More than a hundred years ago, Frederick Winslow Taylor, the father of “scientific management” in the United States, proclaimed that “the most important object” in every business was to make it possible for every employee to “do (at his fastest pace and with the maximum efficiency) the highest class of work for which his natural abilities fit him.”

In the 21st century, Mark Taylor, a professor of religion at Columbia University, reminds us, speed has become the measure of success in virtually all domains. In *Speed Limits*, Taylor examines the “long arc of history” (that began with the Protestant Reformation, gained steam during the Industrial Revolution, embedded itself in consumer capitalism, and became essential to global finance) that has resulted in the insinuation of a “gospel of speed” into modern culture. And he sounds the alarm about the consequences of this phenomenon. “The faster we go,” Taylor warns, “the more fragmented and frenzied life becomes. If life is time, then to lose time is to lose life. Speed has a cost, a high cost – sometimes it even kills. As acceleration accelerates, individuals, societies, economies, and even the earth that sustains us approach meltdown.”

*Speed Limits* is by no means the first jeremiad on this subject. And Taylor’s tone, by turns self-referential, sermonic, and apocalyptic, may turn off readers who do not already agree with him. Nonetheless, the book does provide an informative and, at times, chilling account of “the intersecting vectors” that have given speed such pride of place.

Taylor is at his best explaining the impact of speed on the psychology and practice of globally-wired financial markets, which, he claims, embody “postmodernism on steroids.” Investment firms, Taylor indicates, can now process one trillion bytes of data about stocks, options, futures, and indexes in a single day: trades can be executed in nanoseconds, i.e. one billionths of a second. Such speed creates opportunities for market manipulation. Firms can make enormous profits by executing their own transactions ahead of the orders placed by their clients on the same stocks; they can influence prices by placing and then cancelling buy and sell orders.

The new normal generates vulnerability and volatility. Consider, for example, “flash crashes” like the 1,000 point plunge of the Dow Jones Industrial Average in 2010, which lasted only a few minutes. And, most ominously, consider the implications of the decoupling of financial “assets” from “real” commodities that has allowed global capital to reach ten times the value of all goods and services (and
Although financial markets have been “disintermediated,” with individual human beings in essence “taken out of the loop,” financial markets, Taylor suggests, still utilize short and long-term memories, each of which has limited value for present and future calculations. Markets are not consistent, continuous, self-regulating, or “rational.” Like other organisms, they experience periods of relative stability punctuated by catastrophic events. Over time, moreover, the risks attached to financial markets are higher and the costs are exponentially greater.

These days, Taylor points out, just about everything moves at an accelerated – and accelerating – pace. Able to analyze data from customers, store managers, market professionals, and designers almost instantaneously, “fast fashion” retailers now produce new, low-price inventory throughout the year. With merchandise introduced and then removed from shelves rapidly, customers return to stores more frequently, and conspicuous consumption becomes constant consumption. By one estimate, the average woman in England has twenty-garments she has never worn in her closet.

With the Arctic ice melting faster and faster, the likelihood of abrupt climate change has increased markedly. Sea levels will rise, weather patterns will change, and, according to Taylor, there may be an increase in volcanic activity.

“It is not clear,” Taylor writes, “whether there is time to recover.” He sees a glimmer of hope in Cittaslow, a reform movement founded in Italy in 1999. Dedicated to improving the quality of life by slowing down its pace, Cittaslow has at least one community in fourteen countries.

Slowness alone, Taylor emphasizes, “is no cure for the addiction to speed.” Significant progress will not come without radical social and cultural change. Costs should be calculated with a long-term perspective – and resources should be redistributed. In an effort, perhaps, to conclude on an affirmative note, Taylor claims that when reflection is cultivated “the axis of reality sometimes shifts, even if ever so slightly. In this moment, it becomes possible to hope that the recovery of an appreciation for time will allow time for all of us, and our planet, to recover.”