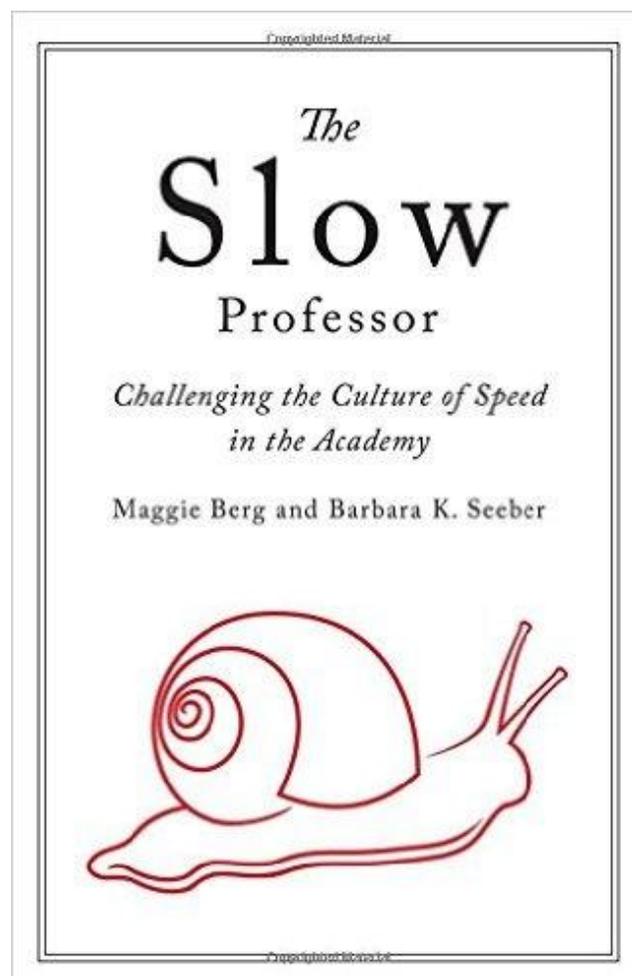


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review  
The Slow Professor:  
Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy  
By Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber

Reviewed by Jackie Brady



## **The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy** **Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber** **(University of Toronto Press, 2016)**

Reviewed by Jackie Brady

Just a few weeks ago, as the Fall Semester at the community college where I work was wrapping up, I ran into an especially exhausted seeming colleague in the copy room. When I asked her how she was doing, she explained, between coughing spasms, that she had pneumonia. "Walking pneumonia?" I inquired, concerned that she was at work in spite of her diagnosis and obvious discomfort. "No," she replied, "regular pneumonia. I really should be at home in bed, but I was afraid of getting too far behind on everything at this point in the semester." I nodded my understanding. What teacher does not know the pressure to get work done even when it means ignoring our own wellbeing? To this colleague and all "beleaguered, managed, frantic, stressed, and demoralized professor[s] who [are] the product of the corporatization of higher education" (ix) (that covers most of us), Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber offer a form of a remedy in their little book, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*.

Berg and Seeber draw their framework and inspiration from the Slow Food Movement begun in Italy in 1986. This movement, as many *Radical Teacher* readers will know, opposes big agribusiness, industrialized food production, and globalization by promoting local products, sustainable methods, and small businesses with fair labor practices. Like the Slow Food Movement, the Slow Professor Movement suggested by the authors, takes aim at the central capitalist concepts that *faster and more output are better* and that *workplaces should operate with machine-like efficiency*. School administrators began to adopt the principle of workplace efficiency already back in the Progressive Era. And by now, over one hundred years later, it has taken firm hold in the neoliberal corporate university. According to the authors, it has created a debilitating "culture of speed," made even worse by "the rise in contractual positions, expanding class sizes, increased use of technologies, downloading of clerical tasks onto faculty, and the shift to managerialism"(3). Such systemic changes to academic culture conspire to, in the authors' word, "balloon" our workloads, making faculty busier and busier, ever more responsible to their students, departments, and above all administrators. It is no surprise then that, as Berg and Seeber describe, they stress us out, wear us down, and render our workplaces lonely as ghost towns (75).

In their introduction and first chapter on "Time Management and Timelessness," Berg and Seeber marshal compelling evidence to show us just how bad it has gotten for faculty in higher education today: "Stress in academia exceeds that of the general population" (2); professors report feeling more pressured about accomplishing work

tasks and more tired than CEOs (16); and the professorial disease of time pressure has spread internationally. (Both authors teach at universities in Canada, and they cite studies of professors in Europe, Australia and the United States). We also learn that there are some dreadfully misguided advice manuals out there touting time management skills for faculty. Feel your heart race when you read Philip C. Wankat's advice from *The Effective Efficient Professor* (2002) that we should be getting everything done in 55 hours per week (quoted on 19); or your eyes roll when you read tips such as stand when students and colleagues come by your office so they don't linger (18); or your blood boil when you read the suggestion to use your graduate students to do your work, just as long as you buy them pizza or a round of drinks to make them feel better (18).

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Written in accessible prose, Berg and Seeber's intentionally short book is meant to provide an "intervention" against the harmful culture of the corporatized academy, so that professors can "take back the intellectual life of the university"(x). The authors offer up this work as "part self help", to reduce our stress, and "part manifesto", to call us to action. In just over 100 pages, they include chapters on how all parts of professorial work—teaching, research, and collegiality—have been hurt by the culture of speed, and can be helped by resisting it. Along the way, the authors drive home their points that 1) thoughtful work in places of higher education takes time and 2) that the labor of faculty must not be degraded by instrumentalist approaches, which frame professors as machine-like neo liberal subjects (59). Although the authors thoroughly dismantle the popular "perception of professors as a leisured class"(2) by painting a picture of a contemporary professoriate that is widely suffering from too much work and too little free time, they purposely avoid the rhetoric of crisis that we at *Radical Teacher* so often adopt. According to the authors such rhetoric may accurately diagnose the problem, but it also creates "a sense of urgency" that overwhelms and ultimately paralyzes us because we "feel even more powerless"(11). We should pay attention to this point that the discourse of impending cataclysm, however much we believe it, may not be good for individual agency and so not the most effective tool for inspiring us to social action.

Instead, Berg and Seeber want their book to motivate us to change our selves and, in so doing, our academic

culture. As part of this aim, and in keeping with the spirit of the manifesto, they suggest ways of resistance for all three areas of our academic work. Their suggestions are generally useful tips that would make any individual professor's work life feel better, and for that they are sufficiently valuable. For examples: in order to reclaim the joy in teaching ("Pedagogy and Pleasure"), the authors suggest that in our classrooms we laugh (44) and tell more stories (47); to accomplish meaningful research ("Research and Understanding"), they recommend that we wait the necessary amount of time it takes for any given project to reach its organic completion (64); and to build our collegial relationships into supportive networks that lift us up ("Collegiality and Community"), they propose that we "risk candor," yet more importantly, not give up hope that our department culture can change (84). These ideas, albeit helpful, are neither groundbreaking nor radical. More unfortunately, when proposed as individual behavioral changes, they are more compatible with neoliberalism than hostile to it. Here, as the title of their book hints, the authors catch themselves up in a common trap of third wave feminism, mistakenly trusting that changing the self will change the world, or in this case that by changing from a fast professor into *The Slow Professor* one can resist the system of the corporatization of the university. In other words, the authors offer individual interventions that cannot defend against structural problems.

In order to fully appreciate the contribution that Berg and Seeber make with *Slow Professor*, some of us may need to suppress our inner curmudgeon, who believes that the authors place too much trust in "individual practice as a site of resistance"(6), and that the systemic problem of neoliberalism and its corporatization of the university is much too huge to be combated by individual changes within the academy. But taken altogether, Berg and Seeber's suggestions for resistance can be appreciated as an important reminder that insidious patriarchal values, particularly those that derive from what Susan Bordo identified in her essay "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought" (*Signs*, 1986), still pervade the academy, contributing to its instrumentalism. In this sense, *The Slow Professor* carries on the work that came out in the late 1980s and early 1990s by feminists calling for a new feminist epistemology that integrates the wisdom of the body, including emotions and pleasure, and embraces caring and collective ways of learning.

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There is no question that, in first diagnosing the epidemic of the overworked professoriate and then in recommending a cocktail of remedies to help us each fight the disease of speed in academic culture, the authors have created a feel good book with many helpful insights. Academic work got you feeling sick and tired? Rest up and read *The Slow Professor*. Doing so will likely make you feel better, particularly if you accept, as the authors do, that by taking this time for reflection (x) you are also helping to challenge the detrimental culture that made you sick in the first place. Just remember: once you have regained your strength, to fully take back the neoliberal corporate university, you will need more than just yourself.



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