Slow Food and the Politics of Pork Fat: Italian Food and European Identity

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the emergence of the Slow Food Movement, an international consumer movement dedicated to the protection of 'endangered foods.' The history of one of these 'endangered foods', **lardo di Colonnata**, provides the ethnographic window through which I examine Slow Food's cultural politics. The paper seeks to understand the politics of 'slowness' within current debates over European identity, critiques of neo-liberal models of rationality, and the significant ideological shift towards market-driven politics in advanced capitalist societies.*

KEYWORDS *Slow Food, Italy, consumption, European identity, social movements*

In April 1998 I returned to Carrara in central Italy where, a decade earlier, I had conducted ethnographic research on the subject of craft identity among marble quarry workers and the history of local labour politics (Leitch 1993). I hoped to renew my associations with local families and update my previous research by revisiting the quarries, reinterviewing marble workers I knew, and tracking any other significant transformations to the local marble industry.

Pulling out my notebook as I arrived in Milan's Malpensa airport, I began to scribble some initial impressions. Perhaps because I had been away for so long, I was struck by the overtly transnational space of the airport itself. With public announcements made in four languages, it was an explicitly modern European frontier. It became more so during the rush hour bus ride towards the city, surrounded by wildly gesticulating drivers all conversing on mobile phones. However, when I noticed the advertisement for McDonald's printed on the back of the bus ticket – 'Buy one: get one Free' – I was slightly taken aback. I could not recall much fondness amongst Italians for such a marked category of American fast food culture, yet soon enough we passed a 'McDrive.'

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Adding to my initial disorientation were the visual manifestations of other recent changes in Italian national politics, with fading posters promoting Umberto Bossi's Northern League and its call for the formation of a separate regional entity called Padania, as well as those for Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party. My sense that the cultural and political landscape had indeed changed in ten years was later confirmed in conversations with Milanese friends, who admitted to me that they themselves were confused. The old categories of 'left' and 'right' in their imagination had somehow merged or become indistinct and, among other things, they mentioned the growing popularity of New Age philosophies amongst their friends.

I arrived in Carrara to find the marble industry in crisis, with the price of high-quality stone at its lowest point and unemployment figures at their highest in ten years. However, much to my surprise, I found that a much humbler, and decidedly more proletarian local product had become newly controversial: pork fat, locally known as *lardo di Colonnata*, had apparently been nominated as the key example of a nationally 'endangered food' by an organization called Slow Food.

At the time of my original fieldwork, neither *lardo* nor Slow Food had particularly high media profiles. Indeed, my own interest in the subject of pork fat stemmed from local reverence towards such an obviously, elsewhere, despised food, one often associated, for example, with the notion of fat as 'poison' in modern American diets (Rozin 1998; Klein1996).[1] Every summer since the mid-1970s a festival dedicated to this specialty had been held in Colonnata, a tiny village located at the end of a narrow, winding mountain road traversing one of the three marble valleys of Carrara. And during the years I spent in Carrara, *lardo*-tasting visits to Colonnata became one of the ways I entertained foreign visitors who, more often than not, registered the appropriate signs of disgust at the mere mention of feasting on pork fat. However by the late 1990s, Colonnata had become a major destination for international culinary tourism. Venanzio, a restaurant named eponymously after its owner, a local gourmet and *lardo* purveyor, was one attraction, but Colonnata's pork fat was also being promoted with great acclaim by Pecks, Milan's epicurean mecca. Moreover, it had even been nominated as a delicious, albeit exotic, delicacy by writers as far afield as the food columns of *The New York Times* (*La Nazione* 18/2/1997) and *Bon Appétit* (Spender 2000).

Similarly, the organization now called Slow Food had limited public visibility in the mid-1980s. Founded by Carlo Petrini, a well-known food and wine writer associated with specific elite intellectual circles of the 1960s Italian

Colonnata and the quarries. Photo by Joel Leivick.

left, it was known then as a loose coalition opposed to the introduction in Italy of American-style fast-food chains. This relatively small group achieved some initial national notoriety in the context of a spirited media campaign waged in 1986 against the installation of a new McDonalds franchise near the Spanish Steps in Rome. And in 1987, taking a snail as its logo, Slow Food emerged with its first public manifesto signed by leading cultural figures of the Italian left outlining its dedication to the politics and pleasures of 'slowness' and its opposition to the 'fast life.'

In the late 1980s, Slow Food began to intervene within the growing circuits of a vigorous national debate concerning the widening application of new uniform European Union food and safety legislation. Theoretically designed as a measure of standardization for the European food industry, this legislation threatened the production of artisanal foods linked to particular localities and cultural traditions. Thus, whereas elsewhere in the world, anxiety about the homogenizing practices of post-industrial capitalism had taken the form of movements around endangered species, environments and people, in Europe there was a growing concern for 'endangered foods.' In 1989 Petrini launched the International Slow Food Movement at the Opéra Comique in Paris, and during the 1990s, Slow Food gradually developed into a large international organization, now in 83 countries.

From its inception Slow Food mixed business and politics. In Italy, for example, it developed an extremely successful commercial wing publishing books and travel guides on cultural tourism, food and wine. It has also initiated taste education programmes in primary schools and has recently proposed a university of gastronomy. An explicit organizational strategy has been the cultivation of an international network of journalists and writers. To this end Slow Food sponsors a star-studded annual food award – a food Oscar – that recognizes outstanding contributions to international food diversity. Although its headquarters remain in Bra, a small Piedmont town of about 70,000 people where Petrini grew up, an indication of Slow Food's institutional and economic weight may be glimpsed in its rapid expansion, with additional offices opening in Switzerland, Germany, New York and most recently in Brussels, where it lobbies the European Union on agriculture and trade policy.

What accounts for this current explosion of public interest in European food politics? There is, of course, a rich body of literature on the potency of food as a political symbol particularly in periods of great economic and social change. Indeed one need only recall the unfortunate consequences of Marie Antoinette's remark about eating cake in the context of a ferocious battle over the production of bread in Paris. Similarly, in the late 19th century, when socialism vied with republicanism as feudalism finally gave way to industrial capitalism, attempts to raise the bread tax in Italy provided the impetus for wide-scale revolts against the monarchy. Social historians researching in this arena have been influenced in particular by E.P. Thompson's (1971) path-breaking study of English food rioters in pre-industrial England; he argued that peasants protesting the rising price of bread were responding not just to increased economic hardship but to the abandonment of a 'just price' system

which guaranteed prices on certain basic commodities for the poor in the feudal economy. A common thread in many subsequent historical studies is that food protests, disturbances, and other forms of collective action around food are often motivated by ideas of social justice within moral economies, rather than more pragmatic concerns such as hunger or scarcity (Hobsbawm 1959; Gailus 1994; Gilje 1996; C. Tilly 1975; L. Tilly 1983; Taylor 1996; Orlove 1997).

Food and other items of consumption have also been central as cultural symbols in colonial and post-colonial nationalist struggles. In colonial America tea took on a radical symbolic function uniting colonists of different classes and regions, to eventually become a catalyst for boycotts, riots and even revolution (Breen 1988; Bentley 2001). Under British rule, Ghanian elites increasingly turned from European to African foods as an expression of nationalist sentiment (Goody 1982). In Mexico, corn, a product which was associated with the peasantry and denigrated by colonial elites as nutritionally inferior to wheat, later became central to the development of a national cuisine (Pilcher 1998). Similarly in Algeria, French bread is imbued with complex meanings reflecting post-colonial ambivalence (Jansen 2001). Equally numerous are examples of the political appropriation of food as a symbol of collective or contested national identity. Familiar recent cases include the wide-scale Indonesian protests in 1998 over IMF demands to remove subsidies on basic food items such as oil and rice; the 1990s protests by the French over American tariffs on *foie gras*; and, of course, McDonalds as a focal protest symbol for anti-globalization activists.

My assumption in this paper is that deepening concerns in Europe over food policy are linked to questions of European identity, indeed with moral economies and with the imagination of Europe's future as well as its past. Nadia Seremetakis, for example, has discussed how the disappearance of specific tastes and local material cultures of production accompanying widening European Union regimes of standardization constitutes a massive 'reorganization of public memory' (1994:3), a rationalizing project which potentially limits the capacity of marginalized rural communities to reproduce themselves as active subjects of history. The Slow Food movement, with its emphasis on the protection of threatened foods and the diversity of cultural landscapes is, perhaps, one response.

In the context of transformations to the global economy, these debates are inevitably also caught up in what has been called the politics of risk discourse (Beck 1986). Issues such as the introduction of genetically modified foods and crops, the widespread use of antibiotics and growth hormones in animal

fodder, the spread of diseases such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, colloquially known as mad cow's disease), the 1999 Belgium chicken dioxin scandal or the more recent foot and mouth scare in Britain, are now central topics of conversation in most European nations. I would suggest that public anxiety over these risks, both real and imagined, is symptomatic of other widespread fears concerning the rapidity of social and economic change since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. In sum, food and identity are becoming like the 'Euro,' a single common discursive currency through which to debate Europeaness and the implications of economic globalization at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Two other sets of questions also frame this inquiry. One concerns the genesis of the Slow Food movement within the broader context of transformations to Italian political life over the past two decades. This is a period associated with a significant decline in the cultural influence of political parties, labour unions and the Catholic Church, institutions that until recently have been the recognized political voice for collective interests in Italian society. It is also a period marked by tremendous economic growth, the expansion of commercially organized leisure and the passage of cultural power into the hands of the economic elite. Coinciding with these trends has been the rapid emergence of an influential independent non-profit sector of the economy and the development of new civil spaces fostering alternate forms of civic associationism. The appearance of the Slow Food movement at this specific historical conjuncture must, therefore, be tracked in relation to these more general transformations to Italian institutional politics and cultural life.

Finally my analysis is positioned alongside recent attempts to understand consumption as a relatively new ethnographic arena for the analysis of the capitalisms of late modernity. If we understand the global economy of the early twenty-first century to be an 'economy of signs' (Lash & Urry 1994; Baudrillard 1981), where the symbolic and aesthetic content of commodities has become increasingly important, then potentially new relationships may be created between consumption and the market. There is already ample ethnographic evidence demonstrating the influence of global cultural shifts in consumer taste on the organization of production (Blim 2000b; Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1996; Heyman 1997; Hernandez & Nigh 1998; Schneider 1994). More polemically, Daniel Miller (1995; 1997) has suggested that consumption has displaced production as the new 'vanguard' of the late-capitalist motor and that understanding the practices of consumption cross-culturally may reveal new roles for consumers as international political actors.

Theorists of new social movements also argue for the priority of culture and 'symbolically defined action spaces' (Eder 1993:9) as the basis for understanding new forms of collective action in post-industrial societies. In a somewhat problematic, though intriguing analysis of new forms of middle-class consciousness, Klaus Eder has argued that middle-class collective action often manifests itself in struggles for an 'identitarian' form of social existence, involving the idea of an authentic life-form where people interact as equals (1993:181). These kinds of struggles for identity and expressive social relations can, of course, also occur within the market.[2] The growth of consumerist forms of identity-production in liberal democratic societies thus coincides with the development of new possibilities for consumer politics in which culture has become a favoured idiom of political mobilization.[3]

Leaving aside for the moment these larger questions, let me now return to the local ethnographic context. The first section of this essay is grounded in what might be termed a phenomenology of pork fat.[4] In other words, I am interested in exploring the meanings of pork fat for local people and how these meanings may have changed in relation to its later appropriation as a key symbol of an 'endangered food' for the Slow Food movement. I focus on this example since it fortuitously coincides with my previous research and also because it provides an ethnographic window onto the promotional politics and origins of the Slow Food movement outlined in the second section.

Eating *Lardo*

At the time of my original research pork fat was not commonly eaten in any of the households I regularly visited for meals. *Lardo* was, however, almost always nominated in the oral histories I collected detailing the conditions of work over past generations. Many households maintained small vegetable gardens, which kept them going during periods of unemployment, and some households, with access to land, kept pigs or cows. One of the by-products of these pigs, *lardo* or cured pork fat, thus constituted a kind of food safe for families in the region and was an essential daily source of calorific energy in the quarry worker's diet. Like sugar and coffee, *lardo* was a 'proletarian hunger killer' (Mintz 1979). Eaten with a tomato and a piece of onion on dry bread, it was a taken-for-granted element in the worker's lunch. *Lardo* was thought to quell thirst as well as hunger and was appreciated for its coolness on hot summer days. Given its dietary importance, it is perhaps not surprising that it was also adopted as a cure for any number of health ailments from an upset stomach to a bad back.

Lard making with the conche. Photo by Luigi Biagini (foto@luigibiagini.com) in the book 'Il Lardo di Colonnata'. Federico Motta Editore, Milano (forthcoming).

Apart from its nutritional or curative value, *lardo* can easily be seen as the perfect culinary analog of a block of marble (Leivick 1999). Firstly, both materials convey parallel ideas of metamorphosis. Elsewhere I have written about the ways in which quarry workers utilize organic metaphors to talk about the transformative properties of the stone (Leitch 1993, 1996, 1999). *Lardo* embodies similar ideas of metamorphosis. It is transformed from its natural state as pig fat through the curing process, and this process is also narrated as one that encapsulates ideas of craft and individual skill. Secondly, although recipes for *lardo* vary in their finer details, marble, preferably quarried from near Colonnata at Canalone, is always cited as an essential production ingredient. Its qualities of porosity and coolness are vital, especially because *lardo* makers do not use any kind of preservative apart from salt. Apparently the crystalline structure of Canalone marble allows the pork fat to 'breathe,' while at the same time containing the curing brine. If at any stage the *lardo* goes bad, it is simply thrown out. Just like marble workers who have often suggested to me that marble dust is actually beneficial to the body because it is 'pure calcium,' *lardo* makers say that the chemical composition of marble, calcium carbonate, is a purificatory medium which extracts harmful substances from pork fat, including cholesterol.

The curing process begins with the raw fat, cut from the back of select pigs. It is then layered in rectangular, marble troughs resembling small sarcophagi, called *conche*. The *conche* are placed in the cellar, always the coolest part of the house. The majority of these cellars are quite dank and mouldy.

Some still contain underground cisterns, which in the past supplied water to households without plumbing. Once placed in the troughs, the pork fat is covered with layers of rock salt and a variety of herbs, including pink-jacketed garlic, pepper, rosemary and juniper berries. Finally, a small slab of bacon is placed on top to start the pickling process, and six to nine months later it is ready to eat. Translucent, white, veined with pink, cool and soft to touch, the end product mimics the exact aesthetic qualities prized in high quality marble.

But *lardo* is of course more than just marble's visual culinary analog. For local people *lardo* is deeply reminiscent of a shared past characterized by poverty and food scarcity. In diets distinguished by protein scarcity, *lardo* was an essential calorific food for men who, in the past, laboured up to fifteen hours a day cutting and hauling huge blocks of marble. To eat *lardo*, especially in the carnevalesque space of an annual festival, where hundreds of kilos of pork fat are consumed over four hot days in late August, is to remember and celebrate this past as collective history and corporeal memory. This is a performance of sensuous display and consumption where the skin, fat, and flesh of *lardo* is counterpoised to that of its consumers. The juxtaposition of two kinds of beautiful bodies and flesh, *lardo* and human, rephrases, or resculpts, two kinds of smooth, sensuous, luxuriousness: *lardo* and marble. And so just as *lardo* tastes of marble, it also mimics it. Through the curing process, *lardo* and marble metaphorically become one and the same. Through its physical incorporation, memories of place and self are actually ingested.

The Politics of Pork Fat

The events that led to Slow Food's declaration of *lardo di Colonnata* as an 'endangered food' began two years before my return to Carrara. In March of 1996 the local police force had descended on the Venanzio Restaurant in Colonnata, 'the temple of *lardo*' (*La Nazione* 1/4/1996). Protected by the constabulary, local health authority personnel proceeded to remove several samples of Venanzio's *lardo* and subsequently placed all of his *conche* under quarantine. Later, samples were also taken from several other small *lardo* makers in the village, but Venanzio and one other wholesaler, Fausto Guadagni, were singled out for special attention.

This action led to a barrage of media commentary that soon reached the national dailies. At the local level, the main preoccupation was the possible threat to the 1996 *lardo* festival. Nationally, the quarantine and subsequent application of new European hygiene legislation led to debates over the power of the European Union to regulate Italian food production and determine

Italian eating habits. The *lardo* quarantine controversy also provided the perfect media opportunity for the political aspirations of the Slow Food Movement. According to Carlo Petrini, coinage of the term 'endangered food' dated to the mid-1990s, just before the *lardo* controversy erupted. Up until then, Slow had been perceived by the public as an association of gourmets mostly concerned with the protection of national cuisines. But by the mid-1990s – a period which coincided with a number of high-profile food scares in Europe and public loss of trust in national food regulatory authorities – Slow began to imagine itself as an international organization concerned with the global protection of food tastes.

For Slow, *lardo di Colonnata* became the example par excellence in a long list of 'endangered foods' which included, for example, red onions from Tropea in Calabria, an ancient legume from the region of Le Marche called *la cicerchia*, and a plum and apricot hybrid called *il biricoccolo*. Several 'endangered foods' were imagined as under threat, from trends towards farming monocultures, from the disintegration of traditional rural foodways, from pollution of waterways, or from the dearth of alternate distribution networks. In the case of *lardo*, salamis and cheese, the threat was standardization and the imposition of new hygiene legislation, which would considerably diminish the economic viability of many of these artisanal producers.

Pork fat was singled out for a number of other reasons apart from timing. Firstly, due to the success of the *lardo* festival over twenty years and the promotional efforts of people like Venanzio, it had already acquired a certain exotic caché, especially among a group of celebrity chefs to whom Venanzio himself was connected. More importantly, however, *lardo* presented an unambiguous test case for new European Union hygiene rules, which insisted on the utilization of non-porous materials in food production. Although there are certainly good techniques for sterilizing the *conche*, marble is porous and its porosity is clearly essential to the curing process as well as to *lardo*'s claims to authenticity. Local *lardo* makers involved in this dispute thus had a vested interest in lobbying for exceptions to the generic rules designed for large food manufacturers. Their interests coincided perfectly with Slow Food's own political agenda, in particular its campaign to widen the debate over food rules to include cultural issues.

Slow Food's appropriation of *lardo di Colonnata* as a key symbol of its 'endangered foods' campaign also had great rhetorical value. In the numerous publicity materials that subsequently appeared in the press, Petrini often likened the protection of pork fat made by local people in dank and mouldy cellars

to other objects of significant national heritage, including major works of art or buildings of national architectural note. In valorizing the traditional techniques of *lardo* producers, Petrini was rhetorically distancing his organization from accusations of gourmet elitism, while simultaneously challenging normalizing hierarchies of expert scientific knowledge, including those of the European health authorities. In this kind of strategic symbolic reversal, the food artisan is envisaged not as a backward-thinking conservative standing in the way of progress, but rather, as a quintessential modern subject, a holder par excellence of national heritage.

Ironically, the publicity surrounding these events subsequently amplified into yet another threat: copying. Much to the dismay of local *lardo* wholesalers, big butcheries from all over Italy began manufacturing a product, which they also called *lardo di Colonnata*. When I visited them in 1998, the *lardo* makers in Colonnata were lobbying regional politicians to protect the name of *lardo* through its nomination as *Denominazione d'Origine Protetta* (D.O.P.), a label which would demonstrate that *lardo* was entirely produced in the village of Colonnata. Alternately, if this failed, they wanted the Tuscan regional government to approve the title of *Indicazione Geografica Protetta* (I.G.P.), a less onerous label indicating that the raw material used in *lardo* production is derived from a circumscribed area around the village of Colonnata.

When I returned to Carrara the following year, in 1999, Fausto despondently told me that while they had failed to obtain the protection of a collective trademark for *lardo*, eleven individuals, including himself, had managed to acquire the legal copyright to the name *lardo di Colonnata*. More recently again, this group has formed a legal association – *Associazione Tutela Lardo di Colonnata* – specifically for the protection of the name of their product. Though they own the legal title, not all members of this group actually produce pork fat, while others outside this original group are now no longer technically entitled to sell a product with the name *lardo di Colonnata*. Nevertheless, an ongoing legal battle still rages between the original group of eleven and outside butcheries who have formed a rival group. The city of Carrara has now established a working study group to deal with the controversy, funding the publication of further books, articles and scientific reports on the subject of pork fat, while the village of Colonnata has sponsored a sculpting competition and plans to erect a marble statue of a pig in its main square.

Clearly, there is a deeply ironic conclusion to be drawn from this brief account. Partly as a consequence of Slow Food's promotional campaign, a food which was once a common element in local diets and an essential source

of calorific energy for impoverished quarry workers, has been reinvented and repackaged as an exotic item for gourmet consumption. A product associated with a distinct social history and corporeal memory is now privately patented by a group of people who may be entitled to sell the recipe. As I have noted elsewhere (Leitch 2000), this is a story not of the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) but of its commodification. The story speaks to how memory replaces tradition as we move from modernity into post-modernity, a process which writers on other culture industries, such as art and music, have tracked as the commodification of nostalgia (Feld 1995).

Apart from its obvious success in the niche marketing of 'endangered foods,' a project Petrini has recently dubbed 'eco-gastronomy' (Stille 2001), Slow Food clearly defines itself as an organization devoted to cultural politics. However, the fact that it so closely engaged in promotional activities which have far-reaching commercial consequences for direct producers raises the question of articulating what kind of politics it actually advocates. What accounts for Slow Food's rapid expansion and evolution as an influential consumer organization in Italy? Why has food in particular become such a nodal point in recent debates over national and European identity? In order to address these questions I now turn to a more detailed consideration of the specific cultural context which partly facilitated Slow Food's emergence as a consumer organization devoted to a new politics of food and pleasure.

The Politics of Pleasure: Food and the Italian Left[5]

In Italian *gola* means 'throat' as well as the 'desire for food.' Although it is commonly translated as 'gluttonous,' implying a negative state of excess or greed, to be *goloso* has a more positive connotation of craving with pleasure a particular food. As Carole Counihan (1999:180) aptly observes, because *gola* implies both 'desire' and 'voice,' it suggests that desire for food is a voice – a central vehicle for self-expression in Italian cultural life. *La Gola* is also the name of a journal dedicated to epicurean philosophy, first published in the early 1980s by a group of Italian intellectuals, including Carlo Petrini.[6] In turn, Slow Food grew out of a previous organization called *Arci Gola*, where Arci was an acronym for Recreative Association of Italian Communists. First formed in 1957 to counter the influence of ENAL, the state recreational organism that supplanted the Fascist OND at the end of the war, Arci circles quickly evolved in the 1960s and 70s, becoming integral to the Italian Communist Party's political agenda on leisure, youth culture and consumer society (Gundle 2000).

Carlo Petrini's own intellectual biography was forged within the milieu of

Arci circles and younger leftish critiques of the Italian Communist Party.[7] Born in 1948 in the city of Bra, Petrini grew up in what he describes as a middle-class family, the son of a teacher and an artisan whose own parents also had long attachments to the region. Politically and culturally this area has strong connections to the Italian aristocracy, as well as deeply entrenched working-class traditions, particularly left-Catholicism. Once noted as a centre for the leather industry, the town's main industries are now the production of laminated plastics and agricultural machinery. Made famous in the literature of distinguished literary figures such as Cesare Pavese, the area surrounding the city known as *Le Langhe* is also acclaimed for its fine quality agricultural produce, truffles, and for the production of one of Italy's most prestigious wines, *Barolo.*

Petrini first studied to become a mechanic but later enrolled in sociology at the University of Trento in a department that, not incidentally, was widely noted for training many of the more prominent leftist leaders of the 1970s extra-parliamentarian groups. Upon graduating, he returned to his hometown, where he became active in local cultural politics, founding one of Italy's first radical-left pirate radio stations called *Radio Bra Onde Rosse* or 'Red Waves.' This was also the period in which Petrini recalls first becoming involved with a group of friends interested in gastronomy, some of whom would eventually pioneer the core-founding groups of Arci Gola in the early 1980s. According to Petrini, he and his friends were motivated by a desire to create a less hierarchical, youthful alternative to the existing gourmet associations, which they viewed as linked to chauvinistic and elitist cultural politics. Later, Petrini developed his professional credentials as a cultural critic, becoming a self-taught food and wine expert writing for the national media, including *L'Espresso*, a widely circulating national current affairs weekly.

Historically, haute cuisine, consumption and the pursuit of pleasure have not been associated with the cultural imagination of the authoritarian Italian left, particularly the Italian Communist Party. As food journalist Fabio Parasecoli (2000) astutely notes, even during the 1960s, a period of enormous economic and cultural upheaval in Italy, Communist Party events were mostly noted for their extreme asceticism and overtones of Catholic morality. He further suggests that in Communist party discourse and practice, *haute cuisine* was regarded with special contempt as a marker of bourgeois decadence and even amongst avant-garde intellectuals and artists of the era, food was often treated with a great deal of suspicion. But by the mid-1980s, a period in which the cultural heritage of the old and new left was significantly undermined,

this dominant image of rigid austerity had undergone a marked reversal. Many public intellectuals, most notably journalists, increasingly turned towards the language of consumption as a form of transformative cultural politics.

For example, from the end of 1986 the independent communist daily newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, began publishing an eight-page monthly 'lifestyle' supplement entitled *Gambero Rosso*. According to Parasecoli, *Gambero Rosso* literally translates as the 'red shrimp/prawn' but has a further double cultural reference to Italy's most noted political morality tale, *Pinocchio*. *Gambero Rosso* refers here to the name of the tavern where the infamous pair of unscrupulous thugs – the cat and the fox – con the unsuspecting Pinocchio out of his gold coins. The obvious mission of the supplement was intended to 'protect Pinocchio's real-life counterparts – innocents abroad as well as trusting customers at home – from finding themselves at the mercy of padded bills, lumpy beds, gruff service, watery wine, or mediocre food' (Parasecoli 2000:7). At the same time the name was apparently also an ironic wink by a younger generation of leftist intellectuals to the supposed dangers of communism – the 'red menace'– and the cultural politics of the pleasure-allergic left parties, particularly the PCI.[8]

Ideology coincided with profitability and the magazine subsequently became an enormous publishing success.[9] In part this was due to the media's increasing influence in political communication during the 1980s. For the first time in Italian post-war political history, television and the press assumed a more central role in galvanizing public opinion, shaping political conflict and conveying information to the public than political parties. Independent newspapers, including *Il Manifesto*, *La Repubblica* and *L'Espresso*, even began intervening in the internal and external media circuits of the Italian Communist Party. At the same time, within the PCI there were substantial generational conflicts over the redefinition of what became known as 'the ephemeral,' those aspects of popular culture such as music, cinema and sport, which were of consuming interest to contemporary Italian youth, but which were seen by older PCI leaders as superfluous to the party's historic revolutionary project (Gundle 2000: 165–193; Grossi 1985).

The attitude of these younger leftist intellectuals towards what might be termed a new politics of pleasure, was certainly also linked to more general transformations within Italian society during these years. This was a period marked by tremendous economic growth, the rapid expansion of commercially organized leisure and the passage of cultural power into the hands of the economic elite (Gundle 2000; Forgacs 1990). As many scholars of contemporary Italy have argued, these years saw the emergence of a new social paradigm

and the parallel growth of new privately oriented individualism; this created the conditions for the advance of commodification and the affirmation of post-industrial capitalism. The victory of capital was thus accompanied by a 'cultural revolution' at a mass level (Gundle 2000; Ginsburg 1989; Asor Rosa 1988).

In the 1990s and beyond, this trend towards the commodification of culture has amplified and is now the subject of scholarly debate. For example, food and cuisine have become topics of conversation even in elite journals devoted to cultural critique such as *Micromega*. In November of 1998 a giant food fair – the *Salone del Gusto* or the 'Hall of Tastes' – organized by Slow Food in Turin, developed into a major media event attracting leading figures of the left intelligentsia, including Nobel Prize-winning playwright, Dario Fo, singer song-writer Francesco Guccini, as well as prominent national politicians, including the former Italian Prime Minister, Massimo D'Alema. Held in the converted ex-Fiat factory exhibition hall at Lingotto, ironically a site that is iconic of post-war narratives of class struggle in Italy, the fair was an enormous commercial and political success, attracting thousands of visitors and garnering popular support for the region of Piedmont's future winter Olympic bid.[10] But perhaps an even more telling shift in leftist political-culinary consciousness became evident in December of 1998 when the left democrat minister for culture, Giovanna Melandri, apparently missed the opening of the opera season at la Scala in Milan, in order to attend instead the annual dinner organized by *Gambero Rosso* food magazine (Parasecoli 2000).

What accounts for the development of this relatively new, but widely circulating discourse on the moral imperatives of pleasure and food in contemporary Italian cultural life? Could it be linked in any way to the generational shift in cultural politics of the Italian left, these days more accurately termed the Left(s)? (Blim 2000a) While often characterized as a party system based on permanent upheaval, over the last decade the Italian political landscape has undergone a veritable revolution leading to media declarations of the end of the First Republic. Beginning in the late 1980s, the corruption scandals, popularly dubbed *Tangentopoli*, 'Kickbackopolis' or 'Bribesville' initially as an allusion to Milan, eventually resulted in widespread arrests and the discreditation of the entire ruling political class. Along with some of its allies, the powerful Christian Democratic Party collapsed, while the ruling Socialist Party also virtually disappeared, with its leader Bettino Craxi fleeing to Tunisia. Less directly implicated in these scandals, but still rocked by the events of 1989 and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Communist Party split in two, becoming the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS) and *Rifondazione Communista*. In

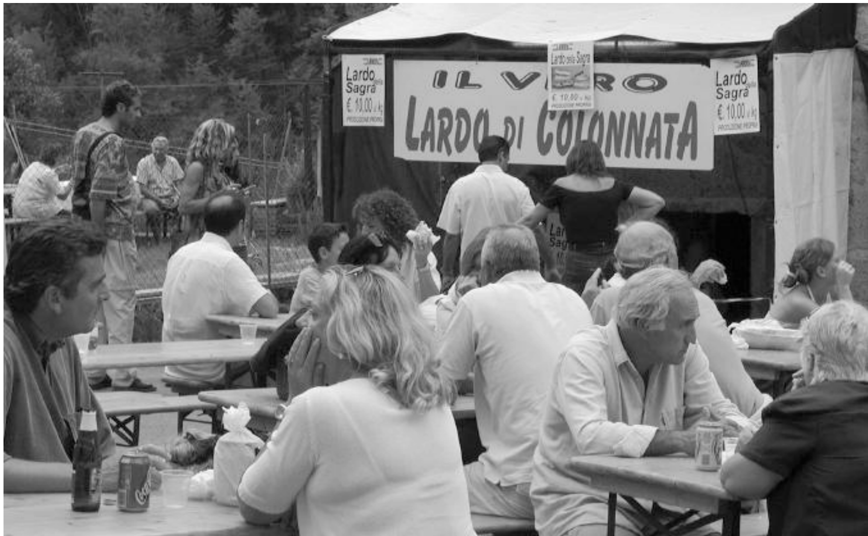
the wake of these extraordinary events, entirely new political parties and alliances emerged onto the national stage, now organized into two shifting amorphous coalitions: the Centre-Right and the Centre-Left.

Perhaps not surprisingly, public disillusionment with the political process has been reflected in falling electoral turnout and a significant decline in strong attachments to political parties. As political scientist Simon Parker (1996) suggests, this move from what Max Weber called a 'politics of vocation' to what might be termed a 'politics as spectacle' after Guy Debord (1967), is symptomatic of many Western democracies over the last thirty years. This entails a period marked by the emergence of new forms of collective action and social movements, by the diminishing importance of class as a major political cleavage, and by the increasing gap between those employed in regular, well-paid occupations and those either without work or in temporary, low-paid employment (Parker 1996:117).

This trend has been especially significant in Italy where, at least up until the 1980s, political parties were not just about representational electoral politics. They were often important sources of cultural identity and vehicles for social cohesion (Kertzer 1980, 1996). Crucially, the final disintegration of the PCI contributed to the waning in importance of explicitly 'workerist' politics, including the centrality of the male factory worker in social struggles, now upheld more or less exclusively by the hard-left *Rifondazione Communista*. More generally, the demise of the post-war party system has deepened the search for new forms of cultural, political and civic associationism, as well as the desire for more varied and dynamic forms of individual realisation (Parker 1996). Alongside religious fundamentalism, new-age spiritualism, spectacular virtual politics and the retreat into private worlds, other arenas for the imagination of alternate social worlds and collective action have emerged. The Slow Food movement could, I suggest, be interpreted as one of these arenas. Once associated with admittedly sectarian notions of bourgeois elitism, the consumption of food, even haute cuisine, has become a new metaphorical reference point for the reappraisal of individual, local and national identities. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Italian leftists insist upon the 'right to pleasure' through the physical incorporation of good food and wine.

Post Revolutionary Gourmets: From *Neo-Forchettoni* to Ecological Gastronomists[11]

In his 1995 novel entitled *Slowness* Milan Kundera makes an impassioned plea for reclaiming Europe as a site of pleasure and civility, for remembering



At a lardo festival. Photo by Luigi Biagini (foto@luigibiagini.com) in the book 'Il Lardo di Colonnata'. Federico Motta Editore, Milano (forthcoming).

and savouring the past. Set in an eighteenth-century French chateau, somewhere in the countryside near Paris, the novel works as a literary hall of mirrors, of stories within stories, blurring fact and fiction, past and present, reality and imagination, sex and fantasy, narrative and philosophy. At a crucial point in the narrative, in the eighteenth-century writer's novel within the novel entitled *No Tomorrow*, a young noble and his lover purposefully stage a night of slow lovemaking, waiting until dawn for the final act of consummation in order to recall every delicious detail. The writer then reflects:

> There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting … In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting (1995:34).

Kundera seems to be suggesting here that nostalgia may be a socially productive force in late modernity. While everyday life is increasingly experienced at a sensory level by the escalating compression of time and space, through acts of slow contemplation or moments of 'stillness' (Seremetakis 1994), sensory memories may be recovered and alternate, forgotten or discarded histories brought to the surface of consciousness. But Kundera's novel is not just a philosophical discussion on speed and modernity, or slowness and its relationship

to memory. It is also a literary treatise on Europe and the nature of Europeanism. The book plays with a series of European symbols to ask questions about what kind of place Europe might become. A vignette of an impatient car driver rudely passing another on a crowded highway at the beginning of the novel essentially becomes at the end a metaphor of the future, in which Kundera seems to be suggesting that the past, like the speeding car, is literally up one's ass.

Like Kundera, Carlo Petrini is also interested in socially productive excavations of the past. Both are concerned with the erasure of sensorial memory under modernity. Both are seeking to replace the usual discussion of how Europe is constituted as a political and economic entity with how one might think of Europe as a cultural entity. Both are insisting upon the intimate connections between economy and culture, the past and the future, fantasy and reality.

Media representations generally locate the origin of the Slow Food Movement in the context of a mid-1980s national polemic critiquing the establishment of the first McDonald's restaurant in Rome.[12] According to the *Italy Daily*, it was an almost anti-Proustian moment of the smell of French fries that first stirred Petrini into action:

> Walking in Rome one day, he [Petrini] found himself gazing at the splendid Spanish Steps when the overwhelming odour of French fries disturbed his reverie. To his horror he discovered that not twenty meters along the pizza loomed the infamous golden arches of a well-known food chain. '*Basta*!' he cried. And thus begun a project which would take him all over the world in order to promote and protect local culinary traditions. As a symbol for his cause he chose the snail because it was the slowest food he could think of (11/3 /1998).[13]

A consummate media manipulator, Petrini actually denies that Slow Food is simply anti-fast food. Rather, he suggests that Slow Food is against the homogenization of taste, which fast food symbolizes. In other words, for Petrini, fast food is a sign of the more negative effects of modern market rationalities on cultural difference – a world in which speed, or 'dromocentrism,' as well as placelessness, is the essence of the era (Casey 1997:xiii).[14] Slowness in this formulation becomes a metaphor for a politics of place: a philosophy complexly concerned with the defence of local cultural heritage, regional landscapes and idiosyncratic material cultures of production, as well as international biodiversity and cosmopolitanism.

These ideas are well articulated in the movement's first and often cited manifesto, which states that:

> In order to fight against the universal manner of the Fast Life we need to make a concerted effort to defend the pleasure of slowness. We are against those who confuse efficiency with speed. Our movement is in favour of sensual pleasure to be practised and enjoyed slowly. Through Slow Food, which is against the homogenizing effects of fast foods, we are rediscovering the rich variety of tastes and smells of local cuisine. And it is here, in developing an appreciation for these tastes, that we will be able to rediscover the meaning of culture, which will grow through the international exchange of stories, knowledge and other projects.[15]

Implicit in this manifesto is the notion that memory is entangled in the senses and that through the sensory experience of rediscovering taste memories one recuperates and holds onto the past (Sutton 2001). According to Petrini,

> In this century speed has become a drug. For us slowness is not an absolute value. It is more like a homeopathic medicine. A medicine one takes daily to remind ourselves that it is we who decide the rhythm of life we want to lead, rather than having these rhythms imposed on us from outside. Slowness is a metaphor for understanding and enjoyment, of being able to know who you are and what you taste (Interview with Petrini June 1999).

Slowness, in other words, is linked to pleasure, conviviality and corporeal memory. 'Slow life' says Petrini with typical sound-bite finesse, 'is not just Slow Food' (Petrini 2001:15).

It is important to recognize that these public manifestos advocating 'slowness' are neither explicitly anti-capitalist nor anti-corporate. Rather slowness is employed ideologically in order to promote what Petrini has termed a form of 'virtuous globalization,' in which members of minority cultures, including niche-food producers, are encouraged to network and thrive (Stille 2001). The notion of slowness for Petrini thus represents a discursive field linked to critiques of modernity *and* an arena of practical action: culture and politics. For Petrini, the questions are: Will the new Europe be a 'fast' Europe that protects the interests of fast capitalism, corporate control of food production and the indiscriminate introduction of genetically modified crops? Or can the new Europe be a 'slow' Europe that protects small artisanal food producers and the cultural landscapes to which they are attached? What kind of political vision of Europe will prevail? Will it be a Europe committed to neo-liberal models of economic rationality? Or will it be a democratic Europe fostering cultural diversity and communities of memory?

Attempting to construct a cultural politics of the future, Slow Food is, however, inevitably also caught up in the interpretive and cultural frames of its

main protagonists. In the 1990s, for example, McDonald's was singled out both by grass-roots 'anti-globalization' activists and by the media attention given to French farmer/activist, José Bové 's acts of sabotage against McDonald's in France. Petrini explicitly disavows these kinds of guerrilla strategies as being against 'Slow style.' As he puts it 'we prefer to concentrate our efforts on what we are losing, rather than trying to stop what we don't like' (2001:28).

Conclusion

This paper began by tracing the recent 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) of *lardo* as it has moved from a commodity with a relatively contained set of meanings for local people to its current role as a widely circulating symbol of an endangered food for the Slow Food movement. As a direct result of this campaign, *lardo* has also acquired new meaning as an exotic item of consumption for middle-class and local consumers alike. Despite occasional accusations of culinary luddism or culinary elitism (Lauder 1999), in Italy Slow Food has succeeded in creating the cultural space for the performance of a new kind of consumer politics. Clearly, Slow Food self-consciously resists easy categorization in terms of any familiar political narratives, including class. But while the 'identitarian' consciousness (Eder 1993) of Slow Food adherents is not easily ascertained, Slow Food political strategies amply demonstrate the *power* of consumption practices as shaping forces of modern identity (Klein 1999), as well as the *potential* for new forms of transnational consumer alliances (Miller 1995, 1997).

Scholars, particularly of the media, have pointed to the extent to which promotion has now penetrated the heart of the political process in liberal democratic societies, as well as the way in which media and public relations experts have increasingly become crucial to the management of political meanings in the public sphere (McLagan 2000; Wernick 1991; Marshall 1997). New social movement theorists have also emphasized that political struggles in the contemporary era focus on struggles over meanings, as well as over political and economic conditions (Torraine 1988; Fox & Stan 1997; Eder 1993). Slow Food politics can, I suggest, be interpreted as the product of all these trends. As an emergent political form it slips easily between the realms of advertising, commerce and cultural critique. It is as much concerned with the commodification of rural and proletarian nostalgia as with the actual protection of local material cultures of production and the memories to which they are attached. Thus while consumption is revealed as a realm for the potential emergence of new forms of collective political agency, the case of *lardo di Colonnata* also

demonstrates the way in which these new spaces for the performance of collective action continue to be fashioned through the dynamic interplay between consumption, production and distribution practices (Mintz 1985).

Filled as much with irony as nostalgia, the cultural politics of the Slow Food movement are not slow. They are fast, concerned as much with the proliferation of images, as with the marketing of memory. Just as international corporations increasingly appeal to particularistic cultural identities in order to capture greater global market share for their commodities, Slow Food political manifestos promote the idea of cultural diversity by urging consumers to buy niche-marketed foods. With this kind of promotional politics, where consumers are envisaged as international political activists by virtue of market choice, there can be no guaranteed ideological outcomes. Demands to protect local culinary traditions and cultural diversity could just as easily risk appropriation by radical regionalist movements with exclusionary political agendas. Anti-corporate rhetoric combined with narratives of cultural loss may fuel a deepening sense of nationalist nostalgia.

As we have seen, the cultural politics of marketing authenticity may also have unexpected consequences for direct producers. One further ironic example emerged during a return visit to Carrara in the summer of 2002. As Fausto joked with me about refusing to play the part of the 'peasant dressed in black,' it became clear that the pork fat makers had fallen out with their Slow Food promoters precisely over issues of marketing. In particular they objected to the promotion of pork fat manufactured outside the area of Colonnata in the Co-op, a national supermarket chain with political connections to the old and new lefts, including the Slow Food Movement. Eventually fed up with Slow Food's instrumentalization of *lardo* as a logo for the authenticity of their politics, especially in the absence of continuing economic benefit, pork fat makers from Colonnata were threatening an embarrassing protest outside Slow Food's signature public event, the 2002 trade fair in Turin.

Slow Food's emergence, I have argued, is critically framed within a uniquely Italian post-war cultural and political trajectory that has witnessed, among other things, the gradual demise of the post-war party system and the search for new kinds of civic associationism. It is an attempt to devise or reflect upon current constructions of Europe as purely a debate between regions and nations. I have also suggested that the endangered foods campaign is, in part, a well-orchestrated political response to what Nadia Seremetakis has called the 'reorganization of public memory,' (1994:3) which has accompanied the intensification of market rationalities in European peripheries. Slow Food's

preoccupation with the disappearance of distinctive regional tastes may indeed, as I have argued, be linked to the generational political sensibilities of its founders, but it is equally deeply engaged with current debates over the future of European identity; to moral economies.

There is, however, one final irony. Over the last ten years, thinking about food, and tasting it, has become a pressing political issue. While more generally widespread fears of environmental contamination through the uncontrolled introduction of genetically modified foods and crops mirror other fears of cultural contamination as national boundaries disappear, in Italy a fear of cultural homogenization has manifested itself in a politics of taste, based around the protection of 'endangered foods.' But whereas Slow Food founders once impishly promoted the 'right to pleasure' as a critique of Left asceticism, now pleasure has become a political duty and food is, perhaps, no longer simply a private pleasure.

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Notes

1. Dietary fashions of course change. Many popular American dietary gurus, for example, Atkins, now recommend diets high in 'good' fats and protein eliminating, instead, carbohydrates.
2. See, for example, Klein 1999 on the way in which market-based invasions of public space and individual's 'life-worlds' have become the impetus for anti-corporate activism. See also Edelman 2001 for a cogent discussion of these trends towards new forms of transnational activism.
3. For a discussion of the emergence of a 'metacultural' framework of culture and political action specifically in relation to indigenous social movements in Brazil, see Turner 1993. See also Conklin 1995. For a more general discussion of the rise of culturalist social movements or 'postnational' social formations, see Appadurai 1996.
4. For a more detailed account of this controversy see Leitch 2000.
5. Post-communist Italy comprises many 'Lefts'. My focus here is on the Italian Communist Party (PCI) because of its institutional connections to some of Slow Food's main protagonists, as well as its domination of post-war left cultural politics. As David Kertzer puts it: 'For millions of Italians, from the end of the Second

World War through the 1980s, personal identity was rooted in the Communist Party and its symbolism: *Sono comunista* (I am a Communist) was a statement not only of people's political allegiance but of their core identity. For many, being identified as Communist was more satisfying than being identified as Italian' (1996:64) See also Blim 2000a for a succinct appraisal of more recent splits in Italian Left politics.

6. Published by a Milanese editorial collective, the monthly journal lasted from 1982–1989.
7. Notes on Carlo Petrini's biography are gathered from the media, as well as from an interview I conducted with him at Slow Food headquarters in Bra in June 1999.
8. My analysis of food and the politics of pleasure among the Italian left is greatly enhanced by my conversation with Fabio Parasecoli, food writer and editor of *Gambero Rosso*. See also Parasecoli's forthcoming article in *Gastronomica*.
9. The last issue of *Gambero Rosso* as a supplement of *Il Manifesto* was published in 1991. It is now a magazine owned by its founder Stefano Bonilli, who had previously worked as a political journalist for *Il Manifesto* from 1971–1982. *Gambero Rosso* now has a regular spot on Italian national television, as well as a book series dedicated to food and wine.
10. In 1998, the Salone del Gusto attracted over 120,000 visitors over four days. Its success prompted the organization of an even larger event in 2000, also held at Lingotto.
11. *Neo forchettoni* roughly translates as 'hearty eaters'. The phrase *da neo-forchettoni a eco-gastronomi* comes from a subtitle in Carlo Petrini's (2001) own recently published book on the history of Slow Food.
12. For a more detailed account of the development of McDonald's in Italy see Petrini 2001.
13. The choice of the snail as symbol for the Slow movement was quite deliberate. As Petrini remarked to me, a tortoise is also slow. The snail is a food but, more importantly, it can be found everywhere and it carries its home on its back. According to Petrini, the snail captures the ideals of the Slow Food movement as being about food and connection to place, as well as cosmopolitanism.
14. According to Edward Casey, 'Dromocentrism amounts to temporocentrism writ large: not just time but speeded-up time (dromos connotes 'running', 'race', 'race-course') is the essence of the era. It is as if the acceleration discovered by Galileo to be inherent in falling bodies has come to pervade the earth (conceived of as a single scene of communication), rendering the planet a 'global village' not in a positive sense but as a placeless place indeed'(1997:xiii).
15. The original Slow Food manifesto was a collaborative effort put together by a group of left public intellectuals, including writers, journalists, singer-songwriters, for example, Valentino Parlato, Gerado Chiaromonte, Dario Fo, Francesco Guccini, Gina Lagorio, Enrico Menduni, Antonio Porta, Renate Realacci, Gianni Sassi and Sergio Staino.

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