

# *Uneasy Combination: Identity and Strategy in the Slow Food Movement*

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*The Slow Food movement is one effort to make food socially important, since food enters all aspects of our lives. But, as social research has had difficulty recognizing the complexity of food, the Slow Food movement has struggled to represent food's multiple aspects. Throughout its development, the movement has reevaluated its identity in the effort to be more widely relevant. By understanding Slow Food's identity project we can better understand how to conceive of food's diversity. While some researchers have cautioned that focusing on movement identity can neglect strategy, theorists have begun to see how these aspects are interconnected. Since social movement theories have paid little attention to agriculture and food movements (Tovey 2002: 2), Slow Food is a new example for understanding how identity and strategy work together. Initially its gastronomic identity neglected material aspects of food, and the movement responded by taking on a direct politics and diversity, to incorporate more issues and actors in the food system. But, with this broader identity, Slow Food had to clarify its intentions for social change, so it allied with related movements and created a more public image. While identity has been a central concern in Slow Food's development, this project has also been strategic, in legitimating the movement's views of food, broadening its resource base, and making it an active and adaptable means of social change. As a result, Slow Food has become a practical alternative to the dominant food system and a participant in changing that system.*

## **Introduction**

Slow Food is a social movement that aims to confront the diversity of issues tied up in food. While initially focused on promoting the enjoyment of good food in good company, the movement has tried to incorporate other aspects to express the complexity of food and strengthen an opposition to the fast food model. The movement has attempted to negotiate these aims by redefining its identity, giving new meaning to the interests and goals of Slow Food. According to the founder, Carlo Petrini (2001b), "the group began to grow as its own collective purpose turned into a search for a new identity" (5). While some researchers have cautioned against focusing on issues of identity, since extensive "navel gazing" can minimize the importance of strategy, social movement research has begun to consider how movement identity and strategy are related. Understanding how identity and strategy work together in Slow Food can alert us to the difficulty of defending multiple aspects of food, and of being a relevant social movement.

## **Literature Review**

Identity is a recent addition to social movement research and, while many realize self-definition as a point of contention in society, its place in theory is uneasy. It was primarily New Social Movement theorists who drew attention to the importance of identity issues in movements. They emphasize how new social conditions, particularly of late capitalism, have shifted social conflict away from class and distribution issues to more personal realms of life. For example, the erosion of traditional identity markers and boundaries (Melucci 1995: 293, Sandilands 1999: 30, Tovey 2002: 3, Sturgeon 1995: 43), the separation of private and public spheres (Berezin 2001: 88, Polletta 1997: 437, Sturgeon 1995: 45, Cohen 1985: 670, Melucci 1989: 71), and the growth of knowledge that controls more personal aspects of life (Melucci 1996b: 488-489, Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 146, Touraine 1988: 77, Habermas 1987: 392), have led to conflict over the meanings and values of political action, as well as the power to construct new meanings (Cohen 1985: 694). Identity adds an interpretive dimension largely absent from previous perspectives that focused on the rational and calculated organization of movements. Some see that work on identity neglects a strategic aspect that is critical to making broader social changes (Cohen 1985: 689, Kauffman 1990: 76-77, Flacks 1995: 259) but this view reflects a division between cultural and political perspectives of movements, and highlights a need to integrate these (Polletta 1997: 442).

A dichotomy in theoretical perspectives has tended to marginalize the politics of identity but it is increasingly clear that the process of identity can be strategic for movements. Since the production of information is an important means of control in contemporary society, the reinterpretation of this information can potentially change the social order (Melucci 1996b: 506-507, Swidler 1995: 34, Cohen 1985: 694, Freeman and Johnson 1999: 4, Sturgeon 1995: 44) and define a position in response to the proliferation of (often contradictory) knowledge (Epstein 1990: 49). Defining an identity separate from that imposed by the dominant social system is a way to resist the imposition of information, and the very conditions of producing information. Consciousness and reflexivity are important for movements to reevaluate their oppositional stance, and to avoid the same totalizing meanings that they contest (Cohen 1985: 694, 669, Melucci 1989: 46, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 179). Lacking political power, it is difficult for movements to create entirely new codes (symbols and meanings) that will be relevant and understandable for society. Rather, movements reinterpret and confound hegemonic cultural codes to create discourses that can be identified as alternative, that expose the irrationality of dominant interpretations and reveal contradictions in the social system (Brunori and Rossi 2000: 421, Whittier 2002: 306, Swidler 1995: 34, Eyerman and Jamison 1989: 112, Melucci 1989: 75-76). Using hegemonic codes makes it more likely that a new message will be widely understood, but this process is continually constrained by dominant meanings. Working in the vulnerabilities of the dominant system is one way to gain leverage, and finding these spaces requires intimate knowledge of hegemonic codes (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002: 361, Freeman 1999: 236, Cohen 1985: 689). Reflexivity draws attention to the ongoing conversation between movement and social system, and makes visible other aspects of identity formation. Apart from the goal of social change, self-definition is rewarding in itself and can benefit participation.

Clearly an interpersonal dimension is important for movements, since much research has shown that collective identity benefits participation. Having moral and emotional, along with cognitive, dimensions, identity can be an incentive for participation and can determine the kind of members a movement will recruit (Melucci 1996a: 75, Jasper 1999: 68, Friedman and McAdam 1992: 157). Essentially, a movement's identity *is* its recruitment strategy since the interests a movement stands for will resonate with particular groups. Some researchers note that expanding a movement's identity tends to make it more exclusive since it becomes harder to control and offers less powerful incentives (Friedman and McAdam 1992: 164); identity cannot be socially constructed *and* representative (Sandilands 1999: 32-33, Melucci 1989: 166, Cohen 1985: 692). While representing interests of every member is not possible for a social movement, or it would break apart, a collective identity is the one shared attribute that serves to tie members together. As such, identity can be a source of solidarity and commitment for members (Melucci 1989: 89, Staggenborg 2001: 509), particularly when a movement is connected to a network of organizations with shared interests (Gerlach 1991: 124, Brunori and Rossi 2000: 410, Staggenborg 2001: 510, Melucci 1984: 829, Jasper 1999: 67). Related movements can contribute participants and resources that solidify the identity and cause of a movement. Further, connecting names of important people to the movement can add credibility (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1231).

Understanding that collective identity affects participation makes visible the importance of non-instrumental aims for movements. The process of defining identity offers its own incentives since it connects people, involves them in a new lifestyle, and recognizes the feminist idea that personal change can lead to social change (Friedman and McAdam 1992: 157, Melucci 1989: 49, Sturgeon 1995: 45, Epstein 1990: 45, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 174, Reger 2002: 182, Tovey 2002: 3). In the process of collective identity members can satisfy personal needs that allow them to engage with broader social issues and to commit to future actions. Identity affects participation but it also defines which actions members will take.

The dualism in theoretical orientations seems to support a division between thought and action but identity is strategic because it is related to a movement's actions. Identity helps form a movement's organization, and it is through its organization that a movement conveys its message or strategy (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 69, Whittier 2002: 298, Reger 2002: 182, Gerlach 1991: 124, Melucci 1989: 60). How a movement's aspects and members relate to each other embodies how a movement defines itself in relation to dominant codes. Movements can accommodate diverse identities by creating boundaries between aspects of an organization, which can make for an adaptable movement, rather than a divided one (Reger 2002: 171, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 176, Gerlach 1999: 93). By enabling a movement to be flexible to new meanings and goals, organization also contributes to collective identity. According to Melucci (1989), organizational structures form the basis for "a symbolic confrontation with the external system" that makes possible alternative relationships and experiences (60). Further, the meanings and values of a movement determine how it will act to pursue its aims. A defined identity enables a movement to find the most cost effective and suitable action (Cohen 1985: 692-694, Polletta 1997: 446, Melucci 1989: 35) and to mobilize (Jenkins 1999: 288, Freeman

1999: 228, Melucci 1989: 69). Finding the best course of action involves awareness of a movement's context, but it is by defining its boundaries and goals that a movement can decide how to interact with its environment.

Identity is not just a turning inward and away from the “real” issues of society, and a growing body of literature demonstrates the strategic potential of self-definition. Collective identity can be understood as a process by which participants of a movement construct their collective experiences, interests and directions for action (Melucci 1989: 34, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 176). Identity describes how a movement produces meaning to define itself and its intentions for changing society. Forming part of this meaning system, strategy is the vehicle with which a movement defines its context and situation and the means of achieving aspects of its project (Eyerman and Jamison 1989: 102, Epstein 1990: 58, Flacks 1995: 259). It is important that researchers continually look to movements themselves to understand the many ways identity and strategy work together. Although food and agriculture movements have received little attention so far, they are useful examples for understanding the negotiation of multiple aims since they are often viewed as contradictory for pursuing both material and symbolic change (Tovey 2002: 2). Similarly, Slow Food has seemed ambiguous for advocating an alternative system of food *and* pleasure and conviviality, and it has struggled to define an identity that incorporates these diverse interests. Slow Food is now about many aspects of food, and it confronts a range of social issues that affect the meaning and existence of food. While it is broad and diverse, Slow Food's identity is defined by four main goals: promoting pleasure and conviviality, disseminating food knowledge, preserving cultural diversity, and protecting environmental diversity (Petrini 2001b: 12-13). I will discuss these aspects of Slow Food to consider how their formation is strategic.

### **Pleasure and Conviviality**

Although it has been problematic at times for the movement, Slow Food has always promoted the enjoyment of good food and company. As food is ever more “stripped of its sensory characters, reduced to appearances and signs” (Fischler 1988: 289), taking time to taste and enjoy food can create a different reality. For the movement, taste is a means of reconstructing “the individual and collective heritage” and resisting McDonaldization (Petrini 2001b: 69). Learning to recognize taste is a personal experience and taking pleasure in taste requires knowledge of the diversity of food. Since it offers the potential for meeting personal needs and transforming the self, pleasure is an incentive for participation (Friedman and McAdam 1992: 157, Melucci 1989: 49, Sturgeon 1995: 45, Epstein 1990: 45) and helps to establish commitment (Melucci 1989: 89, Staggenborg 2001: 509). Through pleasure the individual also gains an understanding of the range of social issues tied up in food, and consciousness is critical for making food choices that affect these issues. In Slow Food, “the pleasures of the table are the gateway to recovering a gentle and harmonious rhythm of life” (Petrini 2001b: 24). While pleasure emphasizes the transformative potential of the individual for society, conviviality involves establishing connections with others.

Since all people share a daily need to eat, food is a basic social connection, and conviviality provides the context for realizing connections through food. A non-instrumental aim, conviviality establishes commitment, and creates solidarity by bringing people together over food (Melucci 1989: 89, Staggenborg 2001: 509). The convivia reflect this social aspect in name and in organizing through eating together. Getting to know local producers and processors connects individuals in a network of food relations that provide security in knowing where food comes from, and a sense of community. As individuals become personally invested in those relations, networks help attract members to the movement and establish commitment (Gerlach 1991: 124, Brunori and Rossi 2000: 410, Staggenborg 2001: 510, Melucci 1984: 829, Jasper 1999: 67). Both pleasure and conviviality involve time, personal investment and connections that are important means of resisting the fast life represented in fast food. Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002) show that these qualities are gaps in the global food system where alternatives can gain some leverage (361). Conviviality and pleasure work to attract and mobilize participants in Slow Food, and to challenge meanings and values in the dominant food system. The goal of knowledge is a more direct way of redefining cultural codes.

## **Knowledge**

Knowledge raises awareness of the food system and informs actions, but it can be a means of resistance itself. The creation of a publishing company was a critical step for the movement since it provided Slow Food with “an emblematic name and a powerful vehicle of identity” (Petrini 2001b: 7). The movement recognizes the role language plays in defining a different world, and works to subvert mainstream food knowledge with a multicultural approach, use of terms like “tradition” and “territory,” and the combination of seemingly incompatible ideas like quality and affordability (Petrini 2001b: 7, 12, 19). Further, Slow Food reinterprets meanings and values of the dominant food system, demonstrating the force of its alternative vision (Brunori and Rossi 2000: 421, Whittier 2002: 306, Swidler 1995: 34, Eyerman and Jamison 1989: 112, Melucci 1989: 75-76). With the term “virtuous globalization,” the movement rejects cultural homogenization but supports transnational connections made possible in globalization. Slow Food is aware that to gain some ground it has to work on the terms of the dominant food system “using their weapons: globalization and worldwide reach” (Petrini 2001b: 17). The internet is an important tool for spreading the movement’s message and the best source of up-to-date information on Slow Food is its Web site. Text forms a major aspect of the movement’s knowledge production, but experience is also an important source of information on food.

Slow Food aims to provide the tools for individuals to appreciate and evaluate food so they can make informed choices. The movement teaches sensory skills and the characteristics of particular foods in workshops, exhibitions and Taste Education for kids. The movement also serves as a resource for its members and groups to gain and produce their own knowledge. Forming “a vast network of men and women capable of generating ideas and programmes,” members are encouraged to know and participate in their own local food systems and to be aware of others’ (Petrini 2001a: xii). The work of individuals in the convivia provides regionally specific knowledge, and the Ark of Taste

catalogues and preserves this heritage of information. An experiential dimension to food makes possible personal change that can also change society by developing a food culture. In the effort to formally build a culture of food, the University of Taste will soon offer bachelor's and master's degrees with courses on all aspects of food. Importantly, the movement aims to incorporate scientific knowledge in a more accessible and interesting presentation than lectures, and it draws on well-known scholars from around the world to teach courses at the University, such as Vandana Shiva and Eric Schlosser, who lend support and connections to the movement (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1231). Not only does the movement contest the information produced by the food system, but also the form it takes and the participants who create it. In spreading knowledge, Slow Food challenges dominant ideas of food, involves participants, and acts on its own knowledge to build resistance to the global food system.

### **Cultural Diversity**

Diverse food cultures form the basis of Slow Food's resistance to the global food system and they give meaning to the development of an alternative. With a multicultural approach the movement acknowledges the diversity of food cultures and opposes homogenization of the global food system. The movement sees that variety and diversity of local cultures "are the key by which [their] members all over the world acknowledge and understand each other" (Petrini 2001b: 37). Through products, methods, histories, identities and the exchange of information Slow Food members communicate and form a common identity. Cultural diversity gives new meaning to food and a different language with which to form an alternative model. This aim is reflected in the movement's organization, enabling Slow Food to be flexible to diverse interests and to adapt to changing needs. The movement works on both local and international levels and has formed more projects to reflect its different aspects. Initially focused on consumers, the movement now confronts issues of producers, processors, researchers and policy makers. Defining an identity has helped to mobilize members and to develop concrete ways that Slow Food can meet its goals. The Presidia are groups that support development projects in less developed areas, using traditional knowledge and methods. These groups need "to be agile, able to offer help and encouragement in many different situations," and the network, adaptability and local roots of Slow Food give the movement strength in these projects (Petrini 2001b: 96). As Slow Food expands to the "Third World" these characteristics are crucial to the success of such a venture. The movement's approach seems to be working, since it recently joined the Brazilian government in a project to restore the country's agricultural and food heritage. Its approach has also led the movement to reconsider its intentions of providing funds to preserve traditional foodways in the Fraternal Tables project. Since charity can neglect development, Slow Food aims to help less wealthy areas recognize and use their own cultural and ecological riches. In other words, defining aspects of its identity has helped the movement to determine appropriate courses of action that reflect its changing goals (Cohen 1985: 692-694, Polletta 1997: 446, Melucci 1989: 35). As well, emphasizing traditions, variety and diversity, and connections has enabled the movement to work in the spaces of the global food system and to gain strength for a Slow Food alternative (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002: 361, Freeman 1999: 236, Cohen 1985: 689).

## **Environmental Diversity**

Slow Food added environmental diversity to give the movement a more direct politics, and incorporating this aspect has affected not only its aims but how the movement pursues them. Along with the philosophy of eco-gastronomy, the movement has taken up projects that connect ecological issues to culture and pleasure. The Slow Food Award was created to recognize food-related work that contributes to biodiversity, and the Foundation for Biodiversity funds the Presidia to develop sustainable food cultures in the context of local ecologies and their natural biodiversity. The movement also opposes biotechnology and industrial monoculture, seeing that organic and small-scale methods better sustain environmental diversity. By adding an ecological dimension, the movement has shifted and mobilized its actions to impact material, along with symbolic, conditions of food (Jenkins 1999: 288, Freeman 1999: 228, Melucci 1989: 69). With a range of projects at different levels of the movement, Slow Food can take action in more ways with less risk, and it can take on meanings of related movements and members (Gerlach 1999: 93). Connecting to a network of movements, like organic agriculture and anti-globalization, has also helped maintain solidarity in diversity. Slow Food has become reticulate, an “integrated network” of linked participants and movements to spread information and participate in actions (Gerlach 1999: 89-90).

By incorporating environmental diversity in a food movement, Slow Food draws attention to the ways food impacts other aspects of society. Knowledge and consciousness are important tools for connecting food choices to environmental conditions and realizing the global impact of local actions. Common to environmental movements, the idea of “thinking globally, acting locally” involves recognizing that there are far-reaching consequences to local actions and that actions to deal with social issues on a global scale must be suited to the local conditions (Gerlach 1991). Emphasizing holism and diversity, Slow Food has expanded its identity to be more inclusive of the many different conditions of food. With independently functioning projects, the movement has been able to diversify its identity and become more adaptable, rather than breaking apart (Reger 2002: 171, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 176). As well, drawing on ecological ideas gives weight to the movement’s ideas of food. Thinking globally legitimates local actions and provides an “umbrella” under which different aspects can ally (Gerlach 1991: 128). Since worldwide reach is a strength of the dominant food system, Slow Food aims to make an impact on this level and it has extended its actions to more public and global spaces. Successfully challenging European Union hygiene standards that created barriers to small producers has put Slow Food in an influential position in the food system. Environmental diversity has altered the kinds of actions the movement takes and the meanings behind these actions.

## **Discussion**

Slow Food expanded a definition of itself to be flexible to the complexity of food issues and experiences, and this process has helped to define its directions for pursuing these goals. As a result, the movement has become more complex, consisting of diverse

aspects, multiple projects and a membership that nearly spans the globe. Slow Food has not become ambiguous as a result of its expansion, but more active in pursuing the diversity of food. By defining an identity that acknowledges diversity and opposition to the global food system, the movement alters culture, participation and an action orientation. I briefly return to these themes for a clearer picture of the strategic potential of Slow Food's identity.

In the process of forming an identity, Slow Food challenges codes of the dominant food culture. With knowledge as a main goal, the movement actively produces and disseminates information in various forms that define a different culture of food. Slow Food utilizes a range of media and styles of presentation to convey its message, it takes a multicultural and polycentric approach, and it supports experiential knowledge of individuals. As well, Slow Food creates new meanings and values of food, emphasizing concepts like tradition and taste, and it makes use of hegemonic codes, reinterpreting "quality" and "globalization," to reveal the weaknesses of the dominant culture of food and the strengths of Slow Food (Brunori and Rossi 2000: 421, Whittier 2002: 306, Swidler 1995: 34, Eyerman and Jamison 1989: 112, Melucci 1989: 75-76). By identifying weaknesses, the movement can move into these spaces to gain oppositional ground (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002: 361, Freeman 1999: 236, Cohen 1985: 689). Slow Food stresses the importance of personal connections, variety and diversity, pleasure and time that are difficult for the global food system to provide. Finally, making connections between aspects and workers in the food system requires consciousness and reflexivity of all the processes involved in getting food to the table (Cohen 1985: 669, 694, Melucci 1989: 46, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 179). In the process of defining its identity, Slow Food constructs alternative ideas of food that challenge the current food model.

As well as contesting dominant ideas of food, Slow Food's identity project has made its goals relevant to more participants and interests in the food system. The movement has constructed an identity that accommodates different interpretations of Slow Food under the umbrella of the international organization. Drawing on networks of movements and people has helped to reinforce a common identity and to strengthen solidarity and commitment (Melucci 1989: 89, Staggenborg 2001: 509-510, Gerlach 1991: 124, Brunori and Rossi 2000: 410, Melucci 1984: 829). Conviviality, diverse cultures and related movements all contribute support and meaning to Slow Food. While pleasure and conviviality have tended to attract an elite membership, these non-instrumental aims offer the possibility of satisfying personal needs and they can attract and commit participants (Melucci 1996a: 75, Jasper 1999: 68, Friedman and McAdam 1992: 157, Melucci 1989: 49, Tovey 2002: 3). Further, the movement sees that meeting these personal needs can alter relations in the food system, emphasizing the importance of individual responsibility and participation (Taylor and Whittier 1999: 174, Reger 2002: 182, Sturgeon 1995: 45, Epstein 1990: 45). In struggling to define itself, Slow Food has become flexible to more kinds of participants and ways of participating.

Although Slow Food generally takes a defensive position, the movement has not retreated from action but has pursued new courses of action that reflect its self-definition.

Incorporating diverse aspects of food has led to a more diverse organization that confronts multiple issues in different projects and groups, from Taste Education to biodiversity (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 69, Whittier 2002: 298, Reger 2002: 182, Gerlach 1991: 124, Melucci 1989: 60). Slow Food works on local and international levels in different areas of the food system, providing support and structure while being flexible to regional needs. This organization reflects a diverse and varied identity, and has enabled Slow Food to adapt to new interests and members without losing stability or legitimacy (Reger 2002: 171, Taylor and Whittier 1999: 176, Gerlach 1999: 93). Slow Food's identity has also helped to determine new courses of action and to mobilize (Cohen 1985: 692-694, Polletta 1997: 446, Melucci 1989: 35, 69, Jenkins 1999: 288, Freeman 1999: 228). The movement has incorporated new projects that reflect ecological ideas, and has reflected on old ones, like Fraternal Tables, to better acknowledge a range of actors and interests in the food system. The movement has extended itself into more public and global spheres to actively defend its interests and has taken concrete steps to reinforce its ideas, in the creation of a University, for example. Generally, Slow Food's identity has helped the movement to strategically situate itself in relation to the dominant food system and devise appropriate means to pursue its goals.

## **Conclusion**

While Slow Food has put much effort into the process of self-definition, it has not closed in on itself to the neglect of strategizing for social change. Social movement research that connects identity and strategy shows that self-definition contributes to a movement's understanding of its situation and the ways it acts on its goals. Identity can strategically alter cultural codes, participation and action in a movement. Defining itself as a defender of pleasure and conviviality, knowledge, cultural diversity, and environmental diversity, has enabled Slow Food to expand and develop a workable alternative to the global food system. The movement's success in addressing new definitions of itself suggest that struggling with identity is itself a strategy.

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