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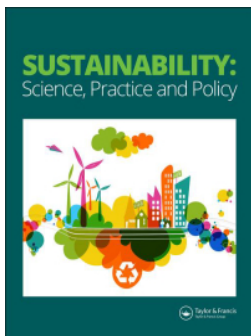
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Sustainable and slow cities: the quest for conviviality

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ABSTRACT

The concept of conviviality, introduced by Ivan Illich in his book *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), offers a solution to the counterproductive effects of fast transport. It is now widely recognized that fast transport does not save time for individuals and communities but rather increases the feeling of time famine and ultimately leads to greater energy consumption to travel longer distances. In today's context of urban time famine and ecological crisis, I show that Illich's system of thought finds empirical validity. An inductive approach in nine "Cittàslow" labeled European cities demonstrates that a slow pace of life and mobility contributes to the maintenance of friendly or convivial relations. Incorporating slow mobility policies into the broader framework of convivial cities could become a key instrument in the transition to a more sustainable path, while also offering prospects for future lifestyles that people find desirable. The article concludes by arguing that the pursuit of conviviality in cities can help promote slow mobility and sustainable living, ultimately contributing to a more environmentally conscious and socially connected society.

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Conviviality; degrowth; pace of life; travel speed; Cittàslow



Introduction


In 2015, the Paris-based Mobile Lives Forum, with the support of ObsoCo, launched a large-scale international survey on the aspirations of city dwellers for their future lifestyles (Descarrega and Moati 2016). Regardless of where they came from, the desire expressed by most respondents was invariably the wish for a slower pace of life in response to a growing sense of time scarcity. These findings were corroborated by a survey on "Living conditions and aspirations of the French" conducted by Credoc in 2020 (Bigot et al. 2020).¹ Whether before, during, or after the first phase of the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 80% of French respondents still stated that ideally, they would prefer to "slow down, take more time." In the call for contributions on a sustainable "after" launched in 2020 by *France Stratégie*, a form of consensus emerged on the need for a slowdown in both the economy and life, and for a rethink of our relationship to time, possibly in response to the urgency of the environmental challenges facing us (de Margerie 2020).²

On the sociological side, the greater the possibility for travel, the less time people may have to enjoy all the activities that thereby become accessible (Illich 1974; Spielmann et al. 2008; Jalas and Juntunen 2015;

Buhl et al. 2021). The sense of time scarcity felt by a large proportion of Western urban populations (Garhammer 1998; Rosa 2003; Robinson and Godbey 2010; Brousse 2015; Sullivan and Gershuny 2018; Hoffmann et al. 2022) is, therefore, counterintuitively and at least partly linked with the ability to travel ever faster and being able to access an ever-growing variety of opportunities (Dupuy 1975; Wajcman 2014). People may experience the feeling of lacking time to enjoy all the activities accessible with fast transport. On the ecological side, it is known that there is, on average, a strong link between the intensity and the ecological impact of life rhythms (Jalas 2002; Schor 2011; Geiger et al. 2021). The same is generally true for the relations between travel speed and ecological footprint (Bigo 2020; Kim et al. 2020; Tranter and Tolley 2020).

Our research hypothesis links these sociological and ecological concerns, which are rarely considered together in the development of public policies. For example, if we consider the inverse relationships described above, the aspiration among city dwellers for a slower pace of life becomes a potential instrument in the development of policies centered on sustainable mobility. Indeed, the idea is that reducing travel speeds would lower the intensity of life rhythms

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and their ecological impact. While this may seem restrictive, it could have a liberating impact by easing the exhaustion that people experience from the fast pace of life and allowing them to focus on more local activities.

However, implementing policies that promote slower travel speeds is a challenge because they are globally associated with degrowth perspectives (D'Alisa et al. 2014). First, the desire for speed is deeply ingrained in Western societies (Tomlinson 2007), and in the symbolic sphere reducing travel speeds is often associated with negative values such as stagnation, retrogression, and restriction (Wajcman 2014; Pelgrims 2019). Only very rarely is it associated with the benefits of a calmer pace of life. Pace of life and travel speed do not form part of the same symbolic grid. While a slower and calmer pace of life may be desired and valued, the same is not so clearly true for slower travel speeds.

Second – and this is linked with the previous point – the perceived benefits of speed make it difficult for public authorities to promote policies that limit travel speeds (Cohen 2010). In public decision-making, the primary focus in the temporal dimension of mobility provision is on “saving time” (Metz 2008; van Goeverden 2022) in the transport of passengers and merchandise. Third, at the household level, the issue of travel speed is still a fairly divisive subject (Urry 2012; Popan 2018). In Europe, there is just as much opposition to projects to build high-speed infrastructure (e.g., motorways, high-speed train lines) (Armano et al. 2013; Grisoni 2022), as there is to projects to restrict travel (e.g. lower speed limits, closure of car lanes in towns), which elicit strong local resistance (Héran 2020). For the population, what is undoubtedly needed to counterbalance the perceived benefits of speed is to raise awareness about the indirect benefits of slower travel.

The introduction of a slowing down approach to urban planning and transport can have many benefits beyond addressing ecological concerns. It can promote a sense of community and social cohesion, improve public health, and enhance the overall quality of life for residents (Amin and Thrift 2002; Tranter 2014; Tolley and Tranter 2022). These effects have been clearly measured and observed in the scientific literature. However, we do not really know how people and elected representatives perceive the positive effects of reducing travel speeds and the pace of life. Above all, how might the benefits of a slower pace of life be legitimized in their representation and their value systems? In other words, what is it in their representations and aspirations that would create a consensus about the desirability of

slowing down and more specifically make it politically acceptable?

Entirely funded by *Agence de la Transition Ecologique* (Agency for the Ecological Transition or ADEME) – the public agency responsible for developing ecological transition policies in France – the project reported in this article employs an action-research framework. The main research question was as follows: What reason, beside ecological objectives, might be adduced to slow down the pace of life and mobility in a given city? What could make it appealing for local populations? The approach adopted is purely inductive. I do not try to verify whether or not there is a particular set of reasons behind the slowing down, but to find out what motives emerge.

In order to study the aspiration for a slower pace of life as a potential instrument of ecological transition, my approach began with a survey of towns that belong to the *Cittàslow* network (Mayer and Knox 2006; Radstorm 2011; Manella 2017; Ball 2022). The article is structured as follows. I first provide a brief presentation of the *Cittàslow* movement and its philosophy. The second section of the article is dedicated to the methodology. I explain how I selected the nine *Cittàslow* surveyed in France (2), Germany (1), and Italy (6) and how I grounded my survey on comprehensive interviews with local representatives. The third section is dedicated to presentation of the results and their discussion. I analyze how local elected officials explain the benefits of *Cittàslow* policies by reference to the aspirations of their constituents. In regards to the results and precedent theories, I discuss more precisely how the desire for slowdown echoes with concrete desires for convivial cities. In the conclusion, I present the impacts of the convivial-slowdown framework for the renewal of urban planning and transport policy in (over-)industrialized regions. The research was conducted between September 2019 and April 2022. It was punctuated by numerous interruptions and delays caused by the successive phases of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Cittàslow label

Genesis and philosophy

Over the past few decades, social science researchers have tended to focus on large cities in exploring the question of the accelerating pace of life. Cities are more obviously affected by the globalization and technological change that are synonymous with acceleration (Panait 2012; Tolley and Tranter 2022). However, the changes associated with different periods of modernity raise challenges in terms of

social and economic cohesion, both for metropolitan regions and small conurbations. Smaller towns are also challenged by an imperative of global competitiveness. For them, the effect of globalization has mainly been felt in the disruption of local economies and local social and cultural practices, as well as a tendency toward greater homogeneity between places – the loss of local specificity in favor of international similarities (Mayer and Knox 2010). In response to these trends, numerous movements based on local initiatives have taken shape since the early 1990s. One of these emerged in small rural Italian towns that had not enjoyed the benefits of Italy's industrialization and postwar economic boom.

The international network of *Cittàslow* – literally “slow cities” – derived from the Slow Food movement (Petrini 2007) which was founded in 1986 in Piedmont in Italy.³ This movement promotes the pleasure of eating traditionally prepared food and venerates certain forms of agriculture, artisanal production, food sourcing, and culinary traditions. Slow Food fosters a kind of slowdown in the rhythms of life in the sense that it exists in opposition to “fast food” and clearly highlights emancipation and the pleasure of “rediscovered time” at the table (Mallet 2018).

In October 1999, Paolo Saturnini, the mayor of Greve-in-Chianti, a small town in Tuscany, organized a meeting with three other mayors, from Orvieto, Bra, and Positano. This meeting resulted in the establishment of the main features of the *Città Lente* – or *Cittàslow* – movement. These small towns were already members of the Slow Food network, and the principles of Slow Food were therefore the main starting points for the conception of a slow city, one that would provide an environment in which residents would live in harmony with nature (Senetra and Szarek-Iwaniuk 2020).

The *Cittàslow* thus replicates the objectives of Slow Food but applies them to the rhythms of life induced by modern urban conditions. In their own way, the *Cittàslows* also situate themselves in opposition to the “McDonaldization” of society and the increased pace of life that it encourages. In their domain, Slow Cities advocate authenticity over standardization, individuality over the franchise, silence over noise, trees over concrete, and cycle paths over parking lots (Grzelak-Kostulska et al. 2011).

The initial objective of the Slow Cities organization was therefore to create a network of cities (Grzelak-Kostulska et al. 2011) and mayors committed to improving, or at least maintaining, the quality of life and the cultural heritage of its member cities. In talking about *Cittàslow*, it must be kept in mind that, before being a network of cities that fulfill certain

slow-related criteria in their local policy orientations, the movement was, in statutory terms, above all an association of mayors.⁴ As it is, the *Cittàslow* label seems to be used more as a tool for promoting the attractiveness of cities where life is good – in terms of workers, jobs, services, tourists – than an instrument or an operational framework for the definition and construction of development policies. We need, therefore, to keep in mind that it is first an instrument of benefit to mayors, and only then a device intended to serve the needs of urban populations.

On these foundations, in 2001 the first 28 Slow Cities were certified, and they were all Italian. The success of these pioneering Slow Cities encouraged 77 other towns to adhere to Slow principles in 2006. As of February 2024, the international *Cittàslow* network consists of 296 towns in 33 countries on every continent. Despite this global coverage, most of the slow cities are in Europe, and almost half of these (99) are in Italy. The current dynamics of the network are difficult to summarize. Since the beginning, many Italian cities have dropped the label while new ones have joined, both in Italy (Manella 2017) and elsewhere (Senetra and Szarek-Iwaniuk 2020; Ball 2022). The countries concerned tend to be wealthy. And it should be noted that there has recently been a significant wave of membership among cities located in Asia (South Korea (17), China (12), Japan (2), Poland (37), and Turkey (28).

Network-government criteria and governance

Only towns with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants can obtain the label. Furthermore, in theory, association with the *Cittàslow* label is conditional on the adoption of multiple measures to promote a relaxed pace of life. There are 72 different recommendations affecting areas as diverse as energy, mobility infrastructures, heritage promotion, hospitality among shopkeepers, and so forth (see [Supplementary Material 1](#)).

Before 2017, member cities were required to implement at least 50% of the requirements (some of which are mandatory and marked with an asterisk in the [Supplementary Material 1](#)) and at least one in each focus area. Currently, only cities aspiring to receive the *Cittàslow* “excellence” label must meet the mandatory criteria. The membership criteria have therefore been very significantly relaxed. Furthermore, there was never really any monitoring to verify whether the member cities followed the principles of the *Cittàslow* movement as the organizational body has no powers of regulation and enforcement but rather is an instrument of promotion for small towns.

This flexibility leaves room for very significant diversity in ways of being a *Cittàslow*, in applying its recommendations, and in adhering to its overall philosophy (Diestchy 2016). This is shown by the many case studies of *Cittàslow* towns in the literature (Knox 2005; Parkins and Craig 2006; Andrews 2008; Pink 2008, 2009; de Salvo 2011; Heitmann et al. 2011; Radstorm 2011; Ball 2015; Holland 2018; Manella 2017; Mallet 2018; Senetra and Szarek-Iwaniuk 2020; Ball 2022). This diversity helps to counter criticism about generalizing from one city, or even one mayor, to the entire movement. *Cittàslow* is a bureaucratic creation, operating at different spatial scales: on the scale of member cities, countries (e.g., *Cittàslow* Italy, *Cittàslow* Turkey) and on a global scale (*Cittàslow* International). The findings from certain cities are not necessarily valid for all and on this question, it should be noted that the priority of this article is not so much to analyze the *Cittàslow* network as a global object of research. Furthermore, it is not intended to provide general results on the *Cittàslow* network, whether approached on a national or international scale. Rather, the purpose is to show to what extent different cities that embrace the Slow philosophy use the same arguments to justify a pace of life's slowdown.

Methodology

Criteria governing the choice of *Cittàslow* towns

As discussed above, *Cittàslow* cities are free to concentrate on certain domains more than others. Some of them focus very little on mobility-related criteria and some are more dynamic than others. Depending on where they are in the world, they draw upon different socio-cultural legacies. One of the first methodological challenges, therefore, was to identify *Cittàslow* cities that were relevant to the research question: How is action on slow mobility and pace of life legitimized by *Cittàslow* representatives? Accordingly, the primary criterion of selection was to survey *Cittàslow* whose policy initiatives focused on the recommendations relating to mobility. Out of the 72 measures listed in the *Cittàslow* charter, six can be linked with mobility issues (as noted above the asterisk indicates a required criterion to obtain the *Cittàslow* “excellence” label). The *Cittàslow* surveyed were expected to fulfill the following criteria (see also Munch et al. 2022):

- Effective cycle lanes linked to public buildings.
- Significant length (in kilometers) of urban cycle lanes created along the total length in kilometers of urban roads.*

- Cycle parking in shopping areas.
- Planning for eco-mobility as an alternative to the private car.*
- Low percentage of residents who commute every day to work in another town.*
- Creation of public squares where people can sit and chat peacefully.

Selection criteria also focused on several additional factors. First, I wanted to focus on cities where policies on *Cittàslow* were “active.” This is a particularly important issue for *Cittàslow* where certain municipalities publicly state a position in terms of public policies, but where local action in this regard is somewhat dormant due to lack of resources and political will (Ball 2015; Mallet 2018; Munch et al. 2022). Without awareness of this factor, one might encounter “member” communities where, for example, there is no one with specific *Cittàslow* responsibilities.

Second, I sought to identify communities that reflected as faithfully as possible the state of mind and philosophy that accompanied the genesis of the movement or local policy. Notably, conflict can sometimes arise between this criterion and the previous one, since certain communities are less active today but were engaged at the start of the *Cittàslow* network.

Third, I wanted to investigate territories in different countries. Beyond the benefits of diversity and comparison, the aim was to identify possible tendencies linked to local and national particularities. Whether or not they reflect political or socio-cultural conditions specific to each country, the aim of giving the survey an international dimension was to better understand what *Cittàslow* membership actually entails. The countries targeted reflect both the scientific objectives of the research – the presence of interesting areas in these countries – and the desire to limit the travel and ecological footprint of the research (Munch 2020b). At one point, relevant areas were identified in Scandinavia, but travel was limited to countries bordering France (the researcher’s country of origin) for reasons of ecological and economic cost, and because of restrictions on international travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, to maximize the diversity of the sample, I targeted cities with varied morphological, social, and demographic characteristics. These criteria are especially important for Italy, where there are approximately 100 *Cittàslow*. The number of interviews conducted was determined by saturation criteria. When content seemed to be repeated and furthering interviews produced almost no new information and only confirmed previous findings, the investigation

stopped. In this sense, the interviews also helped me to determine the number of sites investigated, along with the funding and time constraint factors inherent in any research program.

Selection of *Cittàslow* surveyed

To select these cities, I initially conducted documentary research using information from the *Cittàslow* association's website. These elements were then further enriched by scientific literature describing the functioning, status, and organization of Italian *Cittàslow* at different periods (Radstorm 2011; Manella 2017). In practice, the list of cities that seemed relevant to the study was mainly drawn up based on four exploratory interviews with experts from Italian *Cittàslow* (Supplementary Material 4).

The first telephone interview, conducted with Eugenio Mailler, former Slow Food project manager, gave me insight into the genesis of the *Cittàslow* movement as well as into the values and plans pursued by the first signatory cities. As an active member of Slow Food in 1999, Mailler gave me a “situated” historiography of the movement based on his experience at the birth of *Cittàslow* and from within the food-oriented institutions. Regardless of the stated ideas and values behind the initiative, Mailler – now a food journalist – helped me to understand that there is also a geopolitical component to the *Cittàslow* movement.

I think it might be interesting for you to look at what the towns that decided to be *Cittàslow* have in common. All these cities were at one time places of distinction. There was nothing low born about them. At one time, before the Second World War, they were all cities which had historically played a relatively important role in Italy. As a result, we can imagine that they joined the *Cittàslow* movement to take economic and territorial revenge and to gain importance in the marketing competition between territories vis-à-vis big, industrialized cities. (Eugenio Mailler, former project manager at Slow Food)

His explanations helped me to understand why a large proportion of *Cittàslow* cities are a long way from major communication networks and economic centers. At the start of the movement, they were mostly located in the Apennines, the mountain range that runs down the spine of Italy from North to South (see Map 1).

For Mailler, the *Cittàslow* towns in the Apennines might therefore be representative of the economic reasons (loss of attractiveness) but also of the temporal effects (cities outside of time – lagging economic growth) that explain the label Slow as applied to them. This suggested that a study of the *Cittàslow*



Map 1. Location of the *Cittàslow* surveyed.

Sources: ESRI Satellite (2020). Source: Maxime Sauder and Emmanuel Munch

in the Apennines could cast light on the philosophy and rationale that animated the movement in its beginnings.

The main difficulty was then to identify cities that were very active with respect to the recommendations and undertakings of the *Cittàslow* charter. The interviews conducted with Paola de Salvo and Gabriele Manella, both acknowledged experts in the study of Italy's *Cittàslow*, helped to refine the selection by retaining only the cities that were actively engaged in the *Cittàslow* approach. Likewise, thanks to their experiences acquired from numerous recent surveys in the Italian *Cittàslow*, I was also able to identify the cities that seemed to have focused their “slowness policies” more particularly on the issue of mobility.

In a final stage, all the information accumulated during these three interviews was cross-referenced with the views of Pier Giorgio Oliveti, Secretary General of *Cittàslow* International. Then, to identify *Cittàslow* that had active mobility policies, I selected those cited both by the researchers and by the movement's Secretary General. At the end of this sampling process, Oliveti wanted to organize our visit to each of the cities surveyed to guide and direct the visits. This could have harmed the investigation process, potentially limiting access only to what they wanted to show me or to highlight particular features. I was therefore careful not to give advance notice of my itinerary to *Cittàslow* officials.

Nine *Cittàslow* in the survey

I conducted the field surveys (Map 1) for the *Cittàslow* movement in two phases. In the first phase, in 2019, six Italian towns were surveyed

Table 1. Characteristics of the *Cittàslow* surveyed in Italy.

Town surveyed	Population	Population growth 2002–2019	Average age	Average income per month	Activity level* 2016	Number of hotel beds/population	First year of membership in <i>Cittàslow</i>
C. S. Pietro Terme	20,821	+8.3%	46.8	€1,966	39.6%	5.5%	2005
Brisighella	7,358	–3.1%	48.4	€1,591	23.7%	2.4%	2009
Marradi	3,014	–14.9%	50.6	€1,538	28.6%	1.1%	2013
Castel. Berardenga	9,058	+19.1%	44.3	€2,082	14.9%	5.7%	1999
Città della Pieve	7,689	+6.6%	46.9	€1,602	34.9%	2.7%	2001
Orvieto	20,290	–1.9%	48.2	€1,685	30.8%	7.1%	1999

*The activity level is defined as the ratio between the number of jobs in the town and its total population in 2016.

Sources: Data from the 2019 Italian census, except for the activity level, for which the employment data are only available for 2016.

– Brisighella, Castel San Pietro, Castelnuovo Berardenga, Città della Pieve, Marradi, and Orvieto. In 2020, a second phase of the survey was conducted in three German and French *Cittàslow*: Waldkirch (in Germany) and Créon and Valmondois (both in France).

Main fieldwork in the six Italian *Cittàslow*

Based on all the selection criteria and the information collected and cross-referenced, I chose six towns, having first checked that their socio-demographic characteristics were not too similar (Table 1).

Although they are all “small rural towns” located in the northern part of central Italy (between Bologna and Rome), the six *Cittàslow* surveyed have fairly varied demographic and socio-economic characteristics.⁵ Schematically (Table 2), they can be divided into three pairs of opposites: 1) young and dynamic towns vs. old and declining towns, 2) wealthy towns vs. poor towns, 3) tourist towns vs. non-tourist towns.

Secondary fieldwork in the German and French *Cittàslow*

The purpose of the second survey was to explore the context in which certain findings emerged during the initial fieldwork in Italy. I was interested in whether the attitudes toward religion, conviviality, and conversation in public spaces that were observed in the Italian *Cittàslow* were characteristic of the movement as a whole or if they were specific to Italian culture. The choices made for the second survey in Germany and France are explained more briefly, due to the smaller number of *Cittàslow* towns available in these countries.

In my search for German and French *Cittàslow* that have prioritized slow mobility policies, I used the same selection criteria as in my previous fieldwork. With the assistance of Pier Giorgio Oliveti, Secretary-General of *Cittàslow* International, I decided to focus on Waldkirch, a wine-growing town located in the Black

Table 2. Classification of the Italian *Cittàslow* according to their demographic dynamics, mean income, and tourist activity.

Town	Demography	Income	Tourist activity
Castel San Pietro Terme	+	+	+
Brisighella	–	–	–
Marradi	–	–	–
Castelnuovo Berardenga	+	+	+
Città della Pieve	+	–	–
Orvieto	–	–	+

Forest region of Germany. With a current population of 21,650, Waldkirch has become increasingly popular over the last decade, attracting a new wave of residents with jobs in nearby Fribourg and retirees seeking a better quality of life in the southern part of Germany. The town prides itself on being a *Cittàslow* that promotes an unhurried pace of life and encourages the use of active modes of transport.

In France, I referred to Sandra Mallet’s (2018) monograph on the *Cittàslow* movement and discovered that ten (at the time) out of twelve *Cittàslow* towns in France are located in the southwestern part of the country, spanning the area from La Rochelle to Toulouse. Following this trend, I surveyed the town of Créon in 2021, which has a population of 4,382 as of 2019. This town is one of the *Cittàslow* communities in the area and was home to Pierre Gachet, a former President of *Cittàslow* France. To avoid being swayed by local idiosyncrasies in my study of *Cittàslow*, I also investigated the municipality of Valmondois in the northern Paris region, which has a population of 1,213 as of 2019.

Semi-structured interviews with Mayors or Deputy Mayors

The interviews were carried out with Mayors or Deputy Mayors who were responsible for implementing *Cittàslow* policies in their municipalities. I conducted ten interviews. A detailed list of respondents is in the [Supplementary Material 2](#). The duration of the interviews varied from 22 minutes to just over two hours. All interviews were conducted one-to-one and face-to-face, except for the interview with the Mayor of Créon, which was conducted by telephone.

As discussed above, the purpose of the interviews was not really to study the ways in which communities strive to implement their *Cittàslow* policies. It is easy to understand from observations, reports, and other archival documents what actually constitutes the implementation or progress of Slow policy. I was less interested in how these measures are implemented – for example through the introduction of public benches and green spaces or cycle paths – than in the motivations that prompted their implementation. The aim, therefore, was not really to determine how the *Cittàslow* strive to build spaces of slowness, but to explore how local decision-makers represent slowness and situate it in the measures they seek to implement. In short, the aim was to identify and prioritize the different ways in which Slow is justified and legitimized. What makes it attractive to live in a *Cittàslow*? What advantages are sought or what are the presumed benefits for the populations of these towns?

Using a thematically structured interview guide (Supplementary Material 3), the first objective of the semi-structured interviews was to describe and understand the *Cittàslow* policies implemented in the municipality and then to test their connection with environmental issues, public consultation, and finally the aspiration to a slower pace of life.

The comprehensive interview technique

To fulfill my research objectives, I chose more specifically to use the methodological framework of the comprehensive interview (Bourdieu 1993; Kaufmann 1996). As Kaufmann (1996) argues, it would seem likely that the supposed impersonal stance of the interviewer and the nonpersonal nature of the questions asked might produce answers that are also nonpersonal in character. Or indeed, it might be asked whether the supposedly impersonal form of the standardized interview can arrive at anything more than the superficial and immediate normative opinions of the interviewee, whether it can stimulate the interviewee's consciousness and reflexivity (Ferreira 2014)?

In my case, the comprehensive interview method proved very effective, because it enabled public officials to move beyond the standard answers that they might otherwise tend to give when asked about *Cittàslow*. It helps them to drop their “spokesperson” persona. This was particularly the case in Orvieto where I met the Secretary-General of the association. This method made it easier to enter into questions of values and legitimization, which could otherwise often become routine and automatic in the spokesperson's mouth,

Once the sessions were completed, the material was reconstructed for analysis from the notes taken during the interview and from the transcripts. The transcribed material was then used as one element of response to my research question. The criteria applied in choosing the quotations was “it's interesting.” Once the quotations were transcribed, they were sorted according to the sub-questions corresponding to them.

For the sake of space, when a quotation is highlighted, this generally means that the message or argument expressed by an interviewee in one town is found in similar form in other towns.⁶ It indicates a statement that expresses either a majority or a unanimous view (among the nine cities surveyed), or one that is not really contradicted by another sharply differing or qualifying statement. It thus indicates that a research finding is more than a single isolated case. It is only at the end of the article that I present statements that indicate a point of view that is specific to a particular town or markedly different from those of others. In this case, as we will see, these minority positions are limited to cities outside Italy (France and Germany).

Results and discussion

For *Cittàslow*, slowing down is neither an end in itself nor an absolute goal. Their aim is not to slow down, to travel slowly, to practice fewer daily activities in all circumstances. In certain cases, the objective may be to accelerate and then slow down later, and vice versa. In a world where speed is treated as a cardinal value (Molz 2017), the purpose of the Slow movement is more to restore balance to temporal patterns, to seek a greater equilibrium between slow and fast. This means that for people who “moderate their speed,” the important thing is not “slowness” as such, but rather the possibilities and prospects opened up by this process of slowing down, of restoring balance. In this section, therefore, I describe the perceived purpose of being associated with the Slow movement. What advantages do elected officials think that their populations expect the Slow movement to bring? Are the *Cittàslow* in this way fulfilling what I have described as the aspiration for a slower pace of life? And if so, what are the prospects opened up by the Slow philosophy?

(Attempt to) unite populations around Slow values

At the scale of an individual town and for the same reasons, the breadth of the definition of Slow values also has its advantages (Miele 2008).

It makes it possible to unite residents and others more easily around a range of ideas and values from which everyone will necessarily benefit: the desire to eat local, to relax and idle on a café terrace, to enjoy plenty of green space, to get around on foot, or to enjoy a friendly chat with shopkeepers. By covering a broad spectrum, the *Cittàslow* bring together a huge range of aspirations and desires with which a significant proportion of people can identify.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that in the same way as the connections between the *Cittàslow* program and the implementation of “slow” policies are only potential and not demonstrated, here again it is not at all certain that the residents can “consciously” identify with the Slow values that are supposed to unite them. Indeed, the mayors of the French and German towns readily admit that the large majority of their community members are not aware of the existence of *Cittàslow*. In Italy, in fact, it was my hosts who suggested that the population was not necessarily united over the issue of *Cittàslow*.

For his part, the Mayor of Waldkirch described a phenomenon that was the inverse of the idea of a local consensus around Slow values. In his view, in Germany, Slow terminology is divisive. And it is precisely for that reason that he does not use the logo in his communication.

The population is divided over membership of the *Cittàslow* network: some of them want the ecology but not the slowness. The term Slow does not create consensus. Some people see its connotations as negative. That is why the municipality does not use the movement’s snail logo. (Mayor of Waldkirch, Waldkirch, 2 February 2021)

While in Germany, the division relates to political or ideological distinctions, in Italy the surveys showed differences between age groups. Broadly speaking, older people want calm, a form of peaceful slowness, while the young want excitement and speed.

Question: What do your town’s inhabitants aspire to in their day-to-day lives?

Response: It’s difficult...also because the generations change and need to change. Older people want life to be calm and serene, to be able to stroll about... The young need work and the economy in order to live. So...so, it’s a challenge to reconcile. (Deputy Mayor responsible for commercial activities, Città della Pieve, 30 October 2019, translated from Italian)

The higher average population age in *Cittàslow* towns suggests a correspondence between Slow values and older populations. The question, therefore, is how to reconcile the pace of life aspirations of

young and old within the *Cittàslow*? Given this dilemma, it might be beneficial to tackle the exodus of young people from these towns by making Slow a positive value with the potential to attract young and active populations (who generate taxes and revenues). So, it is undoubtedly no accident that on my first two visits (Castel San Pietro Terme and Marradi), I was met by municipal councilors responsible for youth affairs.

Italian Cittàslow: conviviality, or the importance attributed to resonance

Despite the diversity of the aspirations that the Italian *Cittàslow* towns seek to fulfill, an idea that often recurred in the interviews was that what these towns have in common is that they are places where it is possible to take the time to do things that people no longer take the time to do in big cities, and that all the townsfolk enjoy these shared pleasures. For example, in some of the survey towns (Castel San Pietro Terme, Waldkirch) the streetlights go off at 9pm in winter. This enables people to look at the stars, a practice that has become virtually impossible in big cities.

Moreover, it is important to note that, in the course of the interviews, all the officials claimed that the relatively slow pace of life allowed people to enjoy chatting with their acquaintances in the street. The *conviviality* that slowness facilitates can be compared with Hartmut Rosa’s (2019) idea of *resonance* that he proposed as a remedy for *social acceleration*. For Rosa, the quality of a human life depends on relationship with the world, and the resonance created by that relationship. Resonance increases our power to act and, in return, our ability to be “captured,” touched, and transformed by the world. In other words, the exact opposite of an instrumental, reifying, and “mute” relationship, which is what the high-speed society imposes on us. According to Rosa, the pace of life that enables us to achieve resonance with our environment is the right pace. In the same way, though at another scale, the officials I spoke to in Italy told me that the right pace of a town is the pace that is conducive to convivial relationships between inhabitants. And this seems typically to be one of the major benefits of living in a *Cittàslow*.

Question: How can you know that it is the right pace of life, or the right pace for a town?

Response: When the town’s pace is right, you have warm and positive conditions, relationships, between people. When the pace is wrong, there are tensions between people. (Deputy Mayor responsible for

commercial activities, Città della Pieve, 30 October 2019, translated from Italian).

From a slightly different perspective, the councilor in Castel San Pietro Terme spoke of the importance of moments of institutionalized conviviality:

There are a lot of events in Castel San Pietro Terme, but not only there, also in the small villages attached to the town – Osteria Grande, Poggio, Varignana – every small village has two or three moments in the year when there are wine and food events where you can taste specialities, and I think that there is a good convivial relationship between grandparents and young people today, and I think that this is very important (Town Councilor, responsible for youth affairs at Castel San Pietro Terme, 22 October 2019, interview translated from French).

And another example in Marradi:

In the social center for seniors, we had asked for adults, for parents, to be able to set up parties for young people. It worked really well. So, we had evenings with 70 youngsters, aged 12 - 13 - 14...maximum 15, with just an adult to make sure there was no drugs or alcohol, and it worked. People, including young people, enjoy these convivial moments. (Town Councilor, responsible for youth affairs in Marradi, 24 October 2019, interview in English)

Ivan Illich's conviviality and the slow movement: an effective action-research system?

The findings from my fieldwork agree with the findings of the international survey on Westerners' aspirations for their future lifestyles (Descarrega and Moati 2016) as well as a French national survey (Bigot et al. 2020; de Margerie 2020): a slower pace of life and the quest for good local relationships go together.

But above all, according to my survey in the *Cittàslow*, a slower pace of life also goes hand-in-hand with, or rather is motivated by, a desire for *conviviality*. On this subject, it is interesting to draw a parallel with the work of Ivan Illich. Criticizing the counterproductive effects of industrial societies, and seeking to identify desirable characteristics for post-industrial societies, Illich contrasted the evils of speed with the benefits of conviviality. In concrete terms, in his writings (Illich 1973, 1974) the Austrian thinker follows an initial diagnosis of the counterproductive effects of fast transport with a chapter on the notion of conviviality. This means that the problem on which I base my research – “the more possibilities you have to be transported, the less time you have” (Illich 1976 [2004], 402, English

translation based on the French edition), seems to be answered, both theoretically and empirically, in the construction of more convivial societies or cities (Grünig Iribarren 2019)

The parallel between my observations in the *Cittàslow* and the theoretical paths proposed by Illich does not stop there. Illich's system of thought and the (operational) philosophy of the *Cittàslow* seem to belong to a single schema. He describes a convivial society as “a society in which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers. I have chosen ‘convivial’ as a technical term to designate a modern society of responsibly limited tools” (Illich 1973, 6). For Illich, a convivial society is a society where people control tools in the same way as the *Cittàslow* control speed in order to produce convivial spaces. Further on, he says: “The French cognate has been given technical meaning (for the kitchen) by Brillat-Savarin in his *Physiology of Taste: Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*” (Illich 1973, 6–7). Obviously, this calls to mind the origins of the Slow movements, which have their foundations in culinary culture and the Slow Food movement. In the following lines, the parallel continues in “frugal” and “joyful” forms of action in the *Cittàslow* and Illich's austere man who finds his “joyfulness” and equilibrium in maintaining a speed that permits conviviality.

However, the existence of strong theoretical connections linking “aspiration to a slower pace of life,” “quest for proximity,” and “conviviality” should not tempt us to be too quick to assume one-way relations of causality. The relation is more likely to be systemic and two-directional: slowness permits communication and conviviality just as communication and conviviality require greater slowness. To understand the possibility of this two-way causality, compare the time it takes you to eat a meal alone and the duration of a meal in company. In this case, it could be that you eat in company because you have the time to do it, or that you spend more time at the table because you are in company and because your eating time is punctuated by conversation. The *Cittàslow* permit conviviality, but it is equally possible that convivial towns permit slowness or at least give their people the sensation of having more time. A recent German study conducted by psychologists and researchers in “political ecology” (Geiger et al. 2021) shows, for example, that holding a conversation with another person leads to the feeling of having more time – and this is particularly true for very busy people.

Concerning the need to think about economic time and the connection with working time

These findings on conviviality appeared primarily, in my case, in the Italian *Cittàslow*. Admittedly, the Mayor of Valmondois (France) expressed something similar about slowness as a characteristic that enables people to take back “the capacity for control over their lives, their activities, their movements.” But unlike the Italian officials, he did not claim that the increased control over life that slowness allows was realized in his town as a successful outcome of the *Cittàslow* approach. His point was more that this is what *Cittàslow* should be for, but that it is far from the case at present. Ultimately, he wanted to sideline the slightly simplistic vision of the convivial *Cittàslow* to express what he saw as the real issues raised by the Slow approach:

Yes, I think that if I contrast two values, slowness and speed, preferring slowness over speed equates to accusing speed of violence. What is, what is, what is in the end profoundly reprehensible about speed, is this effect of violence and loss of control. The desire for slowness is a desire to take back the capacity for control over one’s life, over one’s activities, over one’s movements. It’s often here that... Does it... Praising slowness for its own sake makes no sense. And that is the real meaning of the *Cittàslow* – which in my opinion is precisely a way to go a little beyond this kind of, sort of primary enthusiasm about *Cittàslow* which is a bit... a bit... a bit dumb... a bit simplistic. (Mayor of Valmondois, Valmondois, 26 October 2020)

Having the time to take ownership of events, allowing time for friends and family, for interacting with friends and family in a convivial town, means having free time and therefore not working too much, or else having a job that is directly conducive to this type of activity. Yet the question of work and economic patterns is completely absent from the standpoints and actions of the *Cittàslow*. All their suggestions and recommendations assume a constant socio-economic system, a constant cadence of work. This issue, which was completely absent from the discussions in Italy and Germany, was quite directly raised by the mayors of the French *Cittàslow*.

In France, the Mayor of Créon described the town’s pace of life as too exhausting, because most residents work in Bordeaux (the nearest city) and have a long commute. This has an impact on the opening times of public services in the municipality. He regretted it but said he could do nothing because the working hours of the community were completely outside the possible range of opening times for municipal services.

As a result, we’re going to open the nursery earlier (at 7 am) so that people can leave for work earlier

and avoid traffic jams on the Bordeaux ring road. I’m a bit uncomfortable with this policy, since because of this the children will have very long days at the nursery. It’s not the best solution. But what can we do, that is what people want! And for as long as employers don’t change their working hours, the municipality can do nothing.” (Mayor of Créon, phone interview, 4 April 2021)

Balancing the demands of work and private life is a very challenging problem in Créon where the proportion of single-parent families is fairly high (one third). Although Valmondois does not have the same socio-demographic issues as Créon, its mayor also finds the pace of life of his constituents too arduous. For him, school drop-off time is a key instance of this problem. Because parents have internalized the cult of punctuality (Weber 1905 [2013]) and are therefore afraid of “being late to work” (Munch 2020a), the school’s surroundings are totally jammed at drop-off time, making this anything but a moment of conviviality.

Every morning, at the entrance to the school, there is a traffic jam because people, parents, come to drop off their children. And that’s very interesting. There is, there’s a school entrance located on the village square. Many parents plunge in with their cars and that’s it. And when we say no, cars need to be parked a hundred meters away... Walking those hundred meters with their child is very unusual, very difficult to do. These are often the moments when you see how extreme car dependency is. And the idea of slowing down, when the idea is ultimately that at this rather critical moment of the day people should precisely be very slow in the transition with their child, heck, ultimately it is a moment of craziness and rushing when the issue of being late to work takes precedence over the two imperatives, clearing the square and conviviality. (Mayor of Valmondois, Valmondois, 26 October 2020)

These illustrations described by the French mayors show that it would be somewhat unreasonable, not to say “dumb” – to use the term employed by one of my interviewees – to imagine that it would be possible to slow down, to achieve greater conviviality, without considering the issue of work patterns which, by definition and in order to achieve satisfactory levels of productivity and profit, are likely to become ever more intensive.

Conclusion

The nine *Cittàslow* communities that I studied in Germany, France, and Italy exhibit various dynamics and socio-demographic characteristics. Nevertheless, all the places I looked at are small towns with populations ranging from 1,200 to 21,000 people. My research aimed to explore what, apart from

ecological concerns, legitimizes the benefit of adopting a slower pace of life in the attitudes and values held by local representatives of *Cittàslow*. Ultimately, my goal was to identify factors that could make the concept of slowing down more universally appealing and politically acceptable.

According to the officials that I interviewed, one of the primary advantages of the *Cittàslow* label is its flexibility, allowing towns to apply the concept to a wide range of priorities, from promoting heritage to enhancing hospitality in local shops or fostering intergenerational solidarity. In parallel with the perceived benefits for local representatives, is having *Cittàslow* status beneficial for the populations of these towns? And if so, why would their populations find it advantageous to live in these towns with their slower pace of life than in big cities? In the Italian towns, the local officials were spontaneous and unanimous in their answer to this question: the relatively sedate pace of life provides an opportunity for sociable conversation with friends and acquaintances met around town.

The results of my research show that there is a link between conviviality and a slow pace of life. This link can be specified and contextualized as follows. First, there are abundant ways to justify the advantages of Slow. Conviviality is only one argument among many, although it does seem to be the argument most often used. Second, according to my surveys, the conviviality argument is more pronounced in the Italian towns than in the German and French towns. Third, the links observed between a slower pace of life and conviviality in my qualitative survey methods have also emerged in quantitative surveys (Descarrega and Moati 2016) and in theoretical studies (Illich 1973, 1974; Rosa 2013, 2019). These consistent findings help us to understand how a slower pace of life resonates with the quest for convivial relations. Finally, and surprisingly, the issue of work is largely absent from *Cittàslow* positions and actions, despite the fact that the pressure to work faster remains a defining feature of contemporary employment. Can we genuinely slow down and cultivate more conviviality without addressing this work-related pressure? This critical perspective on the justification for a slower pace of life on the grounds of conviviality was primarily expressed in the German and French *Cittàslow*.

Considering the intentions and explanations associated with the *Cittàslow* network, it is important to acknowledge that these towns may not explicitly be striving to achieve a slower pace in day-to-day life. Conviviality, the time dedicated to conversation and interaction, could indeed be a way to reduce the intensity of daily activities and enable a slower pace

of life. Yet, the people I encountered during my field survey were often unaware that their towns were part of the *Cittàslow* movement. Furthermore, the enactment of *Cittàslow* values does not seem to be a central aspect of local policy geared toward fulfilling the population's aspirations through participatory democracy. The *Cittàslow* attempt to construct a retrospective argument to legitimize their position, but my observations suggest that this has limited influence by comparison with other small Italian towns.

Nonetheless, my research presents an encouraging theoretical and operational perspective. Many sustainable mobility policies that aim to reduce transport speed are often seen as restrictive and unattractive, generating resistance and inhibiting adoption. By emphasizing the connection between these policies and conviviality and friendly relations among individuals, they can be made more appealing. By reframing slow mobility policies within the context of convivial cities, we can outline a sustainable path forward that people find both desirable and enjoyable. This approach recognizes that sustainability is not solely about reducing environmental impacts but also about creating livable and vibrant communities where people can thrive.

In terms of scientific impact, I would like to reiterate that the findings from my surveys were in total accord with the theoretical and philosophical writings of Ivan Illich. This is all the more surprising in that the research does not draw upon a hypothetical-deductive approach. I was not looking for conviviality according to Illich. I simply investigated the reasons used to justify the advantages of a slower pace of life and travel, and conviviality emerged of its own accord. My research is inductive. It was only after my investigations that I discovered Ivan Illich's work on conviviality (1973) and his writings on transport in the book *Energy and Equity* (1974). This fortuitous match between Illich's theory and my inductive approach is an important element of the analysis.

On one hand, it shows that Illich's theories have become powerfully valid today, while in his own time he had many detractors who often accused him of being a pamphleteer rather than a scientist. On the other hand, in terms of future research prospects, we now know that research into slower ways of life, slower transport and into the *Cittàslow* movement can, thanks to Ivan Illich, draw on theoretical foundations that add greater breadth and depth to the investigations.

Research-action agenda

Before generalizing from the findings outlined here, readers should nevertheless bear in mind that the

conclusions drawn from my *Cittàslow* towns cannot necessarily be extended to other *Cittàslow*. *Cittàslow* is a bureaucratic creation, operating at local, national, and international levels. Further investigations will be needed to check whether these observations recur in other “*Cittàslow* configurations,” especially as in each case this also depends a great deal on the elected officials in place in the different towns. In this respect, the tensions at play are somewhat different from the kind of minimum controls on individual freedoms advocated in Ivan Illich’s radical thinking. This is nicely illustrated by the Mayor of Waldkirch’s decision not to use the *Cittàslow* logo.

The observations drawn from my fieldwork also raise questions about the reproducibility of these schemes, particularly in bigger cities (Matta and Caballero 2016; Papas et al. 2023). The findings in *Cittàslow* communities open up new avenues for research in urban spatial planning, especially in major urban centers where residents often express concerns about the accelerating pace of life.

These reflections on the pace of life in urban spatial planning and mobility strategies could lead to a shift toward more people-centered planning and mobility models (Kaika et al. 2023), a transition from the paradigm of the “functional city” in which the primary focus is on operational goals like maintaining municipal infrastructure and the growth of production, to that of the “convivial city.” In the “convivial city,” the emphasis is on organizing public spaces for convivial interactions. For individuals, this is made possible by reduced work commitments, while at the collective scale it replaces the pursuit of productivity as the foundation of urban metabolism. The philosophy underlying *Cittàslow* highlights the relevance and feasibility of a degrowth perspective (Cattaneo et al. 2022). It underscores how a slower approach to mobility, driven by the quest for conviviality, can address both quality-of-life requirements and sustainability objectives.

Promoting slower cities encourages a more convivial and interactive use of public space, to the benefit of specific demographic groups (Kębłowski 2023). This is particularly pertinent for older people and for children, whose mobility and independence can be restricted by excessively high speeds (Munch et al. 2022). In this regard, convivial cities also tend to be more inclusive (Bergmann and Sager 2008; Fincher and Iveson 2015), paying greater attention to populations for whom public spaces were not initially designed.

Within the context of contemporary urban traffic-calming strategies, initiatives aimed at creating slower, greener urban environments have been introduced, in part, to enhance conviviality. For

example, areas with a 20kilometer per hour speed limit in France are referred to as “Meeting Zones.” I propose that this approach should be further developed and applied to other types of urban time policies (Munch 2023). Convivial cities not only encourage social interactions but also prioritize activities that take time and have clear meaning, as individuals can directly engage with the tools assigned to these activities. For instance, promoting the establishment of community bicycle-repair workshops, informal peer-to-peer vehicle loan and repair platforms, or community canteens, are policies that generate collective life through manageable tools, thereby fostering conviviality and a slower pace of life.

Furthermore, this perspective offers an alternative to the prevailing urban models of so-called “smart cities,” which prioritize data, automation, and computerization, often at the expense of human relations, physicality, and our connection with nature. The convivial city presents a counter-model to urban development approaches based on growth, innovation, and acceleration.

Notes

1. Research Center for the Study and Observation of Living Conditions.
2. *France Stratégie* is an institution attached to the Prime Minister’s office. Its objective is to help determine the major orientations for the nation’s future and the medium- and long-term objectives of its economic, social, cultural, and environmental development, as well as to prepare reforms.
3. For more information on the network, see <http://www.cittaslow.org>.
4. It should be noted that mayors enjoy very different powers of policy formulation and implementation in various countries. In UK towns, in particular, mayoral powers are mainly ceremonial.
5. Details about each city can be found in the Supplementary Material and an associated research report that is available online in French (Munch et al. 2022).
6. For a more complete analysis of the interchanges in the interviews, refer to Munch et al. (2022).

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