

Collaboration and Decentralization  
in Networked Food Activism:  
Slow Food International, Slow Food USA,  
and the Youth Food Movement

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## Introduction

Food systems are among the most complex of all economic and social human realities, comprising “all the purposive, patterned (institutionalized), and interdependent symbolic and instrumental activities carried out by people in order to procure, process, distribute, store, prepare, consume, metabolize, and waste food.”<sup>1</sup> These activities involve innumerable people, processes, and materials, each with its own vectors and/or motivations, and together possessing a collective momentum of massive proportions.

To redirect this momentum—that is, to bring about a specific change in a given aspect of a food system—therefore requires the participation of many elements of that system, acting in concert, either intentionally or unintentionally. In organizations such as Slow Food, which strive to bring about specific types of change that counter fast food and fast life,<sup>2</sup> the collective participation is highly intentional, and directed at creating a future of food that is “good, clean, and fair.”<sup>3</sup> This long-term goal, which opposes the existing largely industrialized and globalized gastronomic reality, includes many sub-goals and incremental steps, each of which in its turn requires the intentional participation of many actors.

This paper will examine how Slow Food, as a food organization that depends on a broadly distributed networked of actors, has achieved some success towards its goals and met failure in others. It will explore whether these successes and failures might be tied to the structural and ethical model on which Slow Food was founded, and whether new interpretations of this model among more recently established iterations and offshoots of Slow Food International (including Slow Food USA and the Youth Food Movement) may be correlated to more successful achievement of the underlying Slow Food objectives. Using theories of collaboration drawn from contemporary business writings, as well as academic perspectives on system dynamics and diffuse networks, I will consider the role of collaboration in Slow Food activities, as well as the varying modes and degrees of collaboration that exist within Slow Food International and its affiliated organizations. I will demonstrate how collaboration differs from cooperation, how collaborative processes can be effective in reaching organizational goals, and

what philosophical, ethical, and structural practices are required in order for decentralized networks to achieve net constructive results. Finally, I will propose some implications of this analysis for my ongoing research in gastronomy, as well as for the future of food studies as a field.

*A note on references:* Because I have been personally and professionally involved with Slow Food organizations and affiliates since 2005, many references in this paper are drawn from personal experiences and conversations. Wherever possible, the specific source is noted. As well, because a number of references relate to emerging notions of collaboration and swarm theory, Wikipedia is occasionally cited when merited, due to its own foundation in collaborative content development.

## The Genesis of Slow Food

The history of Slow Food International (SFI) is well documented,<sup>4</sup> including the emergence of the Italian-coined term, *slow food*, with the 1987 publication of the Slow Food Manifesto in the Italian newspaper, *Il Manifesto*,<sup>5</sup> and the first international meeting of Slow Food in Paris, in 1989. It was three years before this meeting, however, that the group's expressly anti-fast food stance crystallized, during a demonstration against the opening of a McDonald's outlet in Rome, organized by the Slow Food precursor, Arcigola. And it was during the founding of Arcigola in mid-1986 that the core principles of Slow Food were established—intimately linked to economic and political motivations.

“Arcigola” is a play on words. The ARCI (*Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana*) system in Italy is a federation of cultural and recreational clubs that promote leftist politics and society. *Gola*, meaning throat, thus constructs *Arcigola* as the federation's section focused on matters of eating and drinking. Winkingly, however, it also connotes “arch glutton,” and gives a nod to the indulgence-focused aims of its founders. Woven into this wordplay was founder Carlo Petrini's twinned desire both to promote the agricultural production of his home region of

Piemonte,<sup>6</sup> as well as to bring pleasure and commensality to the table—literally—of the political left.<sup>7</sup> Petrini was, at the time, a member of a non-parliamentary Marxist party, formed in dissatisfaction with the PCI, the Italian parliamentary communist party. The 1986 formation of Arcigola, rooted in the evolution of a succession of political organizations, was also partially in response to a tainted-wine scandal that resulted in 17 deaths and a dramatic decrease in the consumption of such local varieties as Barolo and Barbaresco.<sup>8</sup> The Arcigola activists focused on maintaining and communicating quality and production standards, as well as pleasure and taste knowledge, to promote the efforts of small-scale agricultural workers who were suffering economically. Endorsement by *Il Manifesto*, the leading communist newspaper, provided political leverage against the more powerful PCI, and assisted in Arcigola’s dramatic membership growth between 1986 and 1989, when the first international Slow Food meeting took place, bringing the current organization into being.<sup>9</sup> On the larger political stage, economics, nationalism, and consumption were also thoroughly entwined: the conception, gestation, and birth of Slow Food was all taking place in the right-wing–dominated era of Reagan, Thatcher, and Berlusconi.<sup>10</sup>

## The Current Slow Food Context

Today, Slow Food claims over 100,000 members in more than 150 countries,<sup>11</sup> and calls itself “a worldwide network of people committed to improving the way food is produced and distributed.”<sup>12</sup> The central theme of *good, clean, and fair*, invokes notions of high-quality products and appealing tastes, environmental and human health, and accessibility and economic justice. Slow Food’s programs and projects are aimed at supporting small-scale production, preserving biodiversity and cultural traditions, and educating consumers on a wide range of issues. Independent and increasingly autonomous “national associations” exist locally in eight countries, including six in Europe and the U.K., and one each in Japan and the United States (the latter founded in 2000).<sup>13</sup> In Canada, a national board has been elected, although no independent national association has been created and local Slow Food chapters (“convivia”) are under the administrative authority of SFI.<sup>14</sup> The first Canadian convivium was

founded in Montreal in 2001 by Paul Caccia, then public relations director at the Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec.<sup>15</sup>

In 2004, the inaugural edition of Terra Madre was held, Slow Food's international congress of farmers, activists, academics, and chefs. Alongside Salone del Gusto, which in 2010 featured over 900 small-scale food producers,<sup>16</sup> the biennial event has since been repositioned as a “network of people that all over the world cultivate, transform, trade and cook, committed to strengthen local, traditional and sustainable production models.”<sup>17</sup> In Terra Madre discourse the notion of *food communities* is identified, and defined as “a physically identifiable entity with shared values, interests and future, concerned with seed saving, crops, agriculture, breeding, fishing, processing, distribution, promotion, education and other activities.”<sup>18</sup>

In 2004 the University of Gastronomic Sciences (UNISG) was founded, opening its doors to students in October. Four programs are offered: a three-year undergraduate degree in gastronomy, a two-year specialization degree with a business-administration focus (designed to follow the undergraduate program), and two one-year master degrees. An online “higher studies” program in sustainable gastronomy was given once in 2009, and a PhD program may eventually be offered. For Slow Food, UNISG represents an effort to legitimize the study of food in an academic context<sup>19</sup> as well as a strategic move in extending the Slow Food network to numerous academic institutions involved in food scholarship. Both are intended to complement Slow Food's socio-political positioning, and support eventual influence on food policy.<sup>20</sup>

Twenty-one years after the organization officially came into being, and more than thirty since the inception of the political, economic, social, and cultural principles that form its foundation, Slow Food is today broadly diversified both geographically and programmatically. Like Kleenex and other iconic products, the expression is frequently detached from the brand itself: “slow food” is invoked by media and individuals as an eating-focused belief system, often without any reference to the non-profit organization, or knowledge of its existence.<sup>21</sup> During Slow Food's lifespan to date, the global contexts in which it operates, and the associated realities of food, communications, and individualism have radically shifted. In addition, there are new players on

the landscape: many of Slow Food's objectives—local and sustainable food production, valorization of heritage products and practices, security and access—have been adopted by other food and non-food activists.

Within this framing, and because of the decentralized network(s) on which the organization is based, it becomes relevant to examine the mode in which Slow Food engages collaboration, and whether it is in fact embraced, either by the Italian-based organizations, by the newly powerful and increasingly autonomous US national association, or by the next-generation, self-formed Youth Food Movement.

## Collaboration Theory

Much attention has been paid to the notion of *collaboration* in business, academic, and social settings. In the wake of changing global economic realities and emerging technological opportunities, collaboration “has become one of the leading terms of an emergent contemporary political sensibility,”<sup>22</sup> according to filmmaker/writer and open-source theorist, Florian Schneider. It is cited as a tool for maintaining economic growth, a technique in helping university students learn better, a means of generating compelling artistic works, and a theory underlying interpersonal dynamics from gaming to nation-building.<sup>23</sup> Innovation consultant Mark Sebell notes that collaboration is a key factor in helping companies and organizations develop implementable innovations in new products, services, and operational systems.<sup>24</sup> Wikipedia, one of the most broadly used online information projects, may be criticized for the accuracy of its content, but it is undeniably a successful and productive example of collaboration. Indeed, many of the media-sharing websites characteristic of the Web 2.0 can be considered to be collaborative efforts. (If such a thing as the Web 3.0 exists, then it may be showing how web-based collaboration is also an effective moneymaking tool.)

The word *collaborate* is most usually defined as “work with,” with little other modification or specificity, unlike *cooperate*, whose definitions frequently include the additional implication of

directionality or intended goal.<sup>25</sup> By omission, then, “collaboration” implies that the motive for working together, as well as the anticipated end result, may vary from party to party, whereas cooperators are more aligned overall. Collaboration assumes no “alleged generosity of a group...in the pursuit of solidarity [and]...often works as a brusque and even ungenerous practice, where individuals rely on one another the more they chase their own interests, their mutual dependence arising through the pursuit of their own agendas.”<sup>26</sup> The pejorative sense of the word, traditionally associated with wartime betrayal, underscores how very divergent the motivations may be that drive one collaborator or another.

In circumstances with stakeholders who require the results of a collaboration effort to fall within a pre-determined framing (such as a business context), external facilitation is generally required, as well as more precisely defined project parameters.<sup>27</sup> Despite this additional exigency, in collaboration it is unnecessary for participants to be fully aligned in their reasons for participating (common motivations or desired results), unlike the case for cooperation. Collaboration, properly managed, may therefore be more straightforward, and more effective, in group-work settings.

In less rigidly (or economically driven) circumstances, with broader or no prerequisites for the results of a given collaboration, neither operating plan nor facilitation may be required. This type of interaction is seen in the realms of gaming communities, open-source software development, and self-forming colonies of insects. At the extreme end of this spectrum is the collaboration model of ants, labeled “swarm intelligence”<sup>28</sup> by researchers. While neither facilitator nor departmental manager guides what ants do, where they go, and what they communicate to each other, they collaborate, and the overall system produces effective results. By extrapolation of this swarm behaviour, collaboration business models have been developed for shipping companies and airline transit, which increase successful achievement of identified goals.<sup>29</sup> Swarm intelligence, which Wikipedia defines as “the collective behaviour of decentralized, self-organized systems, natural or artificial,”<sup>30</sup> has also been applied to artificial intelligence and robotics research, and, in the business setting, is the foundation of Peter Gloor’s theories on problem solving and creative development using collaborative networks.<sup>31</sup>

## Collaboration in Decentralized Networks

Peter Gloor's book *Swarm Creativity* deals with collaborative innovation networks (COINs) and their value to organizations involved in bringing about change, whether social or in business: "COINs are the most productive engines of innovation ever."<sup>32</sup> Although his research focuses on for-profit organizations, it broadly addresses the conditions necessary for collaborative work to be successful, including motivation of individual participants, organizational culture, processes for engaging in collaboration, and techniques for maintaining engagement and enthusiasm until the results of the collaboration can be implemented.

At the center of a given collaboration are the participants, whether individual people or groups of people. (As will be described later, non-human participants can also be involved in collaboration, and are important to consider in both theoretical and practical terms.) Each of these intentional participants requires self-motivation to engage in the collective, a motivation that need not be the same as any other participant, as noted previously. According to Gloor, these motivators are connected both to being in the process of collaboration (interpersonal connection, knowledge gain, having fun),<sup>33</sup> as well as to the end results of the collaboration (ego satisfaction, acquisition of expertise, economic or status gain).<sup>34</sup>

The environment in which the collaboration takes place is the second and perhaps more critical condition for success. The organization, or network of organizations, must be willing to embrace decentralization (of process and of ideas) and self-organization (of participants), as well as apparent disorder at the individual level, trusting that movement in the desired direction will take place at the collective level.<sup>35</sup> Citing Eric Bonabeau's theory of swarm intelligence, Gloor states that the design of such systems must include "autonomy, emergence [of activity direction], and the ability to distribute tasks, [which] replace control, preprogramming, and centralization"<sup>36</sup> typical of traditional hierarchies.

These conditions met, the actual collaborative work requires further processes and actors: a creative, charismatic leader who inspires and serves the team; participants, motivated as described above, who maintain and spread energy to their local environments; a common set of ethical guidelines, including a central and shared task (though not necessarily a shared final objective); and the enactment of meritocracy (through recognition), transparency (of information), and consistency (of practices).<sup>37</sup>

Especially for collaborations that take place over time—including such multi-year projects as making change to a global food system—a set of sub-processes within the organization must also be in place. Again adapting from Bonabeau, Gloor cites the following mechanisms: positive feedback that reinforces desired behaviour; negative feedback that counters the positive and keeps a potentially unsustainable practice in check; amplification of randomness of activity; and amplification of interaction between participants.<sup>38</sup>

Intriguingly, these last points are supported by Jane Bennett in her discussion of *assemblages* in her book *Vibrant Matter*. Indeed, she extends them substantially further, grounded in the context of her thesis regarding thing power and non-human actants. Bennett invokes Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Baruch Spinoza's position on bodies as "modes" of being, rather than subjects or objects,<sup>39</sup> and that these modes are themselves assemblages of smaller or simpler bodies—mini-collaborations, as it were. She goes on to present both the notion of "confederate bodies," which she defines as "complex bodies that in turn congregate with each other in the pursuit of the enhancement of their power,"<sup>40</sup> and Spinoza's belief that "the more kinds of bodies with which a body can affiliate, the better: 'As the body is more capable of being affected in many ways and of affecting external bodies...so the mind is more capable of thinking.'"<sup>41</sup> Bennett concludes, saying that "bodies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*...[and that] the efficacy or effectivity to which...[agency]...has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts."<sup>42</sup> Bennett's illustration of confederate bodies and heterogeneous assemblages, even as it broadens

the interacting participants to non-humans, validates the process of collaboration in generating power and/or assigning agency.

Randomness and interaction is explored in depth in the Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder–edited *Interact or Die!*, with the titular theme explained in their introduction to the texts:

“...[R]andom behavior in networks creates strong but flexible structures and forms, without there being a central designing coordinator or code that pushes the process into a definite direction or form. It explores how interaction both forms and selects the effective, functioning part of networks and leaves the noneffective parts to die.”<sup>43</sup>

They go on to describe “exploratory behavior” of such self-organizing networks in terms of evolutionary developmental biology theory:

“...[B]lood vessels and neural cells are always found precisely at the spot where they are needed...only the extensions that hit a relevant target (a muscle or another nerve cell, or a tissue that needs oxygen) survive, while the rest simply degenerate. Only those parts of the developing network that interact live; the rest simply die.”<sup>44</sup>

Though Bennett’s argument is on a plane decidedly more theoretical than Gloor’s, and that of Brouwer and Mulder is more abstracted, all three support increasing and diversifying the points of contact among participants in collaboration, with Bennett’s added exhortation that non-humans be included among those participants. While the full potential of non-human participation in collaboration is beyond the scope of this paper, this certainly points to the need for a radicalized reinterpretation of traditional collaboration, or at the very least a degree of rigor in collaborative projects that is too often missing in most organizations.

Bennett’s point that agency is (or should be seen to be) distributed rather than localized also engages with Gloor’s argument for decentralization in collaboration—embedding an ethos in the social DNA of a collaborative group—as well as with the notion of leaderless organizations that is explored in Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom’s *The Starfish and the*

*Spider*. I will return to this reference in the discussion of Slow Food USA and its recent divergence from the SFI model, including its adoption of the Braffman and Beckstrom book as one of its organizational “bibles.”<sup>45</sup>

Without implementation, innovation simply remains creativity—a bunch of good ideas that effect no change.<sup>46</sup> According to Gloor, implementation requires another set of conditions, including decision makers who are non-isolationist, who are grounded in their environment and understood by the people around them, and who understand how to position their ideas within the existing environment in order to make visible the value of these ideas, as well as their relevance to others. Ideas that are provocative, stimulating, and disruptive, are also necessary.<sup>47</sup> Given these conditions, Gloor says, collaborators will be able to maintain forward movement and implementation (through iterative problem solving) until the idea reaches adoption by the larger community (i.e. outside the collaborative group). This is what he calls the tipping point, or the “moment of critical mass where radical change is more than just possible.”<sup>48</sup>

## Making Change

Gloor’s invocation of Malcolm Gladwell’s now-famous notion of the *tipping point* acknowledges the complexity of bringing about change within a large system, as well as the internal and external actants that participate in such change. In Gladwell’s theory, he names three human actants—mavens, connectors, and salesmen—who each play a role in triggering “epidemics” of social or commercial change.<sup>49</sup> These people contribute different functions to the process, including as information or knowledge collectors, agents of information transfer between otherwise disconnected populations, and those who convince others to adopt information and act on it. Gladwell also notes that environmental conditions are necessary: the social and geographic state of the populations at stake; the surrounding economy and political atmosphere; the history of previous efforts to bring about the same change. Myriad other factors, which seem to have no bearing on the issue facing change, may also play a role.<sup>50</sup>

Again, Jane Bennett illustrates the importance of recognizing non-human actants in large-scale change—moments when a series of actants in a particular context “tipped” an event with widespread effect. Her example of the causes of the North American blackout that affected 50 million people in 2003 demonstrates how exquisitely entwined these factors are. In her framing, an unintentional yet nonetheless collaborative effort had set the conditions for the electrical failure; human and non-human mavens and connectors, climatic and legislative conditions, and trees and power switches did the rest.<sup>51</sup>

When discussing food systems, and potential for change therein, including whether a tipping point is coming (or has already come), the issue of globalism needs to be addressed. The economics and politics, distribution and logistics, and environmental and cultural impact due to globalization have been discussed elsewhere in myriad ways. Bennett’s take, however, is that the dramatic expansion of “the arena in which stuff happens”<sup>52</sup> means that the many parts of the globalized food realm are both “intimately interconnected and highly conflictual,”<sup>53</sup> requiring that they be viewed, along with their constructive and destructive interactions, as an *assemblage*:

Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties.... Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force.... And precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly “off” from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective.... An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history but a finite life span.<sup>54</sup>

Read two ways, Bennett's notion of assemblages can either apply to the system of food systems at play in the world, or the system of food activists trying to change it. In either case, a headless assemblage with internally conflicting energy phases requires participants in such an assemblage to maintain enormous openness and willingness to embrace change, disorder, and potentially their eventual obsolescence. The corpus, as well, needs to be able to accept change—change not only to the system around it (towards which it is ostensibly working), but also change to itself as brought about by its internal members.

Gloor takes on the necessity of embracing dynamism in his example of the differences between firearm development in China and Europe during the second half of the second millennium. Both regions had access to the necessary materials, but, as Gloor says, China's isolationist policy with respect to interactions outside its own borders "did not provide for the provoking, stimulating and at times chaotic hotbed environment" that Europe was faced with.<sup>55</sup> As a result, China faced defeat during 19<sup>th</sup> century invasions by Europe, and was only then rapidly stimulated to innovate in the field of weapons development. By contrast, the internally conflicting elements of the European political reality during the same centuries provided the "provocation" that triggered collaborative innovation.

## The Shifting Ethos of Slow Food

Although Slow Food is today largely known as an organization that counters industrialized and fast food, the founding ethic of the Slow Food precursor, Arcigola, was based in regional product promotion (the consumption of Piemontese wine). This largely economic motivation—and the associated issues of cultural identity/pride and political leverage—was brought forward into Slow Food, and was the basis of much of the early participation by Slow Food members. That ethic went on to permeate the local organizational culture and, by extension, the broader Slow Food Movement as it grew beyond Italy to Europe, North America, and Asia.

In 2000, Slow Food USA (SF USA) was founded, following the model established by Slow Food, and led by Patrick Martins who had previously worked for two years in Bra, the headquarters of SFI.<sup>56</sup> Membership growth was gradual at first, gaining momentum in 2005, and by 2008, there were approximately 15,000 members in the United States throughout all regions, including in large cities, small towns, and rural areas.<sup>57</sup> By then, the small national-office staff, many of whom had been around since the early days, were led by director Erika Lesser. Lesser, like Martins, spent some time working for Slow Food and UNISG in Italy, but had also earned a master degree in food studies from New York University.<sup>58</sup> The differences in membership and leadership that were in place eight years after SF USA's founding, combined with a history, tradition, economics, and taste that is fundamentally different from those in Italy, meant that SF USA required a wholly renovated ethic and structure on which to base its activities and drive member participation.

During the SF USA national congress in August 2008, two key events took place: the announcement of the hiring of Josh Viertel, the first-ever SF USA president, and a speech by SFI Secretary General (and second-in-command) Paolo di Croce, in which he announced that SF USA, and all national associations, should have greater autonomy from SFI. The late-20s Viertel had worked in food production himself to a certain degree, and was the co-founder and co-director of the Yale Sustainable Food Project. Viertel's background and relative youth, as well as his lack of immersion in Italian Slow Food, signaled a clear shift towards a new, made-in-America ethic for SF USA. By 2010, Erika Lesser and all but one of the original national office staff had left the organization, and the autonomy heralded by di Croce's speech two years earlier was almost fully realized. During Terra Madre 2010 in Torino, the United States was acknowledged—during Italy's national meeting—as a more successful iteration of Slow Food than Slow Food Italy,<sup>59</sup> and the United States was announced as the site of the quadrennial Slow Food International Congress, to be held in 2011.

Within the first two years of the University of Gastronomic Sciences' operations, a growing student dissatisfaction began to emerge, at the Pollenzo campus, with Slow Food's organizational structure and programming.<sup>60</sup> During 2006 and 2007, student organizers began

to plan a Slow Food offshoot that would be designed to address the distinctive points of view and interaction realities of a younger generation of food activists. At the 2007 International Slow Food Congress in Puebla, Mexico, the Youth Food Movement (YFM) was officially launched, and the following year, Terra Madre 2008 saw over 1000 youth delegates, including students, farmers, chefs, and other activists.<sup>61</sup> At Terra Madre in 2010 the YFM gained further momentum and recognition with its own annual meeting (paralleling the status and significance of the seven national associations' regional meetings), including participation by Carlo Petrini and Josh Viertel, as well as an extended series of first-hand testimonials and rounds of cheerleading. All told, according to attendees, the YFM meeting topped all other Terra Madre events for enthusiasm and volume.<sup>62</sup> Organizers declared the event an overwhelming success, noting in particular the acknowledgement and support that Slow Food had finally provided.<sup>63</sup>

## Slow Food Projects

Slow Food's central goals are to provide support to small-scale producers, preserve biodiversity and cultural traditions, and educate consumers. Individual projects have been designed within these themes, some of which were established in Italy by SFI, and others elsewhere, either by national associations or at the local chapter level. All projects do not necessarily map directly to single goals, and they often address multiple themes or overlap with other projects.

For the purposes of this paper, and in order to examine the success of the original Slow Food model relative to those emerging within SF USA and the YFM, a number of projects are considered: the producer/consumer-focused Mercati della Terra (Earth Markets) and local tasting events or dinners; the community-building Eat-Ins (collective meals); the biodiversity-focused Presidium program and the Ark of Taste; and the academic-credibility project that is the University of Gastronomic Sciences. The membership models, and their regional variations, are also discussed.

In 2006, the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity engaged three UNISG master students<sup>64</sup> to survey the best practices of farmers' markets in North America, Ireland and the UK, and Italy. From this research, a set of guidelines were written to establish fresh-food markets—Mercati della Terra—at which vendors are required to be the producers of the food themselves as well as subscribe to a number of production criteria (including chemical and genetic inputs). The producers must also be based, and produce their food, within a defined geographic area. The Mercati are intended to address the issue of food markets composed of third-party retailers and reinforce the direct relationship between producers and consumers. To date, 16 markets have been established, five of which are outside of Italy (in Israel, Lebanon, Lithuania, and Romania).<sup>65</sup>

In many ways, the Mercati della Terra model typifies a Slow Food project. On the Mercati website, the program calls itself, “*una rete internazionale di mercati, di produttori e di contadini, coerente con la filosofia Slow Food*”<sup>66</sup> (an international network of markets, of producers, and of farmers, in keeping with the Slow Food philosophy). As a network, however, the participants are required to follow the guidelines established by Slow Food, and as based on research performed largely outside of Italy. The project manager, Gigi Frassanito, inspects a market that is interested in joining the network, and if all the requirements are in place, or can be met, the market may initiate the transition to mercato della terra status. No local innovation or self-definition is allowed, other than the delineation of the geographic production boundaries, and that decision is made in consultation with Frassanito. Contrary to Peter Gloor's model of collaboration through autonomy, emergence, and decentralization, the Mercati project remains highly controlled and preprogrammed, and is unlikely to produce innovative collaborative results. To date, no Earth Markets exist in North America, due in part to the programmed guidelines, in part to the centralization of the project management, and in part to the lack of motivation for North American markets to join the network, often being at the leading edge of farmers' markets best practices to begin with.<sup>67</sup>

Because pleasure and taste were associated with Slow Food since the early years of the organization, tasting events and dinners have long been a feature of local Slow Food chapters'

programming. These events leverage the pleasure motivation of members, but are also intended as a means to promote local food products and reinforce consumption from small-scale producers. Such events were particularly successful in North America in the first years of the 2000s, and built a reputation for Slow Food as educational, convivial, and pleasure-oriented. The formula was effective at building community through commensality, as well as raising much-needed funds for local chapters. Due to the often high cost of admission to these events, however, they also succeeded in building the perception that Slow Food is elitist, and that access to good, clean, and fair food is only for the wealthier classes. Here we see an absence of the negative-feedback control mechanism that Bonabeau discusses as necessary to maintain sustainable practices: the tasting events received positive reinforcement and were therefore repeatedly reiterated. With nothing to check that organizational behavior, the events continued to the point of doing damage to Slow Food's reputation, a damage that still lingers today.

Both the Slow Food Presidium program and the Ark of Taste involve the identification and preservation of distinctive food products or species. The Ark, which preceded the Presidia, documents foods that are in danger of extinction (or may already be extinct) and that have a distinctive history, production process, and connection to place.<sup>68</sup> Every country manages its own Ark, although an international Ark committee exists that sets guidelines for how products may be "mounted" onto a local Ark. Some time after being established, however, the Ark project was seen as becoming a mausoleum of dead or dying foods,<sup>69</sup> and thus the Presidium program was established.

A presidium is a community of producers of a given food product, defended or protected by Slow Food's coordination and promotion efforts. (Translated, presidium effectively means *garrison*; in French, presidia are called *sentinelles*.) Slow Food establishes the presidia based on what they identify as being significant and worthy of support, often triggered by a request from a group of producers, and often around a product in danger of extinction. The Presidium program outlines production specifications, including agricultural or breeding processes, transformation techniques, and taste parameters, and is intended to "protect unique regions and ecosystems, recover traditional processing methods, safeguard native breeds and local plant

varieties.”<sup>70</sup> Products are most often tied to a specific region, but not exclusively, particularly in North America where food and place are less firmly connected than in Italy (where the program was initiated). Although Slow Food does not actively participate in commercializing the presidium products, they do help to forge relationships between a presidium community and wholesale or retail outlets. In Italy, almost 200 presidia have been established;<sup>71</sup> in the United States there are six;<sup>72</sup> in Canada, just one.

Ark products number significantly higher than presidia,<sup>73</sup> due to the lower barriers of inclusion (no requirement that it either be in production or commercializable; few specifications concerning production or processing techniques). The Ark lists often stagnate, however, due to the limited resources of the volunteer committees that manage them, and the contentiousness of the meetings that do take place.<sup>74</sup> Lacking are the motivators for Ark participants—either in-process or resulting from the work—that would render the Ark more successful. With minimal access to the products themselves (due to the non-commercial nature of the program), Slow Food members rarely come into contact with Ark products. The project, with little motivating it from either end, cannot be viewed as particularly successful.

The ostensible objective of the Presidium program is the preservation of biodiversity and cultural traditions. As a collaboration task, it is both shared by participants and based on a common ethical stance, and would therefore promote success of the program, per Gloor. Here, however, it is the grounding definitions that must be questioned, as well as the inconsistencies among them and by extension those in the operational successes of the program in the places where it is active. In the Italian context, “tradition” has a longer timeline and is based on a more homogenous ethno-cultural mix than in North America. The majority of the population in the United States and Canada is immigrant-based, either offspring of the original European colonizers, of slaves, or of other imported workers, or, in more recent years, arrivals from most all countries of the world. Unlike in Italy, the indigenous populations dominate neither socio-politically nor gastronomically. North American *tradition*, therefore, is a blend of many, and is constantly being revised due to ongoing ethno-cultural movement. (Italy, it should be noted, is starting to see increasing inbound immigration, partially due to decreasing birth rates and the

resultant increase in agricultural and industrial workers, largely from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Eastern Europe. Perhaps in response, the ultra-right-wing Lega Nord party has successfully passed a municipal ruling banning “ethnic food” from the Lucca city center. Other municipal bans are pending.<sup>75)</sup>

Statistics Canada’s 2006 census showed that fully half of Toronto’s population is born outside of Canada:<sup>76</sup> what does that mean to the Torontonians’ definition of “tradition”? So, too, must an absolute definition biodiversity be challenged, in the Presidium context. Does it include only species, or transformed food products as well? Does biodiversity include ethnic diversity, in which case must culinary techniques and preparations also be included? And if Canada’s sole presidium product, Red Fife Wheat, only arrived here in 1842 from the Ukraine via Scotland,<sup>77</sup> is it really *of* Canada, or just another “ethnic food” that should not concern Slow Food Canada?<sup>78</sup>

Because the underlying definitions of the Presidium task vary depending on region, the task itself becomes *not* commonly shared among regions. The necessarily collaborative nature of the program (because of the geographical areas covered by it) faces a challenge in this case; the success of the program is threatened, as may be demonstrated by the low numbers of Ark and Presidia products outside of Italy.

The University of Gastronomic Sciences, with its relative youth and small size, and particularly because of its limited human and financial resources, may be considered one of Slow Food’s most geographically distributed (though locally actualized) collaborative projects. A tiny permanent teaching staff means that much of the teaching is done by visiting professors—even more so in the two English-language master programs. The school’s educational design annually includes six to seven weeks of student travel within Italy and abroad (reaching five continents), for which extensive sponsorship is sought in the form of food, accommodation, and didactics. This network of contributors has broadened to such an extent that the university issues “sede didattica” plaques to honor off-campus sites that are centers of UNISG academic activity. Further broadening the collaborative network are the numerous companies and organizations that play host to UNISG student internships (more than 100 per year). And,

because of the still-evolving nature of the academic program, students themselves often play a collaborative role in shaping curriculum and complementary activities.

In such a network, Gloor would argue that the university must display three critical qualities in order to ensure success and ongoing participation by its collaborators: the enactment of a meritocracy, the demonstration of informational transparency, and a consistency of educational and administrative practices. All three, it can be argued, are absent to varying degrees. Visiting professors may be engaged because of availability and personal connections, rather than expertise in content or teaching skill. Personal agendas—desire for travel, prestige, and political leverage—are common motivators for teaching at UNISG, while professor willingness and self-sufficiency are often as prized by UNISG managers as competency. While this is certainly not true of the majority of professors, it clearly points to an inconsistency of merit-based reward, and undermines the perception of an overall meritocracy.

In recent years, UNISG finances have come under closer scrutiny by administrators at the founding organization of Slow Food. This has led to internal restructuring and efforts at increased financial transparency, if only between the school and Slow Food. Informational transparency is selective: students frequently complain of shifting schedules, unmet expectations, and lack of regulatory clarity. Curiously, applications continue to increase—the master program added a third section, increasing enrollment by 50%, in 2009—and the reputation and reach of the school have expanded.<sup>79</sup> While all the conditions for successful collaboration may not be in place, the motivations generated by its underlying objectives are potent and varied, effectively checking off all those indicated by Gloor (interpersonal connection, knowledge gain, having fun, ego satisfaction, acquisition of expertise, economic or status gain). As well, and due to the diversified educational content and learning sites, the university may be viewed as academically decentralized, with substantial opportunities for randomized and frequent interactions between students and other people, places, experiences, and foods. Considering the “assemblage” framing provided by Bennett (including some very non-human animal, plant, and other food-related actants), UNISG does provide substantial open-ended vitality, even if its life span may be finite.

Membership in Slow Food provides relatively little material benefit—the internationally distributed magazine, *Slow*, ceased publication in 2007 for cost reasons, and chapters decide independently whether members receive discounts on event fees or at local retailers. Membership fees are viewed by Slow Food as a means to distribute funds from wealthier countries to projects and communities in places with fewer economic means,<sup>80</sup> via the intervention and oversight of SFI. For countries that have not yet established a national association, fee schedules are set by SFI; even the more autonomous SF USA has faced challenges in creating reduced fee options.<sup>81</sup> While both the U.S. and Canada have established Slow Food on Campus programs, with drastically reduced fee structures for students, buy-in to the program has been gradual. This is in part due to resistance by national organizers who fear a lack of control of student chapters, a lack of continuity as student leaders graduate and leave campus-based chapters, and the need to “police” student activities.<sup>82</sup>

## Slow Food USA and the Youth Food Movement

SF USA president Josh Viertel has discussed the desire to provide every American with the opportunity to “plug in” to Slow Food in whatever way and at whatever level they choose. His model for participation is a series of concentric circles, with degrees of engagement and leadership roles increasing towards the center, and total volume of participants increasing towards the outside.<sup>83</sup>

Viertel cites Brafman and Beckstrom’s *The Starfish and the Spider* as a kind of national-office manual, a guide for Slow Food to create itself as a leaderless organization with unstoppable power (to paraphrase the book’s subtitle). The authors point to the titular starfish as a model for the power of leaderlessness: no one arm pulls the animal forward, rather it moves according to the collaborative efforts and needs of all five; primary organs are replicated in each of the arms; if one is cut off, the animal grows another, and in certain species, the severed member can regrow itself into a complete new starfish.<sup>84</sup> The starfish is a decentralized network, with

the ethic, or DNA, repeated in each member of the corpus; it is the embodiment of highly successful collaboration.

Viertel has shifted membership to a donation-based system, with a minimum contribution guaranteeing membership to the organization; a larger contribution carries additional benefits.<sup>85</sup> While disruptive internally, his staff renovation has shifted the office to a greater level of meritocracy, replacing (dedicated and well-meaning) staff with seasoned non-profit professionals who are more capable of addressing the third-generation state of SF USA's evolution. Informational transparency, along with consistent practices for events and fundraising—established collaboratively by regional member-leaders—supports and positions the organization for success.<sup>86</sup> These changes, in the context of substantial, country-wide, politico-ethico-economic change, may be responsible for a leap in membership and email subscriber numbers over the past two years. Approximately 12,000 new paid supporters have joined, raising the number to 30,000, with 200,000 individuals on the mailing list, 83,000 Twitter followers, and 60,000 Facebook fans.<sup>87</sup>

Akin to SF USA, the Youth Food Movement embraces an extremely un-preprogrammed approach to activism. While younger, its trajectory appears steeper, although it is unclear at this point what successes it will achieve. The YFM, however, is already widely distributed, with representatives in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and North America.<sup>88</sup> Membership in the YFM is unpaid, and activities include whatever the members want. The YFM's signature event, inaugurated during Slow Food Nation in 2008, is the Eat-In, a collaboratively planned and prepared collective dinner. Eat-Ins involve no fees and traditionally take place outdoors, with a line of tables and chairs arranged dramatically along a publicly visible landscape. The goal (like that of a sit-in or bed-in) is to demonstrate peaceful protest—in this case against food industrialization—with a high-profile, participant-inspiring event.

While SF USA's project schedule remains centrally defined, the regional iterations are enacted locally. YFM's programming is more open-ended, providing participants with autonomy and widely distributed tasks, as well as the informational resources to carry them out, all of which

supports emergence in activity direction and the development of a bottom-up organizational identity.

## Conclusion

As Slow Food USA and the Youth Food Movement continue to decentralize the respective ethos that each embraces, they may be building up a potential that could eventually empower any individual, at any moment, to actualize food-system change. This potential, like Gilbert Simondon's *fond*, or ground, would be the "system of virtualities...or rather a common reservoir of the tendencies of forms"<sup>89</sup> that a motivated, nascent food activist would need in order to take action or collaborate in action. From Peter Gloor's perspective, this reservoir would house the collaborators' ethical code and source of trust and connectivity; it would be the means of decentralizing the program of food-system change and the mode of emergence for whatever the collaborators choose to bring about.

In a widely dispersed religion—a successful model of decentralization—practice can emerge anywhere: the faith is in the *fond*. While Slow Food does count among its leaders a number of god-like figures (for better or for worse), the faith that Slow Food participants have is in an imagined future, rather than a perceived, present power. Slow Food is not a religion, nor should it be, but the enactable virtuality of religion is a model the organization might adopt, and may already be doing, in the case of SF USA.

Ultimately, as Jane Bennett points out, Slow Food may need to adopt a consciousness of food that goes beyond its objectified qualities as sustenance, cultural reflection, and even environmental-protection tool. "It tends to perceive of food as a resource or means, and thus to perpetuate the idea that nonhuman materiality is essentially passive stuff.... What would happen if slow food [sic] were to incorporate a greater sense of the active vitality of foodstuff?"<sup>90</sup>

For the development of a theory of intelligent (or equilibrated) gastronomy, and for the future of food studies, this appears to be the real starting point.

Slow Food's *good, clean, and fair* encapsulation link easily to the spheres of *culture, environment, society, and economy* in my initial thesis conception. Just as both sets of words are a starting point to frame the breadth of the issues involved, so too are they a shallow frame, providing not a tidy answer, but a series of buckets filled with questions.

The evolution and divergence of Slow Food, along multiple national and generational pathways, can be a useful model for projecting the divergences that the field of food studies might follow (or may already be taking). Food studies, because of its relevance in all places and to all people, may need to become a widely diffused ethic that exists virtually in all other disciplines, ready to emerge as enacted by participants in decentralized academic locations. We can only hope that it will become unstoppably powerful, as well as a leaderless practice that embraces collaboration by a distributed and trusting network of practitioners. Like Gloor's prescribed mode for innovation, the practice must be grounded, down-to-earth, and understandable by the larger academic and non-academic communities; it must be relevant and positioned in the existing food environment in order to convince others of its value; it must be non-isolationist and provocative, even disruptive.

While the increase in points of contact among food studies scholars appears to be taking place through courses, conferences, listservs, and publications, the amplification of *randomness* may be a key challenge in the academic setting: more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship, including a not-knowing-where-you're-going research approach, must be accepted and valued. As demonstrated by the UNISG example, assembling both human and non-human food actants in food studies programs may provide not only richness in learning, but institutional survival as well. So too must there be positive and negative feedback mechanisms in place: jobs and funding and training opportunities to encourage ongoing work, combined with intellectual and moral challenges from a 360-degree community of students, peers, policy-makers, and activists. Finally, like Brouwer and Mulder's image of growing cells in a biologically exploratory

organism, food studies must interact with the environment of its growth, find relevant targets to benefit and from which to benefit, and extend its network outward, otherwise a dynamic and successful new version of collaborative food studies may simply degenerate and die.

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## NOTES

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