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How Local is Slow Food?

At the heart of the sustainable food movement are a series of dichotomies: local/global, organic/conventional, slow/fast, artisanal/industrial. These terms are often used interchangeably, with those at one end of the spectrum (local, organic, slow, and artisanal) being elided into a single, unified ideology in neat opposition to another (global, conventional, fast, industrial). The problem with ideologies, of course, is that they rarely reflect the reality on the ground, which is more varied and complex than any generalized system of ideas could ever hope to represent.

This is certainly true with regard to “food localization,” which does not neatly stand opposed to all forms of globalization any more than it neatly allies with every organic agricultural practice, Slow Food activity, or artisanal food production method. Nevertheless, the idea of the local can also not easily be disentangled from these allied concepts, which overlap with it in a myriad of meaningful and significant ways.

With this in mind, it is worth seeking to understand some of the ways that local food coincides with Slow Food, given that Slow Food constitutes both a distinctive articulation of the local food movement and the closest thing to an institutional embodiment of that movement as we are likely to find. To that end, I want first to make some general points about food localization before exploring some of the paradoxical consequences that have come from the globalization of Slow Food as a movement.

Food Localization

Local food has now become so widespread a notion that it has followed the seemingly inevitable trajectory of fashionable ideas in an age of rapid communication: from a base of devoted advocates, to popular treatments in film and literature, to the inevitable parodies and backlash, followed by academic books and articles analyzing every possible aspect of the rise and fall of this social trend.¹

¹ The sketch-comedy show “Portandia” on the Independent Film Channel memorably satirized locavores in its first episode (“Ordering the Chicken,” <http://www.hulu.com/watch/208808>).

At its core, the push for local food systems comes in response to economic and cultural globalization: the internationalization of markets and the homogenization of taste. Advocates for localism seek to increase the market for food that has a short and transparent supply chain (“Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food,” in the words of the US Department of Agriculture program). They do this for a variety of reasons, including: reducing the “carbon footprint” of food; improving its freshness, taste, and nutritional value; increasing social and environmental sustainability; promoting food safety; and building local community. Critics of local food systems find fault with many if not all of these arguments, and they often criticize other assertions and assumptions of local food boosters.

The problem with this advocate vs. critic formulation is that it tends to foster an all-or-nothing, black-and-white approach to sustainable food, which is neither productive nor accurately reflects how people all around the world are working to create more environmentally friendly, economically viable, and socially just food systems at a variety of temporal and spatial scales. Even in the US, local food systems take many forms and involve everything from backyard gardens, community gardens, “guerrilla gardens,” and locally foraged food; to farmers’ markets, farm stands, food co-ops, and farm-to-school programs; to urban farms, Community Supported Agriculture farms, and other small- and medium-size producers.

Part of the blame for the simplification of local food activism must fall at the feet of its advocates, whose attempts at putting into practice some version of the “100-Mile Diet” are too easily caricatured as arguments that everyone should eat food only from within a certain radius of home. Among these are Gary Nabhan’s *Coming Home to Eat*, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Alisa Smith and J.B. Mackinnon’s *Plenty*, and Bill McKibben’s “The Year of Eating Locally” from *Deep Economy*.² These were stunts to prove a point, like Morgan Spurlock’s month of eating only at McDonald’s in *Super Size Me*, Colin Beavan’s year of living sustainably in *No Impact Man*, and even Henry David Thoreau’s year of “living deliberately” in *Walden*.³ But while none of these writers

2 Gary Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods* (New York: Norton, 2002); Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Alisa Smith and J.B. Mackinnon, *Plenty: Eating Locally on the 100 Mile Diet* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007); Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, 2007).

3 *Super Size Me*, directed by Morgan Spurlock (Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2004); *No Impact Man*, directed by Laura Gabbert and Justin Schein (Oscilloscope Pictures, 2009); Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854).

were attempting to legislate localism (something that would be seasonally impossible for many people, anyway), their “foodshed”-based approaches must have seemed naïve to readers who took more systems-based approaches to food production, distribution, and consumption. Still, these food memoirs remind us of the most important point made by all the various iterations of the local food movement worldwide: that all food is “food from somewhere” rather than “food from nowhere,” and that the particular places in which our food grows matter much more than we may think they do.

The Growth of Slow Food

Slow Food is in some ways analogous to food in general, because while it may appear to be a movement from everywhere, it is in fact a movement from somewhere, and the place of its origin matters as much as the fields in which our food is grown.

Slow Food was born in Italy in 1986, when Carlo Petrini and a group of his fellow Italian leftists came together to protest the opening of a McDonald’s near the Spanish Steps in Rome. Since then, it has grown into a vibrant, international organization, with more than 100,000 members in 150 countries, including 35,000 members in Italy and 25,000 members in the United States.⁴ Among other activities, it produces popular annual guides to food and wine; it hosts well-attended, biennial meetings of food producers and consumers, the Salone del Gusto (Hall of Taste) and Terra Madre (Mother Earth) gatherings in Turin; and in 2004 it opened the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo, Italy, to educate students about the relationship of agriculture, biodiversity, and gastronomy.

Slow Food is in some sense misnamed, or at least has outgrown its name. While the organization may have begun as a protest against fast food, that protest was largely symbolic, and Slow Food has become less about what it opposes and more about what it endorses.⁵ The organization began with a focus on educating people about the plea-

4 “Slow Food” is also an idea that has taken on a life of its own, developing into an entire “slowness” movement dedicated to slowing down the pace of life, but my focus here is on the Slow Food organization. Two book-length studies that address Slow Food as both movement and organization are: Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig, *Slow Living* (New York: Berg, 2006), and Geoff Andrews, *The Slow Food Story: Politics and Pleasure* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008).

5 As Stephen Schneider observes, current Slow Food rhetoric “is less a rhetoric of protest and more a rhetoric of community organization” (397).

tures of regional cuisine, but over time it has expanded to encompass a range of ecological concerns and, most recently, has added an appreciation that social justice must be part of any understanding of what constitutes sustainable food. Today, that evolution is embodied in Slow Food's belief that food should be "good, clean, and fair":

- good: "a fresh and flavorsome seasonal diet that satisfies the senses and is part of our local culture"
- clean: "food production and consumption that does not harm the environment, animal welfare, or our health"
- fair: "accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for small-scale producers."⁶

In some sense, therefore, all its activities are in one way or another focused on a single goal: fostering a specific kind of economic development intended to establish and promote food communities that share its values of quality food, made by small producers that use environmentally sustainable production methods and pay fair wages.

While this focus may certainly be considered "slow," a better term for it might be "small." As Bill Buford observes in *Heat*,⁷ "The metaphor is usually one of speed: fast food has ruined our culture; slow food will save it. But [this] obscures a fundamental problem, which has little to do with speed and everything to do with size." Slow Food is more about what Buford calls "small food," or artisanal food: "Small food: by hand and therefore precious, hard to find. Big food: from a factory and therefore cheap, abundant." "Food made by hand," asserts Buford, "is an act of defiance and runs contrary to everything in our modernity."

Since its founding, Slow Food has faced a number of critiques:

- that it is elitist, and that its focus on pleasure-based "taste education" reflects an ingrained class bias that the organization has been unable to shake
- that it is nostalgic for a mythologized "local" and has invented food traditions at least as much as it has preserved them

6 "Our Philosophy," Slow Food, <http://www.slowfood.com/international/2/our-philosophy>

7 Bill Buford, *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2006).

- that it is more of a promotional strategy for Italian food, drink, and culinary tourism than a force for sustainable agriculture and food justice.⁸

Although these critiques certainly have some truth to them, they do not reflect the primary concerns I heard during the five months I spent studying Slow Food in the Piedmont region of Italy, where the organization is based. Instead, many of the food producers, chefs, and distributors with whom I spoke were concerned that the scale of Slow Food's growth increasingly seemed to conflict with the preservation of local food traditions and celebration of local food producers on which the organization was founded. A chocolate maker, for instance, observed that as the Salone del Gusto has grown, it has lost the local character of its earlier days, when it was "a small, typical Piedmontese, very elegant site." A winemaker noted that while the organization's increasing need for money has created opportunities for larger producers to be involved, it has also created financial barriers for smaller producers to do so. And another winemaker expressed concern that by helping big producers, Slow Food may have taken on some of the trappings of the very industrial mentality it was formed to combat. Slow Food has now become a brand, he said, "like Dolce & Gabbana or Armani," but it may be that "artisanal products for the masses are not possible."⁹

Whether these compromises are the inevitable consequences of the globalization of Slow Food remains unclear. On the one hand, as Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig have observed,¹⁰ the fact that the organization has always rendered its name in English, despite being founded by Italians, is "an acknowledgment of the international spread and aims of the movement." And its global growth, they believe, has helped to create "a kind of transnational civil society distinct from the transnationality of global corporations." On the other hand, almost everyone I spoke with, including some Slow Food staff members, expressed hesitations about the organization's recent collaboration with Eataly, the Italian food superstore, for whom Slow Food serves as a consultant. As one olive oil producer said, Oscar Farinetti (Eataly's founder) "in a sense

8 Among the more prominent of these critiques are the cluster of articles that appeared in *Food, Culture, and Society* 7, no. 2 (2004), and various analyses that have appeared over the years in *Gastronomica*.

9 Some academic critics have made similar observations. Meneley notes that "Slow Food claims to champion the small producers, but ends up favouring the elite" (173), and Peace claims that Slow Food "essentially reflects the power and mirrors the contradictions of the system against which [it] pitches its political and symbolic resources" (39). Anne Meneley, "Extra Virgin Olive Oil and Slow Food," *Anthropologica* 46, no. 2 (2004): 165–76; Adrian Peace, "Terra Madre 2006: Political Theater and Ritual Rhetoric in the Slow Food Movement," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2008): 31–39.

10 Parkins and Craig, *Slow Living*.

bought the brand of Slow Food” when the collaboration first began in 2007. That the questions I posed to Italian producers about Slow Food almost always resulted in answers about Eataly shows just how fluid the boundary between the organization and the corporation has become.

The anthropologist Richard Wilk has made the case that “the extremes of slow and fast, local and global, artisan and industrial, are ideal types; at some level they may be good intellectual tools, but all the real action takes place in between,” where what Sidney Mintz has called “food at moderate speeds” is traveling.¹¹ The challenge for Slow Food, however, seems to be not how to become “Moderate-Speed Food” but whether it is possible to hold the extremes of local and global in a productive tension. Philip Ackerman-Leist believes that “Slow Food’s dual emphasis on local autonomy and global exchange is exemplary in a polarized era of local versus global”, and there is much to support this view.¹² But when the term “global exchange” refers not to the exchange of ideas but to commercial transactions, Slow Food’s dual emphasis on the local and the global can start to feel a bit more like cognitive dissonance.

11 Richard Wilk, “From Wild Weeds to Artisanal Cheese,” in *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*, ed. Richard Wilk (New York: Altamira Press, 2006), 13–27.

12 Philip Ackerman-Leist, *Rebuilding the Foodshed: How to Create Local, Sustainable, and Secure Food Systems* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2013).