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Politics and Speed Today

A conversation with Simon Glezos

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ABSTRACT

Simon Glezos is a leading social and cultural theorist of time. He has published several journal articles on temporality, and two robust monographs on the matter: The Politics of Speed (Routledge, 2012) and the recent Speed and Micropolitics (Routledge, 2020). In this interview, we will look back on his celebrated works on speed and politics. In doing so, I also get his opinion on current issues that affect the time-politics bond today. The interview seeks to examine the topicality of the acceleration theory through the voice of one of its more original authors, having in mind current socio-political phenomena such as pandemic deceleration, social malaise (both global and local), energy challenges, and the revitalization of old nationalisms.

Keywords: Speed, Politics, Social Theory.

Velocidad y política hoy

Una conversación con Simon Glezos

RESUMEN

Simon Glezos es un destacado teórico social y cultural del tiempo. Ha publicado varios artículos en revistas sobre la temporalidad y dos sólidas monografías sobre el tema: The Politics of Speed (2012) y Speed and Micropolitics (2020). En esta entrevista avanzaremos una breve retrospectiva sobre sus célebres trabajos sobre velocidad y política. Al hacerlo, hemos recogido su opinión en temas de actualidad relevantes que afectan al vínculo tiempo-política hoy. La entrevista examina la actualidad de la teoría de la aceleración a través de la voz de uno de sus autores más originales, teniendo en cuenta fenómenos sociopolíticos contemporáneos como la desaceleración pandémica, el malestar social (tanto global como local), los retos energéticos y la revitalización de los viejos nacionalismos.

Palabras clave: Velocidad, Política, Teoría social.

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Felipe Torres: Simon, allow me to start with a more personal question: how did your interest in time and politics come about? When did you start examining the cultural nature of speed, its underpinnings, and consequences? I am sure these answers will help to contextualize your work for the readers.

Simon Glezos: Let me begin by thanking you so much for the invitation to join you in this conversation.

In the introduction to my first book, *The Politics of Speed*, I describe how my interest in social acceleration came out of my experience moving to the United States from Canada for graduate school in 2002, just in the run up to the Iraq war. Seeing the speed with which the administration moved to war, and how much they relied on the apparent pace of the threat they faced as a way of avoiding democratic due process and public debate, made me concerned about the political effects of speed. From there I begin to interrogate the political dimensions of speed in other contexts, looking at the effect of accelerating capital flows on labour markets, and seeking to understand the dynamics of widespread migration and accelerating technologies of war-making. However, in looking into the subject, I was struck by how little sustained theoretical investigation there was, especially given how central it was to life in late modernity. Where you did see theoretical discussions, it tended to a) be a case where discussions of speed were actually stand-ins for some related, but non-identical, topic (globalization, capitalism, automation, information and communication technologies, etc.), and b) they tended to fall into simplistic, pro-speed or anti-speed narratives. Ultimately, I found that none of the existing literature satisfied my desire to understand the politics of speed (which is not to say that I hadn't found a variety of helpful resources).

So, at this stage I had a strong sense of the problem that I wanted to deal with, but no real sense of what the answer looked like. Surprisingly the path forward came to me not through reading texts, but through a work of art. I was visiting the Guggenheim in New York, to see a retrospective on the Futurist painter, Umberto Boccioni. Many of Boccioni's works interrogated the pace of modern world, exploring aesthetic and affective techniques that could instill in the viewer the feeling of life in an accelerating world. Obviously, this was already of interest to me as a budding scholar of speed. However, at this specific exhibition they were showing Boccioni's masterwork *Materia*, a portrait of his mother. I learned there that the painting's title and style were inspired by Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1991), a text and thinker I was already immersed in. The exhibit made clear the way in which Boccioni's exploration of speed and acceleration was bolstered by Bergson's ontological reflections on the nature of time and movement.

Looking at this work helped me to see the potential connections between theoretical texts around the nature of time and becoming that were a staple of my graduate school life (Nietzsche, 1997; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Connolly, 2002; Brown, 2001; Lucretius, 1995) and my work on the accelerating pace of political events. That Boccioni's work avoided being polemical in any direction, but instead simply attempted to interrogate the affective and phenomenological aspects of social acceleration helped give me a vision of what a more complex and nuanced account of speed might look like. This insight carried through all of my work on speed, ultimately ending up in the

phenomenological micro-level interrogations of my second book *The Micropolitics of Speed* (It was gratifying that the cover of the paperback version ended up being an image of Boccioni's sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*).

Felipe Torres: Your book *The Politics of Speed* is mainly concerned with general trends of speed and politics, while your second book *Speed and Micropolitics* is mainly focused on the micro-level (as the title indicates). What is the reason for this turn? Did you realize that the macro-level has lost its theoretical privilege? Do you think that scholarship should put more emphasis on the micro-level now? This turn may be well-grounded with the ever-increasing multiple time thesis, which is another way to stress the existence of more than 'only' 'one' 'general' perspective on the temporal phenomena by instead favoring other time expressions. You have built up your work by using Spinoza, Deleuze, Guattari and also STS scholarship. Those influences have imposed a very suggestive approach on embodiment, especially in your latest book, which may be read as an attempt for a more situated approach. To put it differently, should we move from schematic distinctions (slow-fast) to more nuanced, overlapping and complex temporalities via concepts of synchronicity, rhythms and recurrences?

Simon Glezos: I think that the turn to micropolitics in my second book was less a rejection of more macro-level analyses (although I agree, they have lost some of their theoretical privilege since the turn of the millennium) than it was a continuation of the arguments that I made in my first book. I viewed the turn towards micro-analysis as a necessary complement to the work I was doing in the first book, rather than a kind of 'going beyond'. So, by way of example, in my first book, I developed the concept of what I called "*ressentiment against speed*" in which I argued that the turn towards increasingly anti-democratic, authoritarian politics –supposedly as a result of a need to respond quickly to fast-paced events– was less a function of the practical limitations of democratic institutions, and more about the emergence of a *ressentiment*-laden rejection of politics in a time of uncertainty. I said there that if we wanted to push back against the rise of authoritarian politics in the present, we would need to develop tools to manage and overcome this *ressentiment* against speed. However, the argument effectively broke off there, since developing tools to respond to *ressentiment* meant being able to analyze, understand, and intervene politically at the affective level, something which I had not done in my first book. That is therefore where I turned in the second book, looking to thinkers (such as Nietzsche whom I discussed in the first book; but also Spinoza, 1982; Bergson, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Ahmed, 2006; Coole, 2007a) who had developed micro-level analyses of affects, as well as thinking about what kinds of practices of the self, and micropolitical interventions, might help to manage this will to *ressentiment*. A similar complementarity happened in terms of discussions in both books around social movements, migration, and accelerating information and communication technologies. In this regard, then, I think the two books kind of speak to the need for both macro- and micro-level interrogations. In a similar vein, I sometimes found myself thinking of the first book as a politics of speed, and the second, an ethics.

Felipe Torres: In the final part of the chapter, 'Regimes of (im)mobility', in your groundbreaking 2012 work *The Politics of Speed* mentioned above, you showed how the global flows –those

incessant colossal forces– define the rhythms of global mobility. You stated accurately that those flows foster *ressentiments* of the locals, about their 'traditions' and the 'own', that, in turn, nurture nationalist-conservative political movements. Seen from today this even looks prophetical. The 'immobile' thus is linked to the local, or that which does not flow, while the 'mobile' is considered 'modern', 'cosmopolitan', 'advanced'. In other words, we have witnessed the rise of right-wing nationalisms that, in many regards, is a response to the changing values espoused by capitalist globalization as well as a claim to stop the incessant movement in modern societies and instead favor a more stable identity. According to Aleida Assmann (2013) we live in an accelerated globalization, which is another way to label the preponderance of time over space and the global over the local. In this scenario, do you think that it is possible to render the nationalist wave as a conservative response and claim against the 'situational identity' (Rosa, 2013)? To put it in other words: is the incessant movement of social acceleration an indirect reason for current talk of 'pro-static', 'national-grounded' or 'local-based', traditional identities? Or more in your terms: do you think that the 'nationalistic wave' we witness globally may be understood as a rejection of 'flows' or 'mobilities'? Is this tribal claim to the local, the 'own', or the 'we', a natural response to the lack of stable references in a world of flows, mobilities, and speed politics?

Simon Glezos: Well, perhaps unsurprisingly, I think the answer is yes and no. On the one hand, as I discussed above, I think it's absolutely the case that an emerging *ressentiment* against speed is one of the major affective drives behind a variety of reactionary political movements and dispositions. At the same time, we should be careful that we don't find ourselves dropping into an oversimplified binary in which 'slowness' is paired with 'conservatism' and 'quickness' with, as you say 'the modern, cosmopolitan or advanced'. Such a binary is unhelpful for several reasons. First of all, it ignores the way in which conservative/reactionary political movements are (and arguably always have been) themselves fast and trans-national. Clifford Bob's work on what he calls 'The Global Right Wing' (Bob, 2012) is instructive on this account, as he notes the way in which major movements in conservative politics gain both inspiration and material support from global networks of funders, actors, and innovators. We can, for example, look at the way in which major players in the conservative and 'alt-right' (which is to say fascist and white supremacist) movements in American and Australia originally come from Canada. Or how anti-gay initiatives in developing countries are originated and funded in wealthy first-world states. Or the way in which contemporary American and Canadian reactionaries are increasingly looking to the Orbán regime in Hungary as a model for future actions. (Here I'm drawing from examples that are familiar to me in North American, but such trends are present, I believe, globally.)

More than these kinds of specific global linkages, we can also think of the ways in which seemingly 'anti-speed' reactionary political actors and movements are bound up with neoliberal capitalist institutions, policies and movements. In this regards we frequently see a feedback loop wherein conservative parties on the one hand increase the process of social acceleration and instability, and then use the affective responses of *ressentiment* which result to gain support by promising reactionary and authoritarian programs to control the lines of acceleration that they themselves have unleashed. (I discuss this in both books, but the line of analysis is obviously an older one. I'm thinking here specifically of William Connolly's (2005) 'evangelical-capitalist resonance machine'.)

The final, and possibly most important, reason that a simple slow/fast-conservative/progressive binary is inadequate is that to a certain extent it presumes the existence of another simplified binary, namely one in which immobility is linked with powerlessness, and mobility with power. This is a common worldview, but one which fails to capture the complex temporalities and spatialities of life in an accelerating world. As I discuss in the chapter on 'Regimes of (Im)mobility' which you mention above, it is not necessarily the case that mobility is identified with power, but control over one's mobility. Thus 'local' populations are as disempowered as global migrant flows, though one is highly mobile and the other not. Conversely, the power of a transnational capitalist class can be expressed as much through staying still and having others come to them as it does through globe-trotting and jet-setting. Attentiveness to these kinds of nuances are necessary in developing an actual sense of the diverse, to use your language, temporal regimes (Torres, 2021) of life in an accelerating world.

Felipe Torres: In recent decades, and particularly after the COVID pandemic, we have witnessed contradictory trends on the description and normativity of the acceleration/deceleration theses. From a descriptive point of view, we can count the global economic deceleration and the current pandemic crisis; while, on the other hand, increasing automation speeds up production and digital media connects people all over the world in faster ways than previous analog communication. In normative terms, many socio-political claims (bio-food, degrowth) began to defeat the acceleration process, while others actually demanded to maintain it (Lash, 2002) or rather to speed up society (Williams and Srnicek, 2014). In your view, what are those aspects of the acceleration thesis that are still present today since your first book was published? For instance, is incessant growth an uncontested claim today? Furthermore, what are those (if any) phenomena that you perceive as weaker, about to disappear or no longer present for an updated acceleration theory today?

Simon Glezos: So, I think it's worth decoupling two concepts here, namely acceleration and growth. If we go with Hartmut Rosa's definition of social acceleration as consisting of three qualities – 'technological acceleration', 'social change and transformation' and 'the heightened tempo of everyday life' (Rosa, 2003)– then it makes sense that in general acceleration and growth are coupled. However, we shouldn't assume that they are essentially linked for two reasons: 1) If we presume that we're describing 'growth' in a capitalist sense (and I'm not really sure how else a vision of 'growth' makes sense) then one of the things I argue in *The Politics of Speed* is that contrary to visions of capitalism as uniformly dynamic and accelerative, capitalism frequently functions as an 'apparatus of capture' (to use Deleuze and Guattari's term), capturing and decelerating lines of flight which might otherwise escape capitalism's plane of consistency. So, I think if we're going to talk about the possibility of future acceleration, we should not presume that it implies or is the result of a capitalist tendency towards growth. (This is similar to, but not identical with, Williams and Srnicek's accelerationist thesis.) This also means that 2) we shouldn't conceive of 'degrowth' as necessarily decelerative. Again, if we take seriously the latter two qualities of Rosa's social acceleration, we see that they don't necessarily rely on technological acceleration or innovation. Indeed, if tomorrow all the airplanes fell out of the sky or the internet stopped working, we might see a dramatic deceleration of certain kinds of technological speed, but we would also see a radical acceleration of the pace of events, as societies moved with a kind of panic to respond to these

disasters. And, of course, this is not an idle thought experiment. Increasing climate change-driven natural disasters have the effect of disrupting or destroying accelerative infrastructure and processes, while they are also producing a radical social acceleration in the communities trying to deal with the aftermath.

The point of disaggregating acceleration and growth here is not just pedantic theorizing (not that that's such a bad thing). Rather I think it's demonstrably the case that, if we're going to grapple with climate change, we're going to have to engage in a radical struggle against capitalism and colonialism, and that this will involve a dramatic decrease in expectations around growth and consumption. However, we should not from that expect that what we're going to see is a uniform social deceleration. Certainly, some processes will decelerate (I don't see how widespread transcontinental plane travel persists in a world actively trying to combat climate change, for example) but we shouldn't from this presume that what we're going to see is a 'slowing down' or 'turning back the clock' as it were. Indeed, effective responses will almost certainly require fast, coordinated action at the global level.[1] And what *this* means is that the work that theorists of speed have been engaged in over the last 20 years or so in terms of developing a more nuanced analysis of social acceleration will still be relevant (if not more so).

Felipe Torres: In recent decades, several phenomena related to acceleration started to gain attention within the scholarship. Notorious works applied the acceleration theory in different fields, sometimes as a theoretical framework and in other occasions from a critical point of view. Among them we can count the link between speed and politics (Hassan 2009; Glezos 2012), temporal cultural flows (Tomlinson 2007; Sharma 2014), the reception of acceleration in Science and Technology Studies (Wajcman 2015) or even the acceleration process within academia (Vostal 2016). The Jena scholar Klaus Dörre (2011) has remarked on the extremely uneven distribution of social rhythms, while Filip Vostal (2016) has pointed out the deflationary acceleration character respectively. This blooming panorama leads not only to reckoning that acceleration can be studied in several fields, but also to the question of whether there is 'one' or rather 'multiple' accelerations. Actually, as you know, I tried to shed some light on these multiple temporal expressions in my book *Temporal Regimes* (2021). There, I developed further the idea of multiple times under the umbrella concept of 'temporal regimes'. In this scenario, do you think that theory has responded properly to this complexity? Do the different acceleration processes in India and Latin America mirror diverse (a)modernity(ies)? How we can explain theoretically the multiple expressions of acceleration without neglecting its modern, western, and capitalist character, as well as other temporalities?

Simon Glezos: I'll start by saying that I broadly agree with the picture you paint of the field, and it's one that I find encouraging. As I discussed above, when I first started interrogating the question of speed and acceleration, in the early 2000s, one of the things I was struck by was the surprising lack of theoretical work on the topic. For what seemed like such a fundamental element of late modernity, it felt like we had Paul Virilio (1977), a few cryptic pages in Deleuze and Guattari, and that was it. Now we've seen an explosion of work over the last 20 years, including not just the

[1] A fact which will itself have consequences. See for example Whyte, K. (2020). "Too late for indigenous climate justice: Ecological and relational tipping points," WIREs Climate Change, 11(1), e603.

thinkers that you've mentioned over the course of this interview, but others as well, such as William Scheuerman (2004) and Shannon Bell (2010), amongst others. And I think this has had the effect of knocking out the simple binary of fast and slow that can tend to dominant discussion of social acceleration. Instead, what has developed is a more nuanced account of speed, which views processes of acceleration (and the temporalities and spatialities that they give rise to) as more diverse, complex and intertwined (something which you well know, and write about very powerfully). Now, that being said, insofar as much of this theorizing is coming out of the developed world, along lines of western political theory, I think a properly global theory of speed and acceleration will require two things. 1) Increasing empirical studies of social acceleration, such as we see in the exceptional work of scholars such as Judy Wajcman and Sarah Sharma, for a start. And 2) accounts of speed which draw increasingly on non-western sources of theoretical analysis. Such work is necessary both to keep theories of speed and acceleration from being parochial and Eurocentric. More than this, however, is the importance of not reinforcing an unfortunate racist and colonialist trope, in which "The West" is viewed as dynamic and accelerative, and non-western societies are viewed as static and unchanging. Developing theories of speed and change rooted in non-western ontologies will help us to ensure that we develop theoretical approaches which are capable of grappling with the global nature of life in an accelerating world.

Felipe Torres: Thank you so much for your willingness and time, Simon!

Simon Glezos: Thank you so much for your thought-provoking questions, Felipe. It was a real pleasure.

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