in the modern period, in which women had a central role to play, in the fields or in domestic workshops. Even though they were excluded from most corporations², they freely practiced certain professions, in particular in small and large-scale trade³, and even sometimes owned businesses⁴. We do not see why they would have been immune to the injunctions to speed and discriminations through

² Though not from all of them: see Cynthia Truant, “La maîtrise d’une identité ? Corporations féminines à Paris aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles”, *Clio*, no. 3, 1996, pp. 55-69.

³ Christine Dousset, “Commerce et travail des femmes à l’époque moderne en France”, *Les Cahiers de Framespa* [online], 2006, viewed on 21 January 2021, <http://journals.openedition.org/framespa/57>; André Lespagnol, “Femmes négociantes sous Louis XIV. Les conditions complexes d’une promotion provisoire”, in Alain Croix, Michel Lagrée, Jean Quéniart, Jean (ed.), *Populations et culture. Études réunies en l’honneur de François Lebrun*, Rennes, 1989, pp. 463-470.

⁴ A mother, Marie de Luxembourg, and her daughter Françoise thus owned a forge at the start of the 17th century in the Pays de Châteaubriant. Nicole, Dufournaud, “Les femmes au travail dans les villes de Bretagne aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles : approches méthodologiques”, *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest* no. 114-3, 2007, p. 47.

slowness that affected men. Furthermore, the accusation of idleness, which Laurent Vidal skillfully shows has its place in social and racial hierarchies, also feeds into hierarchies of gender in the public and domestic spheres. In 1531, a man who had killed his wife was granted a royal pardon after he denounced her inactivity at home⁵. In Rousseau's writing, idleness is presented as a natural characteristic of those women who, in the salons that they host, risk corrupting and feminizing men. Femininity itself is even associated with "limpness", which thus brings us back to the first meaning of *lentus*⁶! In short, we see here a whole range of discriminatory ideas regarding limp, lazy or corrupting *slow women*, which would have more than deserved a mention in this essay.

Literary Analogy or Causal Relationship?

Finally, we should note a problem caused by the use of analogy in this author's writing: it is not always clear whether this is meant to serve as literary evocation or scientific demonstration. For example, Laurent Vidal believes that musical syncopation, defined as the transformation of weak beats into strong ones, partly characterizes the forms of music that were invented in the "honky tonks" of Atlantic port towns:

"The analogy with the situation of *slow men* in the society of New Orleans or Rio de Janeiro is thus clear: excluded, on the margin, they grant themselves, through their subtle use of syncopation, a power that allows them to thwart the new temporality that claims to dominate them, body and soul." (p. 190-191)

What are we to make of this analogy between the musical device of syncopation and the attitudes of roustabouts towards the dominant temporalities, in particular that of port work? Should we conclude from this that the temporal characteristics of these forms of music are to be interpreted as signs of resistance to these temporalities? This is an exciting idea, but its demonstration leaves something to be desired. We are probably dealing here with the limitations inherent to the history essay as an exercise, since its writing, which is less formalized than that of a scientific paper, also leaves more room for interpretation⁷.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶ Yves Vargas, "Paresse et friponnerie", *Cites*, no. 21, no. 1, 2005, pp. 115-130.

⁷ For Laurent Vidal, "the historian [who studies *slow men*] must accept the audacity of poetic thought", p. 18.

But this reservation by no means makes us doubt this book's scientific relevance. It is a useful addition to those works that have focused on acceleration⁸ or speed⁹, decenters our gaze away from Europe¹⁰ and towards the Atlantic¹¹, and convincingly analyzes a long period of time in just two hundred pages. And, beyond the limitations we have highlighted above, it is indeed Laurent Vidal's prose itself that transports us with ease and benevolence into the ingeniousness deployed by *slow men* to subvert the temporal discriminations of modernity.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, on 3 February 2021.

Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info

Published in booksandideas.net, on 2 March 2023.

⁸ Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

⁹ Christophe Studeny, *L'invention de la vitesse. France, XVIII^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1995; Paul Virilio, *Vitesse et politique : essai de dromologie*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977.

¹⁰ To be more precise, it is usually Europe at the juncture of the 19th and 20th centuries that tends to attract authors' attention, such as Kern, Stephen, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983.

¹¹ Vanessa Ogle even took a global approach to time, but always within this restricted period, in *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870-1950*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015.