



## Recreating culture: Slow Food as a leisure education movement

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## SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

### Recreating culture: Slow Food as a leisure education movement

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Though seemingly concerned only with food and agriculture, Slow Food ought to also be understood as a movement that addresses crises in societies' use of leisure. Specifically, mealtime is examined as a site of conflict between gastronomic cultural traditions and the efficiency, standardisation, and profit-imperative of the global food infrastructure. Drawing on recent reconstructions of *scholé*, this paper examines Slow Food as an organisation that promotes a critical and reflective leisure practice in the form of eating. Specifically, it seeks to recreate gastronomic culture by facilitating meal experiences that are convivial, mindful, and ethical. Understood in this way, Slow Food's mission and methodology have important implications for reconstructing the concept of leisure education in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Slow Food; conviviality; leisure education; recreation; *scholé*

#### Introduction

March 20, 1986 – Political activist and food writer, Carlo Petrini leads a parade of protesters, symbolically carrying bowls of fresh penne, around the Piazza de Spagna in Rome in opposition to the opening of a McDonald's outlet at the base of the famed Spanish Steps.

According to its own mythology, this “David vs. Goliath” episode was the genesis of the Slow Food (SF) movement. In fact, the antecedents of this movement were present decades earlier when Petrini and colleagues became involved in a left-wing political organisation called the *Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana* (ARCI: Association for the Recreation of Italian Culture). ARCI's origins are telling because, as the name suggested, it was concerned with recreation and rejuvenation of Italian culture, including its gastronomic heritage. Slow Food has continued this tradition by encouraging individuals and communities to engage with and recreate the systems that deliver food to their collective dinner tables, albeit on an international scale. Slow Food is now active in more than 150 countries around the world, boasts more than 1,300 *conviviums* (chapters), and has gained approximately 100,000 members since it was established in 2000. When compared with previous leisure movements, such as the Playground Movement, or contemporary agencies such as the Girl Scouts of America, SF is relatively small in scope and influence, yet its mission is ambitious. It seeks nothing less than to fundamentally reshape the practices of contemporary life, beginning with our relations to food. As discussed in its mission, SF USA “seek[s] to inspire a transformation in food policy, production practices and market forces so that they ensure equity, sustainability and pleasure in the food we eat”

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(www.slowfoodusa.org). This mission has far-reaching consequences not only for the cultivation and sale of food, but also for the nature of family life, public education, civic engagement, the stewardship of ecosystems, economic vitality, and leisure.

Nonetheless, one may be left wondering, what do bowls of penne have to do with leisure? Slow Food has often been dismissed as a social club for epicures and is thought by some to be largely irrelevant to the daily lives of most Americans. And yet, Slow Food's disciples, principally its chief spokesperson, Petrini, respond by asking what aspect of human society has greater relevance to daily life than the food that we collectively put in our mouths? Eating is literally a means by which we restore and recreate both individuals and communities. With this in mind, I contend that Slow Food is an organisation which attempts to recreate individuals, communities, and even entire cultures through a process of leisure education. Similar to previous historical movements, Slow Food addresses a perceived social crisis related to leisure and in doing so demonstrates the continued importance of leisure as a tool for social activism in contemporary society.

### **Slow Food: its mission and methodology**

Having originated in the town of Bra in the Piedmont region of north-western Italy, Slow Food arose from the convergence of several other organisations and movements, including the communist student movement in Italy, the ARCI, and a critical mass of journalists in the 1980s who viewed themselves as gastronomic reformers. Coupled with a series of sensational food contamination scandals among Italian producers, and most importantly, a heritage of agricultural and gastronomic pride, these social currents coalesced into Slow Food's predecessor, ARCIgola, and finally Slow Food itself (Petrini, 2001). The organisation formalised itself with the ratification of the Slow Food Manifesto by its charter delegates at the *Opéra Comique*, Paris, 1989:

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model. We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus, Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods. To be worthy of the name, *Homo Sapiens* should rid himself [sic] of speed before it reduces him [sic] to a species in danger of extinction. A firm defence of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of the Fast Life.

May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency. Our defence should begin at the table with *Slow Food*. Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of *Fast Food*. In the name of productivity, *Fast Life* has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So *Slow Food* is now the only truly progressive answer. That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it. And what better way to set about this than an international exchange of experiences, knowledge, projects?

Slow Food guarantees a better future. *Slow Food* is an idea that needs plenty of qualified supporters who can help turn this (slow) motion into an international movement, with the little snail as its symbol. (Petrini, 2001, p. xxiii)

As indicated, this manifesto invited the pursuit of a far-reaching agenda, an agenda that has been principally concerned with issues related to food. However,

it is worth noting that, in the eyes of Petrini as well as many of its other founders, Slow Food is not exclusively a gastronomic movement, but rather a movement that espouses a “slow philosophy” of which gastronomy is but one component (Petrini, personal communication, 21 February 2010). In this way, SF is also an organisation and a larger movement that is concerned with leisure. As with previous examples, such as the Rational Recreation or the Playground Movement, SF addresses that which it perceives to be a crisis in the nature of contemporary leisure, in this case the degradation of our gastronomic heritage.

However, because it is principally concerned with the food that we eat, Slow Food has been hailed as an important vehicle for addressing not only the global agrifood system but also our environmental crisis more broadly. These observations seem important and obvious, but my purpose here is to contend that Slow Food is also pursuing an informal and popular form of leisure education. To make that assertion, let us pause to consider the meaning of leisure in contemporary society.

### Contemporary theories of leisure

Nature requires that we should be able, not only to work well, but to use leisure well; for as I must repeat once again, the first principle of all action is leisure. Both are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end. (Aristotle, *Pol* 1337b, 30–34)

Strikingly, several contemporary scholars have looked backwards to the concept of *scholé* in their attempts to articulate contemporary theories of leisure. Foremost among these efforts are Rojek’s (2010) *Labour for leisure* and Blackshaw’s (2010) *Leisure*. As opposed to selecting a metaphor firmly rooted in contemporary society, Rojek and Blackshaw have retrieved *scholé* from its ancient roots, relying heavily on Aristotle’s articulation of the concept. Quite simply, *scholé* describes the state of being free from the necessity to labour (Broadie, 2007; Hemingway, 1988; Maynard, 2010). Contemporary usage of the term *leisure* tends to focus on an immediate sense of being free from labour, as in having finished with the working week; one is free to go to the cinema. However, the classical concept tended to describe a person’s station in society, i.e. one having sufficient wealth so that one could avoid labour altogether.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to its contemporary usage, leisure was not synonymous with idleness. As Richardson-Lear (2004) explained, “leisure in Aristotle’s sense is not a time of relaxation (though it may be used that way); it is the condition of being free from the demands posed by our natural desire for the necessities of life. A leisurely life is one that is not driven by the need to satisfy necessary desires” (p. 185). Thus, *scholé* was a state of repose in which one could survey the state of affairs and, having done so, conceive of future possibilities.

*Scholé* did not describe a particular activity, but rather a precondition for the exercise of choice and the pursuit of numerous activities. This aspect of choice and decision making is therefore a context for the exercise of virtue. As with all of the other domains of public life, Aristotle (*Pol* 1269a, 34–36) contended that one of the principal functions of the state was to educate its citizens in the virtuous uses of leisure. Consistent with his ethical philosophy, Aristotle endorsed a moderate course in the use of leisure, one which charted a middle path between a life of pure contemplation and a life of pure amusement (Maynard, 2010). In his references to these topics in *Politics*, Aristotle recommends that in keeping with humanity’s character and in order to promote human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), leisure ought to

be used for pursuits of an intellectual and social nature. Thus, politics and general engagement in the affairs of the state were considered virtuous uses of *scholé* (Broadie, 2007; Hemingway, 1988; Maynard, 2010). When used in this way, *scholé* leisure can be understood as a forum in which citizens convene to engage in a literal form of social and political recreation.

Such considerations are a pre-requisite for understanding Blackshaw's use of *scholé* to describe leisure in contemporary life. For Blackshaw (2010), contemporary societies are characterised by a type of "liquid leisure" that corresponds to the fundamental contingencies of everyday life (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992). Old social categories and institutions have been overturned, including the treatment of leisure as simply being the derivative of labour. As opposed to creating an overwhelming sense of anxiety or dread, Blackshaw (2010, p. 120) portrayed this state of contingency as holding the promise of liberation from the constraints of older social categories:

The emergence of liquid modernity has also been a shift from a structured and structuring society in which our identities were largely predetermined by our social class, gender and "race" to one in which *individualisation* dominates more than anything else, and where our identities always remain a work in progress. Class, gender and ethnicity may still exert some degree of influence on our leisure opportunities, but they certainly do not dictate them. Today we inhabit what is an unstructured sociality (rather than a structured society) in which life is lived *noch nicht* surrounded by possibilities that have not yet been realised.

This sounds delightful, but seems only to be describing the possibility of leisure for that relatively small segment of the global population that benefits from the inequitable arrangements of the global economic order. It is hard to believe that this notion of leisure would describe the experiences of the hundreds of millions of people at the bottom of the economic order who subsist on less than two dollars a day. Perhaps unwittingly, Blackshaw's use of *scholé* echoes the inequitable social structure of ancient Athens. Regardless, he is attempting to align his concept with *scholé* by contending that leisure serves as a social space in which individuals can engage in a robust process of recreating themselves.

The overly glib nature of Blackshaw's portrayal can be remedied by turning to Rojek's (2010) *Labour for leisure*. Similar to Blackshaw, Rojek attempts to revive *scholé* while embracing the fundamental contingency of contemporary life. However, in contrast to Blackshaw, Rojek abandoned the strong notion of freedom in leisure and instead articulated leisure as a set of situated practices in which individuals may exercise a highly constrained form of agency. Rojek (2010, p. 19) explained,

[Leisure] is a question of how form and practice [are] *represented* in relation to power. Individuals, groups and the leisure choices they make are located in a context of power. The defining feature of this context is the unequal divisions between individuals and groups in relation to scarcity. This is somewhat disguised in everyday life, because leisure cultures typically focus on *surplus*, that is, leisure forms and practice are organised around surplus time, surplus wealth and conspicuous consumption. However, surplus is a relative concept. No matter how abundant their access to surplus time and wealth, every individual and group is located in a context of scarcity.

Throughout, Rojek is careful to emphasise that the exercise of agency and choice in leisure is always dependent on one's relation to economic scarcity. In other words, choice at the top of the economic order comes at the expense of those at the bottom.

In this way, Rojek complements but also tempers Blackshaw's optimistic revitalisation of *scholé*.

However, both scholars slip easily between descriptive and normative accounts of leisure. Blackshaw takes great pains to *describe* the manner in which leisure, freed from old categorical constraints, is a continuation of the modern project of constructing the self. However, near the end of his work, he realises that individualisation cannot adequately provide for the critical and reflexive characteristics of leisure that *scholé* implies. This critical hermeneutics of leisure, as he describes it, is stymied by two things: (1) the contemporary focus on individualisation in leisure, and (2) the fact that global multinationals are the choreographers of society's leisure experiences. In Blackshaw's words, "what we need to do in our lives is get away from the reusable language found in the consumer world to generate new cultural discourses that are able to speak for the first time" (2010, p. 149). The possibility of generating new cultural discourses from "whole cloth" sounds a bit fantastic, but the notion that individuals ought to maintain a critical distance from capital interests seems relevant to the SF mission. In this prescriptive conclusion, Blackshaw calls on individuals and communities to resist the "siren song" of commercialised leisure and reclaim *scholé* as a context for critical reflection. To borrow Ritzer's (2007) terminology, leisure ought to function as a space in which individuals make a transition from being consumers of *nothing* to producers of *something*.

This conceptualisation of leisure seems especially relevant to SF since its mission and methodology encourage adherents to wrest control of the food infrastructure from global agribusiness. With this in mind, I now turn to a more detailed consideration of the ways in which SF addresses leisure.

### **Slow Food: a movement preoccupied with leisure**

I contend that, while it is often treated as a gastronomic and/or agricultural movement, Slow Food is a movement that is principally concerned with leisure. In keeping with the concept of *scholé*, SF's approach to gastronomy is one of critical reflection in which consumers are encouraged to recognise their potential to recreate the global agriculture infrastructure. Gastronomy, agriculture, and globalisation are the topics of conversation, so to speak, but SF's methodological locus is the dinner table and the experience of eating. Rightly so, because if we understand the degradation of our *agriculture* and gastronomy as resulting from the logic of unchecked capitalism, the remedy is not to be found in the marketplace, but rather in a set of spaces and practices that abandon the reductionist logic of the market altogether.

The SF Manifesto emphasised the celebration of "material pleasures" as the antidote to the Fast Life, a claim that echoes previous critiques of the acceleration of contemporary life. Indeed, the fast food meal against which SF positions itself is the product *par excellence* of the modern obsession with efficiency in general and leisure in particular (Cross, 2005; Linder, 1970; Rifkin, 2004). Thus, the dinner table is literally the seat of power in which consumer behaviour is portrayed as being capable of altering the globalised food infrastructure and its norm of efficiency. In this way, one could argue that SF is aligned with earlier campaigns that cast consumers as the impetus for industrial-scale organic cultivation and subsequent regulation.

In fact, Petrini and his followers have advocated something more far-reaching than simply “buying local” or “buying organic.” As DeLind (2006) has observed, so long as the action is simply a purchase, it is susceptible to being co-opted by global capital. In other words, if resistance movements choose to do battle in the marketplace, they will most likely be incorporated into global capital’s agenda (Butsch, 2001). This principle is evident in the inevitable conflicts that arose around SF’s endorsement of certain regional products related to culinary tourism. Realising this dynamic from its inception, SF’s founders understood that the dinner table must be a “scene of action” and that it must be constructed in such a way so as to resist the interests of global capital. As opposed to other consumer-orientated movements where battle is waged in the aisles of the supermarket, SF has chosen to stage its conflict at the dinner table. In doing so, it has deliberately constructed the ideal meal experience as being: (1) convivial, (2) mindful, and (3) ethical.

Despite being mentioned often in its early literature (Petrini, 2001), the concept of *conviviality* has fallen by the wayside in SF’s efforts, perhaps for being too antiquated or esoteric. Nonetheless, conviviality captures the essence of SF’s methodology. Defined as, “(1) of or belonging to a feast or banquet; characterised by feasting or jovial companionship; such as befits a feast, festive; 2) fond of feasting and good company, disposed to enjoy festive society; festive, jovial” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2010), conviviality captures precisely the qualities of a meal experience that are resistant, though not immune, to easy commodification. The convivial meal is one in which participants are as engaged with one another as they are with the food. As with all feasts, for example Thanksgiving dinner in the United States, time is taken for the preparation, but especially for the consumption of the meal. Additionally, the ritualised nature of such meals, such as the use of time-honoured family recipes, has functioned to cement the bonds between family and friends. Obviously, such festive meals are created using the products of global agribusiness, and commercial interests are endeavouring to shape our images of the feast. However, to a greater degree than most other meal experiences, the indulgent nature of a home-cooked feast runs counter to the logic of Fast Food’s emphasis on efficiency, standardisation, control, and profit (Ritzer, 1996).

As an antidote to Fast Life, the *slow* in Slow Food makes its case intuitively. However, considered in the light of the dinner table, the slow concept is better understood as *mindfulness*. If diners intend to celebrate the sensual pleasures of eating, attention must be given to the act itself. They must be attentive to the smells, the appearance, the texture, and the tastes of the foods. Ideally, these sensual pleasures have been enhanced through the movement’s various efforts to “educate for taste” in which participants are taught to detect the subtleties of fragrance, texture, and appearance. This emphasis on the finer points of pleasure is precisely that which leads to accusations of pedantry and elitism. However, similar to conviviality, this attention to the act of eating also runs counter to Fast Food logic (Ritzer, 1996). In educating for taste, SF has endeavoured to connect the subtleties of sensation to the act of cultivation. The home-grown tomato, for example, is superior in taste, texture, and appearance because it is intentionally cultivated with such sensations in mind as opposed to industrial cultivation that favours characteristics such as durability, uniformity, and blandness. Thus, mindfulness would seem to be SF’s most effective tactic in the face of global agribusiness. In fact, it is actually the aspect of the meal experience that is most susceptible to incorporation. The subtleties of taste are

notoriously fickle and susceptible to sustained marketing campaigns. For example, global agribusiness enterprises are quickly focusing their research and development efforts on cultivating items such as the “home-grown” tomato on an industrial scale (Estabrook, 2010).

In light of such developments, SF’s dinner table experiences must be ethical in addition to being pleasurable. To this end, the food on one’s table ought to have arrived there having caused as little environmental, social, and economic harm as possible. It is this third, *ethical*, aspect of the meal experience that almost mandates that the eating public engages with the producers of its food. “Know Thy Producer” is the argument that lies at the heart of the Locavore Movement and its exponents (Berry, 2002; Kingsolver, 2007; Pollan, 2006). The shorter the commodity chain between producer and consumer, the more accountable will the producer be to the consumer. This simple notion, whether accurate or not, is largely responsible for the resurgence of a local agriculture infrastructure in the United States (e.g. farmers’ markets, community gardens, direct marketing production). Individuals exercise their agency as consumers to protect their communities by patronising local producers who respect the integrity of the local ecosystems and the health of the eating public. To acknowledge the importance of this choice, Petrini (2009) has cast the individual eater not merely as a consumer but as a co-producer with the farmer. Accordingly, the dinner table ought to be understood as a site of co-production through which participants eat their way to a better world. The entire argument is neatly summed up in Berry’s (2002) observation that “eating is an agricultural act” (p. 321).

By exalting a meal experience that is convivial, mindful, and ethical, SF has constructed an adversarial movement under the banner of pleasure. It must be noted that this emphasis on pleasure is particularly susceptible to accusations of elitism (Bourdieu, 1984), as well as discussions related to the seemingly subjective nature of pleasure as it relates to eating. To paraphrase a former student of mine, “Can SF convincingly claim that the experience of eating a locally-grown, ripe peach is inherently more pleasurable than that of eating a fruit roll-up?” This observation is especially relevant, given the inequitable access to fresh produce in many societies around the globe. Petrini and his allies have countered with the observation that only in a world that has so thoroughly succumbed to the Fast Life is it possible to embrace the sort of relativism that places these two experiences on a par with one another. Additionally, I would argue that Slow Food has been more transparent than global agribusiness in constructing its discourse around the dinner table. This is crucial because the SF eating experience is not focused solely on the physical sensations, but embraces all three elements of the meal *synergistically*. In other words, pleasurable sensations are enhanced by ethical considerations and a convivial atmosphere.

To the extent that its agenda is transparent, I argue that SF is engaging in the critical hermeneutics that Blackshaw (2010) has called for in his iteration of *scholé*. Despite its occasional use of myth (McWilliams, 2009), SF’s discourse of eating and pleasure deliberately invites adherents to reinterpret taken-for-granted notions of eating, pleasure, and gastronomy. Further, by stepping back from the table so to speak, SF challenges its followers to re-evaluate the status of pleasure in contemporary life.



### **The *Convivium*: Slow Food's methodology as leisure education**

Slow Food stages its “defence of quiet material pleasure” through its *convivia* or local chapters. The *convivia* recruit local members and engage them in activities that they collectively refer to as Taste Education. Taste Education assumes that contemporary eaters are sufficiently alienated from their food as to need to be reacquainted with the sensual pleasures of seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting food. Taste Education takes place within the *convivia* through two primary activities: (1) engagement with local and regional producers of products that are deemed worthy of being associated with SF; and (2) *convivia* meals. *Convivia* organisers identify producers within their locales who cultivate foods that are endemic to the region; preferably those produced using traditional methods. For example, such educational sessions might include a trip to a local goat farm/ranch during which visitors are given a tour, introduced to the farmer, educated about the natural history of the particular goat breeds, and, most importantly, partake in tasting products such as goat cheese or ice cream. Through such educational sessions, *convivia* cultivate local food communities that make it possible for small-scale producers of traditional products to thrive. Highlighting the symbiotic nature of this interaction, Petrini (2009) has eschewed the term *consumer*, preferring to think of the eating public as potential *co-producers*.

Harkening back to its roots in the ARCI, *convivia* dinners constitute the second means by which taste education is pursued. These meals are meant to typify the qualities of conviviality, mindfulness, and ethics discussed above. Additionally, such meals often feature a cursory review of the dishes being served and the provenance of their ingredients. Such dinners are also often communal, pot-luck style meals, but may showcase the talents of a local chef or restaurant aligned with SF principles.

SF pursues a number of other important ventures such as: its biennial producer congress, *Terra Madre*; its University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo, Italy; specialised congresses devoted to particular products such as cheese or fish; as well as lobbying efforts intended to secure governmental protection for traditional producers. Despite the visibility of activities such as *Terra Madre*, it is the *convivia* and their localised educational activities that function as the primary vehicle for altering the manner in which people eat. In this way, the *convivia* may be understood as pursuing a form of leisure education.

### **Conclusion: implications for leisure education**

Throughout its short history, the concept of leisure education has undergone numerous transformations from being a component of mainstream public education (Dewey, 1916) to a therapeutic modality (Verhoven, Schleien, & Bender, 1982) to a means by which individuals gain personal fulfilment (Corbin & Tait, 1973), among others. Acknowledging its various incarnations, Sivan (2006) has invited scholars to consider an expansive conceptualisation of leisure education, one that focuses on the act of learning rather than institutional education. Such an approach is consistent with Blackshaw's (2010) and Rojek's (2010) portrayal of leisure as regaining its critical function within society. In this way, participation in Slow Food activities may be understood as engaging in a form of popular leisure education in which individuals form a *community of practitioners* who nurture one another in their quest for knowledge (Dunlap, 2011; Gherardi, 2006). This understanding of Slow

Food participation differs subtly but importantly from previous conceptualisations of leisure education whose conceptual and analytic focus has been primarily on individual edification and development.

In addition to suggesting that leisure education ought to expand beyond conventional educational settings (Sivan, 2000, 2006), several scholars have acknowledged the importance of broadening its traditional focus on individuals' leisure repertoires to encompass pressing social, political, and ethical issues (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2007; Rojek, 2007). With such suggestions in mind, leisure educators would be hard pressed to find a better model for their efforts than Freire's (1971) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Freire's starting point as an educator was the recognition that all forms of education, both institutional and popular, are products of a society's prevailing political and economic relations. Consequently, societies such as Freire's native Brazil, which are characterised by extreme economic inequity and widespread political disenfranchisement, will produce economic institutions that propagate such arrangements. In response to these conditions, Freire's approach combatted oppression by inverting dominant relations and placing the disenfranchised at the centre of his educational model. As such, his methodology began not with a set of institutional imperatives but by inquiring and listening to the concerns of peasants' everyday lives. Though not without controversy, Freire's approach succeeded in challenging accepted models of pedagogy and encouraging substantive changes to the economic and political order in Brazil during the latter half of the twentieth century (Mayo, 2004).

Inspired by Freire's example, leisure education is uniquely suited to facilitate a pedagogy of liberation. Working independently of institutions that may benefit from conserving the dominant social order, leisure education movements such as Slow Food are better able to initiate processes of critical reflection, not simply about the role of leisure in society, but about a great many other issues (e.g. hunger, free speech, religious persecution). In this way, a reconstructed leisure education may encompass and transcend its previous focus on individual enrichment and ally itself with more progressive social and political forces.

### Note

1. *Scholé* derives from a socio-political system based on the exploitation of slave labour, an arrangement that was finely woven into the fabric of the classical world (Ober, 1989).

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