



Perceptions of Time in the Sustainability Movement: The Value of Slow for Sustainable Futures

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Abstract. The value of slow in the fast society can easily be associated with downshifting and voluntary simplicity – lifestyles that value more spiritual and emotional well-being rather than material accumulation. The literature on these topics is extensive, from religious studies of asceticism and humble simplicity, to the sociology of consumption. Nevertheless, a new approach to the value of time in living simply is needed in our more recent context of the 2008 crisis. After the Occupy movement of 2011 has been criticized for not being able to offer solutions to the problems they were challenging, the social movement for sustainability has become more and more visible. This movement is actively creating systemic alternatives, testing new social and economic models, redefining their relationship to money and material goods, imagining and sometimes enacting possible futures that go beyond the tensions of the crisis. In this article, I explore how members of the sustainability movement in Europe perceive time and how they interpret, feel, or imagine the value of slow. As I use the unstructured interview starting from a single question, the narratives that the respondents elaborate are complex and diverse, yet they recount a dual value of time: on the one hand, time can only be defined as slow or fast when it is related to external objects; on the other hand, time can be experienced as pressure or as expansion, depending on where the respondent perceives their locus of control. I use these accounts in an analysis that discusses the value of slow time for concrete utopias that re-enchant the world and for stimulating hope in alternative futures.

Keywords: time, slow, concrete utopia, futures, hope

Introduction

In this article, I explore the value of time, in particular the value of slow time, as a social construction and as a political process. In the context of the global crisis, I explore how the emerging and growing social movement for sustainability builds

its visions and actions on temporal experiences. It is not my intent to define and debate what sustainability means. Or rather, my intent is to see to what extent our cultural, political, and economic understandings of time affect our societal capacity to build a sustainable world. For a start, though, I do understand sustainability as that complex cultural behaviour that can be continued indefinitely on at least three dimensions: environment, economy, and society. Moreover, drawing from my informants for this study, I understand sustainability as a future that can be built for next generations in the current critical status quo that experiences a deep crisis of natural resources, fossil fuel, energy, politics, and social values.

The paper starts by outlining the context of the research, the social movement for sustainability. It then continues with interdisciplinary accounts of time, as I describe various interpretations of time and politics, time and lifestyle choices, and time in utopian thinking. The last part of the paper describes and analyses the current study: a qualitative research based on unstructured interviews that have explored the value of time as pressure and as expansion and its both individual and social transformation into slow time, which has deep implications for creating new cultures, for promoting persistence as a sustainable attitude towards the future and for acknowledging time as a multiple non-linear dimension.

Context: the social movement for sustainability

As a form of group action, social movements vary impressively in size, form, and scope, but they all share a common denominator: change. Social movements can be progressive or regressive, can be rooted in leftist, rightist, or centre ideologies, they can even be post-ideological, they can look to the future or reminisce on the past (Cross and Snow 2012). The social movements in the United States of America in their post-World War II era were regarded as deviant (Buechler 1993 – qtd by Zugman 2003) since political action and protest were interpreted as an abnormal reaction towards politics. Later on, in the 60s and 70s, social movements have been interpreted as extensions of political systems through mobilizing resources based on rational choices (Buechler 1993 – qtd by Zugman 2003). The theory of new social movements first came out in the 80s, circumscribing those movements that work towards a change for post-material values such as alternative lifestyles, meaning, and identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1988 – qtd by Zugman 2003). The more recent wave of social movements, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, and Indignados, have somewhat returned to the reactionary model of street protests and they were able to bring deep social and political problems to the fore. Nevertheless, these movements have been criticized for not being able to go beyond reaction, for not being able to offer solutions or models for change. The social movement for sustainability builds

on the experience of Occupy and Indignados and on the environmentalist social movement of the 70s. As it is a complex combination of initiatives of change that became more and more active in the context of the global crisis that started in 2008, the movement for sustainability can be interpreted as belonging to the new wave of social movements. The values that sustainability brings into the public discussion are post-material, even post-economic growth, post-carbon, post-oil, and focused on co-operation rather than on competition, on sharing, rather than on accumulating.

The context that allowed for this movement to emerge and to converge from a large number of initiatives is the global crisis that manifested in its financial form in 2008. The practitioners in the sustainability movement are aware of systemic problems that are larger and older than the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Topics such as peak oil (the maximum amount of oil exploitable by mankind), global warming, deep and sometimes irreversible perturbation of ecological systems, unsustainable and aggravating social inequality are part of an apocalyptic imaginary (Fallon and Douthwaite 2010) that, throughout the decades, has stimulated various responses. The perceptions of and reactions to the crisis and the public discourses on the crisis have drawn activist, academic, and media attention. For instance, a recent research from the London School of Economics and Political Science reviews media discourses and academic analyses available on discourses and perceptions of the crisis in Europe (Murray Leach 2014). According to this transnational study, the crisis is portrayed as an abstract given, a 'supernatural phenomenon'. The crisis is an economic, technical error. Such accounts rule out agency, causes, or possible solutions to overcome the crisis. Furthermore, in the European context, the European Union and other ruling apparatuses are represented as 'others,' as foreign entities that are responsible and blameworthy for the suffering generated by the crisis. In this sense, the media and the technocratic discourse of the crisis seldom bring into focus values such as solidarity and co-operation. As a result, the mainstream discourses of the crisis are technical, as media covers almost exclusively elite discourses of the crisis, those that belong to economic experts. The European crisis is not perceived as an arena for European citizens, rather it is a bureaucratic machine deeply challenged to explore technical, top-down virtual solutions.

In this deep divide between technocratic politics and citizenship, the grass-roots social movement for sustainability is slowly defining itself as different from previous waves of social movements seeking to promote change. If these previous movements were reactionary and based on protest, the social movement for sustainability relies on an attitude toward change based not on reaction but on creation, not on criticism but on solutions. This is consistent with a longitudinal research done by Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson in the United States between 1987 and 2000 (Ray and Anderson 2001) and later on replicated in the UK,

Germany, and Japan with consistent results. The authors have surveyed the adult population of the US in order to assess and learn more about their social and political values. Instead of using standard social values surveys, Ray has constructed a new questionnaire that allowed for social phenomena unobserved until then to emerge. The research has shown that, at the time of the study, around a quarter of the American adult population did not identify with any political ideology from left to right, were highly concerned with sustainability, felt increased responsibility for nature, and adopted a holistic approach toward the environment. Since the lifestyles, aspirations, consumption choices, ethics, and daily practices of these individuals seem to lead to a new civic, political, and economic culture, Ray has coined the term 'cultural creatives' to describe the phenomenon. As the research shows, these individuals and groups, through not identifying with the mainstream ways of doing politics and economy, contribute to the creation of new cultures, of alternative lifestyles, alternative economic models, and alternative ways of living in communities. Consistently with these results, Ray and Anderson estimated that there were 80 to 90 million cultural creatives in Europe as of year 2000.

Once these new lifestyles converged in social movements and in initiatives of change, the cultural creatives became more visible, more present in the public sphere. Such is the case with the recently increased interest in permaculture throughout Europe. Based on a holistic approach to revive the depleted soils of Australia in the 70s, in order to restore biodiversity and to regain the capacity of producing food, permaculture is now promoted by various initiatives of change as a strong model to generate sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods. Permaculture stands for permanent agriculture, which implies a shift of values and attitudes toward the environment, since it takes a step away from the seasonal rhythm of agriculture. It also stands for permanent culture as a set of values, norms, ideas, rules, and behaviours that allow for a sustainable permanent presence of mankind in natural systems. Another movement for change toward sustainability is Transition Towns. Initiated sometimes in the late 90s in the United Kingdom, Transition Towns promotes a set of practices and values necessary for transforming urban environments in sustainable and resilient cities and towns. The main message of this movement is that, when systemic collapse happens (for Transition Towns, collapse is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when), urban populations, currently on the rise, should have the capacity to survive, to rebuild economies and communities and, possibly, even thrive. The built surfaces of cities are a heritage of the growth- and oil-based civilization that need to be included in any plans and models for building sustainability and resilience to the crisis.

To these two main currents in the social movement for sustainability, we can add various modes of living that rely on redefinitions of people's relationship to material culture. The cultures of do-it-yourself and of reduce-reuse-recycle,

of voluntary simplicity and of downshifting, of gift-based and circular, local economies, of co-operatives and horizontal associations are parts of the growing trend of redefining the meaning of consumption and growth. New attitudes toward money allow for local currencies to be invented and used in economic micro- and mezzo-systems or for circular, local, participatory or gift economy models to be adopted and tested as possible solutions to the technical-financial crisis in profit-based neoliberalism. As cultural creatives and the social movement for sustainability have or tend to have holistic approaches, a change in one variable (money, consumption, leisure, etc.) brings along the necessity to reorganize the whole system. This is how new models of social organization or community organization have come into play. The Occupy movement brought to the general audience the value of consensus and participatory democracy. But these two models of decision-making can be complemented by consent, as it is practised in the viable systems model and in sociocracy. More recently, social innovators discuss about holocracy and rhizomic, non-hierarchical organizational models.

All these factors are tested and combined in order to explore the current capacity of the western world – if not globally – to go beyond the crisis and to imagine and stage sustainable futures. As the hegemonic system that the movement for sustainability seeks and builds alternatives to is deeply rooted and culturally constructed throughout centuries, the work of the sustainability movement is complex and highly challenged. In this sense, the current study takes a closer look at the value of time in the social movement for sustainability, exploring how time is perceived and used by individuals and groups that are actively involved in social innovation. In the next sections, I discuss the value of time in several perspectives: politics, lifestyles, and utopian thinking.

Interdisciplinary perspectives of time

Time and politics

I start my exploration of the value of time in the social movement for sustainability from the premise that the social construction of time is a political process (Verdery 1996). That time is socially constructed and relative to cultural contexts is a recurrent topic in anthropology and ethnography. Still, Verdery argues there is very little attention given to the political context of how time is constructed and determined culturally. In this sense, the construction of time as a political process brings to the fore aspects of power and determination. Conflicts and competition characterize any political context in which social actors create and impose new temporal disciplines over other social actors that are subjected to these transformations (Verdery 1996). Verdery's analysis focuses on a political

regime, the communism in Ceaușescu's Romania in the 80s, which created struggles over time in various forms. Through policies that regulated time and informal but equally powerful solutions to systemic problems – from working hours to be spent in the state production co-operatives or in factories, to the rationalization of food for which people queued in long lines as early as 4 in the morning in front of state shops – the political regime of Romania in the 80s created a temporal order in which state was the main deciding agent. Verdery names this process 'etatization'. Her analysis goes beyond the instruments through which cultures generally seize time – rituals, calendars, and schedules –, and focuses on the cultural and political body. Indeed, her ethnography of time in Ceaușescu's era shows how people were less able to pursue their own interests and activities because they had to be physically present somewhere else, even if that meant they would not be productive. For instance, Verdery accounts for a young villager who had to commute to work on a daily basis from the countryside to the factory. The commute would last for around one hour one way, by train. Sometimes, he would be sent back home due to electricity failure in the factory, or he would work very few hours during the workday schedule, and sometimes he would work extra hours. The physical presence in these temporal activities allows for little negotiations. Since time was not used in such an instance by the will of the individual, the state has taken over, has 'etatized' the value of time.

An interesting aspect in the western world is that the criticism towards how communism affected temporal autonomy holds valid for the capitalist consumer society, by and large. As Shippen argues, capitalism controls and dominates temporal necessities through determining how much time is necessary to be invested in working hours, in order to generate an income that can support livelihood in the market society (Shippen 2014). In other words, capitalism creates a regime of dominance over time that is not transparent. Working to make ends meet is part of life in capitalism; it is how the world works (Shippen 2014). This leads to a deep de-politicization of time, as negotiating time constraints is an individual challenge, highly visible in the self-help and self-development culture of finding your own work–family balance. Shippen observes that this is an effect of liberalism, which suggests that time belongs to individuals that rationally choose how to use it, disregarding the political and economic context in which time usage needs to be assessed. Even more so, rationalization in the market economy has facilitated the replacement of traditional thinking and emotions with efficiency and reason. In this sense, time is commodified; it becomes a good that can be sold. Indeed, 'time is money'. The capitalist logic that reinforces the usage of time in order to generate profit and economic growth renders the individual time of 'doing nothing' almost non-negotiable. Shippen accounts for how McDonald's rhythm and logic for making profit is incompatible with various cultural experiences of time, such as that of a couple of Korean

McDonald's patrons who, in their elder age, would enjoy coffee for long hours over the rush of fast food (Shippen 2014). Some years earlier, Ritzer observed this phenomenon manifesting at large and analysed it in 'The McDonalldization of Society' (Ritzer 2008). In this influential book, Ritzer discusses how the attributes of McDonald's restaurants have grown to actually describe society as a whole. Through convenience and affordability, the consumption of fast food has created a culture of fast living, of measuring time usage against comfort and money in linear ways of thinking and experiencing the world. In this sense, time is, if not etatized, then colonized by the capitalist regime.

To some extent, the experience of etatized, colonized, or commodified time in communism and capitalism can be interpreted as generated by or belonging to political regimes of anxiety. If research on the value of time argues that time is much too less regarded in its political context or as a political process, time is also much too less explored as a political affect. As the Institute for Precarious Consciousness elaborated in 2014 in a zine essay that received high general and specialized attention, the dominant reactive affect in capitalism is anxiety (Institute for Precarious Consciousness 2014). Through intricate forms of systemic control over individual autonomy, capitalism generates and maintains a regime of anxiety that depoliticizes time. Similar to Shippen's observation, the essay argues that the only political sphere in which individuals struggle to regain control is their own body, through 'micro-management': anger management, time management, parental management, gaming, or self-branding.

These critical accounts of uses of time in communism and capitalism point in a coherent manner to how time is politically constructed. In the following section, I bring into discussion two social movements that contributed and still contribute to the re-appropriation of time by individuals, withholding a strong political value: downshifting and voluntary simplicity.

Time and alternative lifestyles

Throughout the last thirty years, at the least, capitalist and consumer societies have been the stage for a particular form of temporal disengagement: downshifting. As Etzioni analyses, the forms of downshifting in the 80s and 90s implied reducing consumption in order to appear as more simple, reducing income in order to pursue individual goals that are less materialistic, and adjusting all levels of life to more simple patterns, in a holistic ethical attitude towards voluntary simplicity (Etzioni 1998). Although Etzioni's analysis has been influential, it is still narrowed to observing downshifters who have previously been well off. In other words, Etzioni's taxonomy of voluntary simplicity covers only part of the phenomenon, which occurred among high-paid, high-earning career- or business-oriented individuals. As Hamilton and Mail show, downshifting and practising voluntary

simplicity appears throughout the social-economic income-based spectrum, from well-off people, to blue-collars and low-income individuals and households (Hamilton 2003; Hamilton and Mail 2003). As research in the 90s and 2000s in the USA, Australia, and UK consistently show, the consumer society has had a strong toll on well-being and happiness (Hamilton 2003; Hamilton and Mail 2003). What the Institute for Precarious Consciousness identifies as a political regime of anxiety has been experienced throughout the last decades at a very intimate level by individuals and families in the global North. The pressure to perform, to self-brand, to earn money, and to become a profitable social actor has had its toll on how people spent their time. As previously discussed, time has been colonized by societal values that pursue profit and material success, to the expense of family, leisure, or personal time. This competitive environment has generated the pressure for 'quality time': although short hours are spent with the spouse or the children, these hours 'must' be of high quality. The anxiety oftentimes failing to obtain emotional quality under the pressures of material performance has been the main motivation to pursue voluntary simplicity. Nevertheless, once engaged in reducing working hours and income, downshifters have begun to develop a political consciousness and a critical attitude towards consumption, even alternative forms of civic engagement through reducing or reinventing consumption (Nelson et al. 2007). Such is the case with cultural creatives, who, as previously discussed, have later on formed the mass of the social innovation movement for sustainability. As a type of new social movement oriented towards obtaining and redefining meaning and identity, the movement for sustainability is characterized by voluntary simplicity, strong political consciousness, and ethical attitude towards consumption. In this sense, downshifting and voluntary simplicity appear to be life choices that bring meaning. Nevertheless, as Levy shows, leisure and family time are insufficient to provide meaning for downshifters, as these times are less structured (Levy 2005). In order to generate meaning and emotional well-being, downshifters need to engage in a particular type of work dedicated to achieving goods and results beyond the material (Levy 2005). Indeed, Thoreau's imaginary of voluntary simplicity in a hut in the woods is a utopian form of seizing time that disregards socialization and politics. In this sense, I further discuss the value of time in concrete utopias – contexts and dimensions that bring meaning to voluntary simplicity in the context of sustainability.

Time in utopian thinking

Although utopianism and utopian thinking have been largely dismissed during the twentieth century, the emergent movement for sustainability in the context of the global crisis is the perfect social, political, and economic context to explore, once more, utopian possibilities. Utopian thinking, after its quite long intellectual

history in the West, has received a twofold value in capitalism. First, in his book 'The Open Society and Its Enemies,' Karl Popper has criticized utopian movements as dangerous to liberalism, while Francis Fukuyama, while imagining 'The End of History and the Last Man,' rendered utopia irrelevant for liberalism (Weeks 2011). Popper's critique of utopian thinking relied on the emotional threat that utopianism brought to the rational-choice-based liberalism: if those who made their choices based on reasoned arguments were impartial and objective, the passionate utopianists would be individuals driven by emotions, by affects close to hysteria. In this sense, Popper warned of the importance of safeguarding rational thinking if liberalism were to survive the threats of the Cold War and of communism. Forty years later, Fukuyama wrote the influential essay in which he declared the triumph of liberalism based on reason and rational choices, thus casting the shadow of irrelevance over utopian thinking. Nevertheless, twenty years after Fukuyama's end of history, liberalism and the capitalist model entered a deep crisis, doubting whether capitalism is indeed the end of history. Some of the global social movements that reacted against the hegemony of capitalism have been criticized as not bringing forth a solution to the systemic dysfunction of neoliberal markets and societies. Still, the emergent movement for sustainability, through its power to create new cultures, brings again utopia under focus, both as an interesting intellectual exercise and as a concrete design in response to the challenges of the crisis. Utopian thinking as a diversity of glimpses into the future, of incitements towards imagining alternatives, takes the movement for sustainability beyond what Pierre Bourdieu has called economic fatalism: the belief that the world can not be in any way different from the way it is (Bourdieu 1998). Indeed, utopian thinking repositions the social agents in relation to time and to politics. First, it alters the connection to the present, thus generating the experience of estrangement. Utopian thinking creates an otherness that liberates from the configurations of the present time. It activates political awareness and criticism, and political will. The individual is thus desubjectified, they sense the taste of political desire. Time is no longer a constraint, it is a liberating dimension that opens up possibilities. Indeed, while altering the relationship to the present, utopian thinking shifts our relationship to the future. The future, as Bloch's concept of the Real-Possible entails, is the unfolding of the present's possibilities. Utopia has, in this context, a function of provocation, it challenges the present to unfold into alternative futures (Weeks 2011). Thus, utopian thinking provides inspirational models, it generates hope. The fatalism of the political regimes of anxiety that etatize, colonize, or commodify time is replaced by hope, an affect that redefines our relationship to history, to the present, and to futurity. Once hope is experienced, utopia becomes more than an intellectual possibility. Utopian thinking transforms into performance, through which utopia becomes an empirical reality. Writing at the same time with Popper's criticism of utopia

as a threat to liberalism, Ernst Bloch developed on the value of concrete utopias in his three volumes of 'The Principle of Hope' (Bloch 1985 – qtd by Weeks 2011). Concrete utopia is a utopian form that negates and disinvests the current political status quo, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, it presents itself as an affirmation, as a provocation towards alternatives. In this sense, utopia becomes concrete, not merely an intellectual imagination, because it creates the opportunity for conscious participation in the creation of history, culture, and society. Concrete utopias offer the possibility of increased participation in the current system, through the imagination of something else (Foucault, 1977 – qtd by Weeks 2011).

The present study

With this conceptual map in mind, I explore the value of slow time in the movement for sustainability as both political and personal, as concrete and utopian, as othering and empowering, and as performance and stillness. How is time perceived thus by individuals and groups in the sustainability movement? How is it used? What does slow mean in the sustainability movement? How do individuals negotiate time? What is the political desire that the usage of time elicits in the movement for sustainability?

In order to answer to these questions, I have used a qualitative research methodology based on unstructured interviews: three individual interviews via e-mail and one group interview with eight participants, face to face. The participants are activists, practitioners, and stakeholders from the sustainability movement in Europe, from seven countries: Germany, Austria, Italy, Portugal, UK, the Republic of Ireland, and Romania. While e-mail interviewing allowed the participants to reflect and to elaborate on their answers, group interviewing facilitated the interaction between participants and the building of responses into a snowball process that explored the value of slow and of time in depth. Aiming at drawing the most from the experience of the participants, I have decided to use unstructured interviews that started with two trigger questions: 'What is the value of slow for you?' and 'What is your perception of time?'. The advantage of venturing in the realm of an unstructured method is that the data thus collected provides an emic perspective on the topic. Even though there was an increased risk to collect inconsistent data, the direct experience of the respondents revealed common patterns in their accounts of temporal experiences. Even though we started from just one question that I input, the temporal dimensions that the participants explored freely, either individually or together, emerged in patterns that I further analyse.

I chose to explore the value of slow in the fast society as constructed and experienced by activists and practitioners in the sustainability movement as

an attempt to bridge two distinct worlds: the academic community and the practitioners' community. This small study belongs to a larger personal and political project to explore and develop ways scientists and researchers, on the one hand, and practitioners, on the other, can inform and support one another in promoting sustainable lifestyles and economic models in Europe. The criticism that academia is working isolated from the larger society while it is also compelled – lately – to follow neoliberal efficiency models is not new in the history and the present of science. Non-formal and unstructured conversations with sustainability activists and practitioners revealed the necessity of incorporating in research the experiences of spirituality and the dynamics of emotions in the work towards sustainability, both as research topics and as elements of better research designs. Throughout my ethnographic experience based on action research in the sustainability movement, I have observed the quite great extent to which sustainability activists and practitioners are interested and sometimes even in need of reorienting social, anthropological, economic, and psychological research from the predominant quantitative approach towards qualitative methodologies. Qualitative methods are perceived by this demographic group as more human and less technical, more in depth and less descriptive, more complex and diverse in searching solutions to the current crisis in quite relevant social models for the change towards sustainability (Fofiu and Dobos 2015).

Data analysis

The value of temporal experiences for sustainability

A strong pattern that emerged through the conversations was that the relationship with the notion of time is an ongoing process that constantly repositions the respondents, through experiences of learning and deep understanding. The main story that the respondents share starts from the intimate perception of time in the current global crisis as too pressuring. At some point in their time, for some, quite recent, for others, dating a few years back (from the 2000s to 2011-2012), my respondents experienced such a deep emotional pressure to perform against time that they either made decisions towards slowing down or are currently in the process of downshifting. Becoming a sustainability activist or practitioner entails life-changing decisions and long-term processes of personality development, as sustainability activism develops holistic thinking. Each informant was, at the time of these interviews, in a different personal stage of envisioning and practising sustainability.

Time is experienced as pressure in the neoliberal mainstream culture due to several aspects. First, time is perceived as acceleration. More 'things happen at

the same time, and it is a constant challenge to keep up the rhythm' (M. W.). In the artificial environment of the city, time is a pressure because people are expected to perform. Not performing, not doing anything can be subject of intense criticism from those around, who can observe when someone falls out of rhythm. This brings along the feeling of agitation: the simultaneity of events and processes defocuses the mind, 'it is hard to choose what to focus on' (M. W.). This also elicits the fear of losing the opportunity of doing one activity or participating in one process or event in case one chooses to focus on another activity, process, or event. This simultaneity generates superficiality and the sensation of living at high speed. As one of the respondents described their temporal experience in the world, the fast society is built on the glorification of busyness, of not allowing ourselves almost any time, except the time to work: 'the world is already a too much agitated place, it doesn't need more agitation. In a culture where being busy is glorified, this is the right time to slow down, to live more simply, in a more conscious way and loving ourselves more dearly' (F. S.). Another respondent described this society as a *karoshi* society, a society in which we kill ourselves through overwork and that is killing itself through unsustainability (A. G.).

These temporal experiences are the source of feeling the need to change. Each of the respondents was on their own subjective experience of changing how they related to time. As it emerged through the interviews, slowing down or learning new ways to negotiate time is an intimate experience, it comes with deep personal understandings. The topics that emerged as responses to the pressure of time revolved around the perception of time as expansion, not as pressure. Some of the respondents told how they understood this value of time through the need to pursue personal degrowth, as opposed to personal growth. In the culture of self-help and personal branding, personal growth and development are dependent on doing more, not on doing less. In this sense, the personal ethics of degrowing lead the way towards mindfulness and meditation. Part of my respondents shared their experience of meditation and mindfulness as techniques or even 'places' in which time in itself does not move: 'when I am alone and I close my eyes, I don't feel time' (A. P.). Meditation as a conscious technique of slowing down or even stopping the flow of time proved to be a highly efficient way of acknowledging agitation, as was the case with F. S. In this situation, becoming aware of agitation and practising meditation are not necessarily in a chronological order, rather they are mutually informative. What some of my respondents accounted for was that the chance to slow down allowed for passive observation to take the place of the struggle to do as much as possible in as little time as possible. As D. P. develops:

I am convinced we need a daily mindfulness practice, essential to be effective agents of change and slow us down. Permaculture design emphasizes the need to slow down and observe. Otto Scharmer's Theory U process for innovation also starts with slowing down, observing and tapping into source before taking action.

Too often we jump into doing with too narrow a perspective when we need to slow down, zoom out, and see from the widest perspective what we need to do.

In the case of this respondent, mindfulness and observation have become, through practice, conscious acts of experiencing time. This awareness has two main effects regarding the value of slow. First, it stimulates the political desire, and then it transforms individuals in consciously active social and political agents.

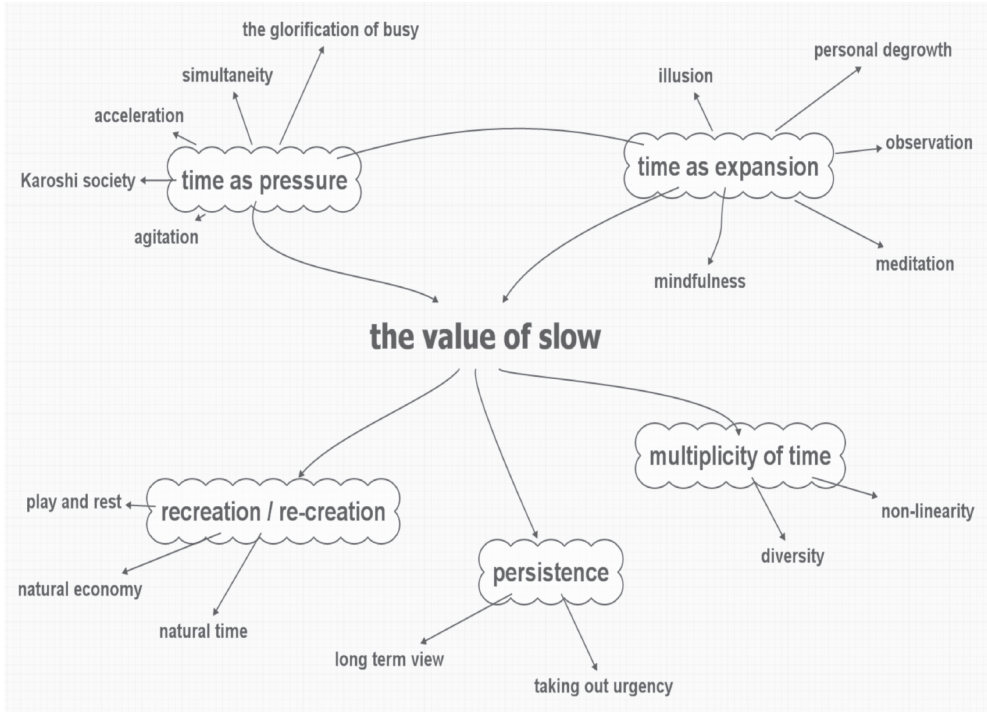
As F. S. stated:

We left our jobs so we could dedicate our time being BUSY on finding solutions for a more simple and sustainable lifestyle, linking people, connecting projects and bridging movements such as permaculture, transition town, and ecovillages. And there is so much work to do and explore in these areas that I created the illusion that I couldn't stop even for a minute [...].

On the other hand, experiencing slow time through mindfulness and meditation has also facilitated spiritual experiences to some of the respondents. They shared their perception of time as being an illusion that varies in relation to external objects. Time is mobility and speed only when we reference it to movement. The time spent in the garden observing plants grow or the time spent in the car on the highway are two very different temporal experiences; one is slow, the other is fast; one is natural, the other is artificial. In this sense, D. S. was able to elaborate on how time is an illusion when they experienced it as time-space, not as time: 'slow or fast are attributes of speed, and time should be a constant. Time-space is not time in itself, it is something else.'

Building on these perceptions of time as pressure and time as expansion, the discussions with my respondents evolved towards assessing the value of slow for a sustainable world. In their views, experiencing a slower time reveals at least three values necessary to build sustainability: persistence, multiplicity, and recreation. Persistence is a work attitude that implies the capacity of viewing long-term processes and effects. It is highly dependent on observation, as only taking the time to observe can reveal where action is needed. In D. S.'s words: 'what we do today in our culture of fast is to do a lot now and tomorrow correct what we have done today, a spiral that goes like crazy to nowhere, instead of slowing down and observing what really needs to be done.' A work attitude in which we focus on now and on today is short-sighted and unable to account for slower effects. Living agitated lives in the glorification of busy has created a general sense of urgency, of anxiety, as we have discussed above. Adopting a persistent attitude through slowing down may enable us to take out the sense of urgency (A. G.). This leads the way towards new cultures, in which we recreate and recreate. Consistent with the characteristics of cultural creatives, my respondents' experiences with slowing down have revealed the necessity and opportunity to recreate cultures, economies, and livelihoods. So, slowing down is not only an individual choice under the pressures of the present, it is also a social act based

on individual agency, which generates new ways of living. Slow is valuable in the transition from a busy, work-based life to a more natural life, in which work, rest, and play are balanced. Slow is an opportunity to better negotiate between these qualities of time through ‘stepping out from the one dimensional quality of time’ (P. J.). For another respondent, recreation both as play and rest and as creating a new culture is not about stepping out. It is about centring: ‘when I’m the centre, I let things come to me and I have the consciousness that everything is all right, I’m doing the right thing at the right time and I can change a lot, instead of trying to be everywhere. Sometimes I don’t need to do anything, because things are coming to me’ (M.W.). These various experiences of slow have revealed a quality of time that is not accessible in the fast society: multiplicity. My respondents have reported on how observing and working with various qualities of time has enriched their lives, rendering them capable of living multiple livelihoods in the same amount of time. The non-linearity and diversity of slow times has helped some of the respondents to understand the difference between natural time and economic time.



Graph 1. Conceptual map of the recurring topics in the unstructured interviews on perceptions of time and the value of slow. Generated with xMind.

The last 100 years we passed from the natural time to the economic time. Time is no longer about the speed of light or the growth of a tree or the revolution of

Earth around the sun. Rather, it is the time needed to travel from here to New York. We used to do this in several months, now we do it in a few hours. We constructed the concept of time around business, money, speed: the higher the speed the shorter time seems to be. This isn't an objective situation, it is just an economic construct based on cheap energy and higher and higher speeds of transfer of data (D. S.).

A natural time and a natural economy are systems in which work and productivity are no longer the focus. They are systems in which people no longer make a living based on earning money, but build livelihoods through participating in community life, engaging with nature, and working in a sustainable way.

Conclusion

The accounts on temporal experiences, as illustrated above and in *Graph 1*, indicate that members of the social movement for sustainability found individual and social ways of temporal disengagement with the processes of etatization, colonization, and commodification of time. Once venturing in experiences of slowing down, the respondents experienced desubjectification from various means of temporal control. This had a twofold effect. On the one hand, they have become the others of the mainstream culture, but any possible tension from disidentification was solved through acquiring the awareness of a higher scope and meaning: that of actively working for a sustainable future. Choosing to downshift and slow down and actively working for sustainability are not necessarily chronological, rather they are mutually informative. Through this reciprocity, slow time receives a political and cultural value. First, it mobilizes individuals to critique and disinvest the status quo, thus negating the current state of the crisis as being the only one. Indeed, the respondents who experienced the value of slow can see beyond Bourdieu's economic fatalism. Second, experiencing slow transformed from an individual subjective experience into a vision, a provocation for alternative futures. In this sense, the value of slow in the movement for sustainability resides in its intrinsic utopian character. The abilities to see and foresee beyond the tension of the crisis transform slow living into a utopian performance. The present is redefined as multiple, as diverse, as natural, as long-term, as not urgent, as playful and resting, and as opposed to busy, agitated, accelerating, and pressuring. The mere exploration of possibilities to slow down can transform time as pressure into time as expansion, from where our fast society can be informed and inspired on how observation, persistence, and multiplicity can re-create sustainable futures and hope.

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