

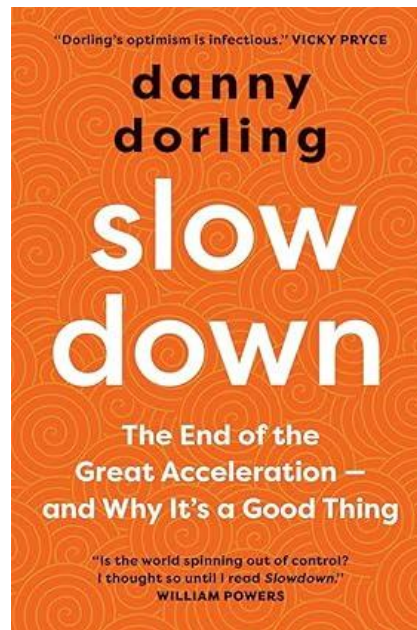
Slow Down: The End of the Great Acceleration – And Why It's a Good Thing

Danny Dorling

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Danny Dorling has established a deserved reputation as one of the UK's leading (and increasingly prolific) social scientists. That reputation is based on the accumulation of large amounts of high-quality data which is then scrupulously considered and engagingly presented. This is certainly the case with this book, *Slow Down*, which features extensive use of timelines as a means of displaying data as it changes through time. This method shows not only the magnitude of observations but also changes year-on-year. The timelines use smoothed data to reduce oddities and aberrations in individual observations. As Dorling notes, this approach is one that is rarely used in western social science but it is one which does effectively show how change occurs in complex data sets.

Dorling's central thesis is that while we have been living in periods of enormous, unprecedented change, the rate of change is now slowing down, hence the title. The data are drawn principally from the past five generations, which has a beginning in 1901, although longer perspectives are taken when required. The start date may be taken as a proxy for the great accelerations of the current age. A main plank of his argument concerns global populations. The threat of apparent over-population has been an issue in political discourse since at least 1798 when Malthus famously wrote his treatise that starvation would follow the continued increase in population. He was evidently wrong about this contention, as advances in technology have hugely increased the productivity of agricultural systems. Nevertheless, this has not stopped a series of mostly ill-

meaning people arguing that it was not exactly over-population that is the problem but over-population by the wrong type of people. However, it has become apparent in recent years that populations will not increase forever because as people's standard of living increases, they feel less need for relatively large numbers of children. After all, if people have one or two children they can be sure will survive them into adulthood, then why not stick at that number so that more resources can be concentrated on them as individuals? Greater freedom of choice for women in the form of reliable contraception combined with more justice in the workplace (albeit there is still a long way to go) has further contributed to reducing the number of children being born. Stories from countries such as Italy and South Korea about women becoming increasingly uninterested in starting a family have become commonplace. However, Dorling goes further than this by showing how family sizes have been declining around the world, including the less developed parts of Africa, Haiti, Guatemala and so forth. He has been proven right in the past when UN figures have been revised downwards as he had predicted. Now he argues that peak population will come sooner than predicted and so too will be its diminution.

This part of the book is well-grounded in data and quite credible. Other parts of his argument are a little less so. For example, he claims that the era of enormous gains in productivity from technological advancement are over and that its trajectory arcs back towards the mean. Perhaps it is a result of where I live and my exposure to the changes taking place in China that incline me to see a more dynamic period coming. Further, these additional sections are not as well-supported by data and citations – it may be argued that the book is aimed at a general audience but it is, nevertheless, published by Yale University Press. This updated paperback version of the book contains an epilogue dealing with the recent coronavirus pandemic. Using his by now familiar timeline method, he carefully shows how the pattern of mortalities played out differently in different countries, even though the disease followed the same progress everywhere. If there are significant variations here, can there not be in other spheres of human activity? In fact, significance as a concept is strangely lacking from the text. Perhaps I am doing it wrongly but whenever I am teaching or just thinking about research methods, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, I am much concerned with finding significant results that permit the discarding of the null hypothesis. In this way, the claim for contribution to academic knowledge can be made. It may be that this is too academic an approach for the concept of the book; Dorling is an excellent communicator of social science to the public and writes with a pleasing inclusion of cultural allusions and comparisons to well-known phenomena as a means of making his various points.

One that this is particularly endearing about Dorling is his optimism – he might be the living embodiment of Gramsci's dictum of pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. He finds in the sense of slowing down opportunities for people to rest from endless exhausting change and start to work out how things may be made better for everyone. As he has persuasively written elsewhere and mentions here, it is inequality which is at the heart of much that is wrong with the world. Above all, deceleration will enable us to tackle the one thing that is not slowing down – global climate change. While others have found that only in degrowth will we be able to take the

steps necessary to survive the climate emergency, Dorling can see a world in which that is going to happen of its own accord. Let us hope he is right in this.

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