Is that all there is, my friends? Then let’s keep dancing, let’s break out the booze and have a ball, if that’s all there is.
—“Is that All There Is?”

The radical instability and threat to social identities posed by capitalist expansion necessarily leads to new forms of collective imagery which reconstruct those threatened identities in a fundamentally new way.
—Ernesto Laclau, Post-Marxism without Apologies

At a time when strong anti-globalization movements have developed throughout the world, when there is growing concern for the widespread use of genetically modified food and a more conscious approach to the environment, the issue of food has taken on special relevance. How has food become so important in the political and cultural agendas of many opposition movements? This essay examines food in one particular aspect of social life—the political—using Italy as its case study. In an evolution not without irony, shifts in ideological and cultural discourse have brought certain segments of the Italian Left to the forefront of appreciation for fine food and wine, well beyond the supposed historical mission of the proletariat.

Child-Eating Communists

Communists eat children. Or so went a catchphrase in the political polemics that characterized Italy after World War II, when the country found itself at the frontier between the Western and Communist worlds. However, children seemed to be the only nourishment Communists were interested in: food and pleasure were not at all part of the Italian Communist Party agenda. The average cadres had grown used to nurturing an almost monastic conception of their moral mission—after all, the direct competitors for the hearts of the masses were the Catholic Church and its political representatives, the Christian Democracy Party. No energy or time was to be wasted in the pursuit of futile leisure activities; as a bourgeois luxury, haute cuisine was viewed with slightly contemptuous suspicion. In fact, life was not easy for Italy’s workers, even when the country underwent an economic boom in the 1960s. Rapid industrial growth prompted internal immigration from the South to the North, which in turn provoked huge social changes, including the displacement of important segments of the population, crises in the family, and a questioning of traditional values.

In those years, only the hearty nourishment of the People was worthy of consideration—local Communist Party conventions were renowned for their massive consumption of grilled sausages. In any case, happiness and pleasure were not likely to be experienced in the present:

Food was to be appreciated only as the fruit of the labor of farmers and peasants who, not being very class-conscious, were easily lured into the anti-Communist propaganda of the Christian Democracy, often via the Sunday sermons of local priests.

the masses were to struggle for a better future, when their rights would not be trodden upon by international capitalism and the ever-growing, parasitic owner class. Food was to be appreciated only as the fruit of the labor of farmers and peasants who, not being very class-conscious, were easily lured into the anti-Communist propaganda of the Christian Democracy, often via the Sunday sermons of local priests. Among the Italian Left a “cathocommunist” attitude prevailed, which united Catholic morality with Communist ideology. When the Party leader Palmiro Togliatti left his wife for his comrade Nilde Iotti, he was criticized not only
by the Catholic Church, but also by large segments of the Communist Party. Even at the end of the 1960s, the majority of the Left still had not embraced divorce.

Leftist intellectuals and artists also frequently treated food with a certain ambivalence. It is easy to recall such films as Marco Ferreri’s *La Grande Bouffe*, in which a group of gourmet bourgeois eat themselves to death; Pierpaolo Pasolini’s *Salò*, in which banquets are depicted as opportunities for Fascists to exert their power over their young victims; or *La Ricotta*, in which a poor starving actor, supposed to play one of the thieves in a movie about the Crucifixion, kills himself by bingeing on ricotta cheese.

Since that time, the general attitude toward food among the Left has greatly changed. For example, Sabrina Ferilli, a musical starlet who declares herself a true leftist, and whose nude photos appeared on a calendar that sold more than one million copies, said in a 1999 interview:

> Historically, the Left loves books and culture; those who dance and have fun are idiots. It is contrary to progress and comfort. To be noisy, to laugh, to love comfort is considered rightist. The Left would gain a lot if it admitted freedom, emancipation, and tolerance towards pleasure, if it would not raise an eyebrow against the latest-model cell phone or expensive watch. I hate tearoom conformists, those gentlemen holding an imaginary remote control who decide who is behaving and who isn’t. I belong to another kind of Left, which is not made up of elites, sects, and castes. It’s this moralist Left that is not good for Italy, this austere and guilt-ridden Left that equates being poor with being righteous. Who wants to be poor? Why should one feel guilty if one owns a boat?

Thus, today’s cultural climate could not be more different, especially in regard to food. *Micromega*, one of Italy’s most prestigious leftist journals, dedicated an issue to the subject of “food as culture.” While in office as Prime Minister, Massimo D’Alema (a member of the former Communist Party, now called Leftist Democrats) used to invite the most famous chefs to cook at official receptions, and he was not embarrassed to hang out with them. The shift in public consciousness came in December 1998, when Minister of Culture Giovanna Melandri, also from the Leftist Democrats, missed the opening of the opera season at La Scala in order to attend the annual gala dinner organized by *Gambero Rosso* food magazine. This event was attended by all the leftist intellectuals, including Fausto Bertinotti, the leader of the Communist Refoundation Party. Mammoth food events like Salone del Gusto in Turin, organized by the Slow Food association, attract thousands of people every other year, and many leftist militants, among others, offer their help free of charge for the event.

So what happened over the last thirty years? How did the discourse on pleasure, and specifically food, come to be included in the larger discourse of the Italian Left, which is itself changing under the pressure of the transformations in Italian and international politics and the development of anti-globalization movements?

**A Loss of Identity**

In order to understand these transformations, it is necessary to consider briefly the evolution of the ideology of the Italian Left. Here I am specifically concerned with the leftist intellectuals who split with the militants on issues relating to pleasure and food.

Until the fall of Fascism, the leftist parties had been on the same side with all the other anti-Fascist forces in the National Liberation Committees, which engaged in more or less organized forms of resistance and guerrilla warfare while the Allies were conquering southern Italy. The political foes (Nazis and Fascists) were immediately identifiable, creating clear-cut antagonisms in which it was easy for all of the anti-Fascist groups to put aside their differences temporarily and establish common political goals.

At the end of the war, on June 2, 1946, a majority of Italians (though a mere 54.3 percent) voted in a constitutional referendum to abolish the monarchy, and Italy became a republic. Now the main antagonism was between the Center-Right and the Left, an opposition that emerged within the wider international context of the Cold War, which emphasized this political dichotomy. Although excluded from the government, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had a strong identity, clear objectives, and a definite role. Its political methods were based on programs, widespread organization, and a coherent analysis of reality and of the historical development of capitalism, all inspired by Marxism-Leninism in its Stalinist form. The entire Left took for granted the rationality of the working class, which was supposed to be able to see where its interests lay and make its choices accordingly.

But with the invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the beginning of Krushchev’s de-Stalinization of the Communist Party in 1958, the Italian Communist leadership found itself obliged to rethink its ideology, to find what it defined as “renewal within continuity.” Without abandoning Marxism-Leninism, the Party refused revolution as a political strategy and accepted as new values the defense of the Constitution, democracy, and the coexistence of private and public property. At the same time, the Party did not renounce its goals to guide labor struggles and new forms of democracy while...
maintaining its hegemonic role in Italian culture. A kind of leftist feud developed, to the extent that the philosopher Norberto Bobbio called the Marxist ideology of many intellectuals a “new aristotelism” and “Marxist conformism.”

The crisis of the traditional Left parties became evident during the 1968 movement when students, who had begun occupying the universities in 1967, could not be controlled by the party structure. Students protested generally against any kind of control and authority, whether in schools, family, or society. They also felt that the democratic centralism that had been the functioning principle of the Communist Party could not meet their needs or demands. Without accepting the guidance of the Party or of the unions, factory workers began to oppose the large corporations in the North; they also founded local committees. Points of antagonism multiplied, and the different forces could not easily coalesce around common programs and goals. The generation of ’68 felt that power should be creative, and that political engagement within the Left should not also automatically imply the acceptance of Party morals: sex had to be freely experienced, as did drugs, music, free speech, and collective life. The influence of the hippie movement in the United States, the events connected with the Vietnam War, the international protest movement that swept throughout Europe, the cultural revolution in China—all constituted points of antagonism that the traditional Left parties, and especially the Communist Party, were unable to control. A heterogeneous array of competing “I’s” stubbornly refused to be articulated in the collective “We” of a single political project.

From then on, a radical leftist culture prevailed, consisting of four main articulations: feminism, environmentalism, anarchy, and Communist groups that criticized the Communist Party from the Left and from outside the parliament. Of
these groups the most important were Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle), Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power), and manifesto. The latter began as a journal in 1969, but its bold positions led to a break with the Communist Party. In 1971 the new group started a newspaper, also called manifesto, which is still alive today and totally independent. The manifesto movement centered on such important figures as Luigi Pintor, Rossana Rossanda (formerly responsible for culture in the Italian Communist Party), Aldo Natoli, Valentino Parlato, Luciana Castellina, and Lucio Magri. Other leftist groups outside of parliament harshly criticized these leaders for their intellectual positions and their distance from the struggle of the real workers. As a matter of fact, many of them were accused of being “radical chic.” The movement presented itself for the 1972 elections but could not get the minimum quorum (three hundred thousand votes) to enter the parliament. In 1976 it gave birth to the Proletarian Unity Party (PDUP), which succeeded in getting some seats in the parliament, as did Proletarian Democracy. Finding these new movements too conservative, a few leftist groups founded terrorist cells, which became particularly powerful in the 1970s.

As new objects of political concern emerged, such as women’s rights, divorce, abortion, and the environment, the Communist Party found itself unable to channel the discontent among the Left. The institutionalizing of the referendum—the possibility to abolish a law or part of a law by popular vote11—created a new field for debates that polarized public opinion in ways that were unlikely to be controlled by traditional parties, none of which was able to prevail. As a result, the Communist Party and its leader, Enrico Berlinguer, from 1973 on developed a new political line of “historical compromise,” aimed at narrowing the gap between the Party and government forces.12

Despite good results in the 1975 regional elections13 and in the June 1976 political elections, the Communist Party began to experience crisis. The student protests of 1977, which grew violent and were marked by urban guerrilla warfare, marked the end of the hegemony of the PCI in the Left. The kidnapping (and subsequent murder) of the Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978 convinced the Party to support a “national solidarity” government and make it into an institutional force. In the 1979 election, as the unions lost power against the large corporations, it began to show signs of decline: despite thirty-five days of strikes and picketing, the automobile maker Fiat succeeded in firing twenty-three thousand factory workers, with the support of other department employees and subcontractors. These events marked the end of class solidarity in Italy. The Socialist Party found itself in a balancing act and became a crucial force under the leadership of Bettino Craxi. Craxi was Prime Minister between 1983 and 1987; his authoritarianism and transformations of the country became the symbol of a new Italy, a place where yuppies were considered role models, where economic results were more important than social issues, and where all sense of community and solidarity disappeared in an unprecedented rat race.

The Communist Party momentarily regained momentum in the June 1984 elections for the European Parliament, for the first time getting more votes than the Christian Democracy Party (33.3 percent versus 33 percent), no doubt due to the emotional impact of the death of its charismatic leader, Enrico Berlinguer. Yet in 1985 a referendum eliminated the automatic connection between inflation and salaries, further weakening the Communist Party, which had supported the need to keep it.14 In the 1987 political elections, the negative trend became evident as new forces entered the parliament, such as the Greens (an environmentalist party) and the Northern League, which voiced the local demands of Italy’s wealthier North.

These events triggered a major rethinking of not only the strategy, but also the very nature of the Communist Party. On November 12, 1989, Achille Occhetto, who had become secretary in 1988, three days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, launched a project for a radical transformation of the Party, which was approved by a congress in March 1990.15 In February 1991 the Communist Party became the Party of Leftist Democrats (PDLS), tightening its connections with the European New Left and definitively renouncing Communism as a guiding ideal. Several sections of the Party that had not renounced the original project seceded to form the Communist Refoundation Party, which excluded any compromise or alliances with the Center-Right. At the same time, the whole political establishment was devastated by the investigations led by a group of Milan attorneys who revealed the inherent corruption of the party system.16 The Christian Democracy Party and some of its allies collapsed, vanishing from the political scene; the Socialist Party, also deeply involved in bribery scandals, virtually disappeared when its leader, Bettino Craxi, fled to Tunisia. The political earthquake was so devastating that the media proclaimed the end of the First Republic (unfortunately, the Second Republic has not yet begun…). The 1994 elections were won by a new party, Forza Italia, led by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, who assembled most of the Center-Right forces into a government coalition, which soon collapsed after the “betrayal” of one of its members, the Northern
League. This party is now back in the Center-Right coalition; in 2000 it again defeated the leftist coalition that had led the Italian Government since 1996.

A Communist Gourmet Club

On December 16, 1986, in the midst of these politically turbulent years, the Communist daily newspaper manifesto began publishing an eight-page monthly magazine supplement, edited by Stefano Bonilli, a staff reporter. This new magazine was called Gambero Rosso, which carried a double message. Literally meaning “red shrimp,” Gambero Rosso is also the name of the tavern where an unscrupulous pair of beastly thugs (the Cat and the Fox) cons the puppet Pinocchio out of his gold coins. The supplement’s mission was to protect Pinocchio’s real-life counterparts—innocents abroad as well as trusting consumers at home—from padded hospitality bills, lumpy beds, gruff service, watery wine, and mediocre food.

Let’s wage war. A war declared by a small group of very determined, very aware people against retailers, producers, restaurateurs. Not all of them, of course, only those who constantly, daily try to fool the consumer...In the past it was a struggle of the poor. You could be cheated on weight. Today we’re in an affluent society, so you get cheated on quality, health laws are not respected, people take advantage of their clients’ ignorance.

At the same time, Gambero Rosso was an ironic nod to the supposed dangers of the “red menace” and to the fact that the pleasure-allergic Left was losing ground in the political scene. Attractively designed by Piergiorgio Maoloni, Gambero Rosso aimed to change the frequently gloomy and sullen image of leftist initiatives. With the first issue, the sales of manifesto increased more than thirty percent, enabling Bonilli to hire a very small editorial staff. Although manifesto was not very widely distributed, it was read by everyone who mattered, as part of the briefing material that all industry managers, state officials, and politicians found on their desks every day. On the other hand, the public who bought manifesto on the newsstands was made up of the progressive leftist bourgeoisie, some union cadres, and a few workers. The magazine focused mainly on food and wine, offering restaurant reviews and tasting notes. It also included notes on value wines—good-quality wines that could be had at affordable prices. Over time, product evaluations began to appear, as did a travel section.

Before Gambero Rosso, there was a journal called La Gola (meaning both “throat” and “gluttony”), which was very intellectual. It was not sold as a newspaper supplement but distributed in a few thousand copies. By contrast, manifesto and its magazine supplement were distributed in thirty-five thousand copies. The magazine became the arena for a new organization, Arcigola. (“Arci” is an acronym for the Recreation Association of Italian Communists; “gola” ironically refers to both food and gluttony.) This organization, which would later become a worldwide movement under the name of Slow Food, was founded by Carlo Petrini, a union militant from the Piedmont region. It had (and still has) its headquarters in Bra, a small town in the Langhe wine area.

Here are the coordinates for the work of Arcigola: protection of the environment and the defense of consumers must be seasoned with a nice dose of conviviality, of good living, and of the enjoyment and pleasure that these issues demand.

Because Gambero Rosso and Arcigola believed that the world of wine was not properly presented in Italy, they initiated the Wine Guide in 1988. Its initial printing of ten thousand copies sold out, and within a few years the Wine Guide had become an economic and social fact, to the extent that it now determines the Italian wine market. Producers who receive a Tre Bicchieri (“Three Glasses”) award see their volume of business increase from one day to the next.

Interest in both Gambero Rosso and Arcigola grew quickly. On November 9, 1989, at the Opera Comique in Paris, representatives of the countries participating in the international movement for the defense of and the right to pleasure—Slow Food—signed a register to mark the movement’s official birth. The manifesto had already been signed by Carlo Petrini, Stefano Bonilli, and a few important Italian intellectuals: Gerardo Chiaromonte, director of the Communist Party newspaper Unità; the actor and subsequent Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo; the singer Francesco Guccini; and the cartoonist Sergio Staino.

An abstract of the manifesto states:

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 of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction. A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of Fast Life. May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude that mistake...
frenzy for efficiency. Our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors 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.22

The final issue of Gambero Rosso as a supplement to manifesto was published in December 1991, after which the magazine started a yearly restaurant guide and other series of books. By that time, Slow Food had founded its own publishing house (though it still collaborates on the Wine Guide with Gambero Rosso). Slow Food also began to expand abroad, founding branches in many countries and translating its quarterly journal, Slow, into several languages. It now has a US branch based in New York City. Meanwhile, Gambero Rosso was bought by the Espresso group, which publishes Espresso magazine and the daily paper Repubblica. The first issue under new management hit the newsstands in February 1992, but after a few months, Espresso decided to sell Gambero Rosso back to Stefano Bonilli. He has since published many series of books, created a Web site, and launched an English-language edition of the magazine as well as a successful TV channel with RAI SAT, the satellite division of Italian public television. In 2002 he also opened Città del Gusto, a new center for food and wine in Rome. For its part, Slow Food is preparing to open a university for gastronomy in northern Italy.

Articulating Pleasure

The question posed by the development of Gambero Rosso and Slow Food is this: How can the appreciation of food and wine be articulated within a wider leftist and, more generally, oppositional, discourse?

The crisis in the Socialist and Communist parties caused the previously coherent and homogeneous identity of the movements, focusing on such distinctive elements as a new society, freedom, class emancipation, and equality, to explode. The emergence of new concerns promoted by the so-called “new social movements” transformed what had once been considered private matters (gender, race, ecology) into political issues. The new movements demanded from the militants not only a reassessment of their political beliefs, but also a reform of their way of life, of their established ways of connecting to reality. To some extent, this reassessment also took place in the world of food. Beginning in the early 1970s, “counter-cuisine” systems based on holistic assumptions, cosmic awareness, and a strong sense of personal responsibility toward the health of the planet began to spread. Within a short time, vegetarian and vegan diets became extremely popular and began to influence Western eating habits.

Deprived of an organizing principle (such as the Communist project), both the new and the old values revealed cultural elements whose meaning and place within a certain

Many leftist intellectuals who had been unable to deal with these new approaches began to consider food not in terms of appropriation and exploitation, but within a conceptual framework in which collective enjoyment, sharing, and community became the main points of reference.

discourse were fixed retroactively by the emergence of a new center of interest. Adopting the terminology elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, these elements may be termed “floating signifiers.”23 In Italy and elsewhere, pleasure, creativity, and whimsy played an important role in the opposition movements of the 1960s and ’70s, becoming the new metaphorical center for the reassessment of society. From the 1980s on, food partly absorbed and neutralized the disruptive forces unleashed by the new attention to pleasure. Many leftist intellectuals who had been unable to deal with these new approaches began to consider food not in terms of appropriation and exploitation (the fat bourgeois sucking vital energy from the workers), but within a conceptual framework in which collective enjoyment, sharing, and community became the main points of reference. Food allows individuals to come together, to rediscover their connections to vital traditions, to create relationships, to take their time in...
a world that moves at an increasingly fast pace. The “Slow Food” denomination itself was created in opposition to the fast food seen as a sign of the globalization that imposes an increasingly faster pace on all human activities.24

Although food is highly symbolic, it also remains closely connected with desire, pleasure, and the fulfillment of personal desire, thus opposing the symbolic universality and historical certainty of the utopian projects that had proved unsustainable in the Communist ideology. The new emphasis on food as a social and cultural practice constituted an effective antidote to the damage suffered by traditional political identities or, even more importantly, to the painful disclosure of a fundamental lack of identity, a lack that had been concealed in the past by hegemonic practices and a disclosure of a fundamental lack of identity, a lack that had been concealed in the past by hegemonic practices and a political project that collapsed along with the Berlin Wall. Food became a focal point, condensing a symbolic network that connected various heterogeneous elements, which, in their political neutrality, could be inserted into all kinds of discourses and thereby derive meaning. In fact, many of the progressive issues raised by Gambero Rosso and Slow Food are, or have been, used in conservative contexts. Analyzing the rhetorics of care, commensality, and family values shared by both McDonald’s and its opponents, one cannot fail to notice that community and “natural bonds” are part of a romanticized vision that stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the world’s contradictions and fragmentation.25

Judging from the material produced by both Gambero Rosso and Slow Food (and despite the differences that have emerged between them over time), the main elements in the discourse on food and politics appear to be the following: the right to pleasure; the value of tradition and memory; the defense of local identities; and biodiversity and anti-globalization. As will become clear, their signification can change according to the ideological framework to which they are submitted.

The Right to Pleasure

From the start, both Bonilli and Petrini adopted a very bold attitude toward the leftist majority.

Immediately a contradiction became evident: we were talking about consumption along with the joy of consuming. We were saying that high-end consumption is also a cultural thing; you have to be intelligent and have knowledge. If once a year you decide to spend money on a good dinner, a good wine, a good product, or a good trip, it’s better that someone else do the research for you, someone who’s free from any form of conditioning. Then you can choose. This approach was enormously successful. It opened a new path for the Left.26

Many would like to teach communists the right way to act. According to these “masters of life,” a good communist should mortify himself in clothing, in enjoyment, and above all in frequenting good restaurants...Well, I have the impression that these people will always confuse Communism with Franciscanism. Such confusion, after all, favors those who believe that the precious elements of Italian gastronomy should always be a privilege for the usual few.27

In this kind of oppositional discourse, pleasure, liminally situated between the symbolic and the biological, is considered liberating and disruptive, a primal force that can shake every structure from its base. Of course, this liberation must not be limited to overcoming a certain type of judgmental and oppressive leftist mindset, or to affirming the right to pay a high price for something if it is worth it. The liberation must also aim to undermine the corporate vision of food as pure commodity, as a source of money with little or no connection to the most basic human needs. On the other hand, pleasure plays a major role in the marketing campaigns for most products, and corporations present themselves as purveyors of products that can meet the consumers’ every need. The corporations know better than the consumers themselves what they need to achieve the pleasure they deserve.

The Value of Tradition and Memory

Tradition enters the leftist discourse through its connections with material culture, labor, territory, and human time, as opposed to the obsessive rhythm of the modern capitalist economy that deprives us of our leisure time. This approach, especially evident in Slow Food, has sometimes been defined as Culinary Luddism, whose goal would be, according to Rachel Laudan, “to turn back the flood tide of industrialized food in the First World, and to prevent such foods from engulfing traditional ethnic foods elsewhere.”28 This criticism points to the real and present danger that the rediscovery of tradition could end up in a discourse that hinges on conservative moral values and patriarchal society, reconstructing the ideological myth of a time that knew neither disruptions nor crises.29 The appeal of tradition has already been largely exploited in this sense by the advertising industry; in Italy, especially in the 1980s and 90s, many products were marketed bearing an image of the “good old days.” These products include Mulino Bianco cookies, which in the TV commercials were consumed by an ever-smiling family living in a beautiful old mill in an uncontaminated countryside; and Antica Gelateria del Corso, an ice cream that claimed its origin in an imaginary fin-de-siècle parlor.
The Defense of Local Identities

Both Slow Food and Gambero Rosso emphasize the role of local communities and traditions, the manual skills and know-how of food producers, and their ties with a historically determined material culture. Here a reference to the concept of use-value is apparent in the emphasis on labor. Labor cannot, however, be isolated from exchange-values: a local product exists as such only when it leaves its territory and is brought to different places, i.e., when it enters the market. Thus identity, once again, is neither fixed nor definitive.30

Localism has always been present in Italian culture as a reaction against imposed unification, which after 1870 tried to make a homogenized whole—a nation—out of a very diverse ensemble of local communities whose identities had developed over centuries. This phenomenon is usually called campanilismo, the pride of belonging to a community that considers its territory to be the space within which the ringing of the town bell-tower (campanile) can be heard. In the food realm, every region, even every small town, has its own culinary tradition that is a source of pride and innumerable quarrels with neighboring regions. The Fascist regime made a conscious effort to impose political and cultural unity on the entire country, from elementary schools to sports to military service. The groups of partigiani that fought from their mountain hideouts against the Fascists and the German troops after the fall of Mussolini, although organized nationally by the opposition parties, had strong connections with their territory, and a good knowledge of the land ensured their survival.

The rapid industrialization that swept Italy in the 1950s and '60s displaced masses of people, especially from the South to the North, where the factories were. At the same time, the increasingly popular television homogenized language and customs, creating a nationwide market for the new industrial foodstuffs that were making housewives' lives easier. For many years, regional food traditions risked disappearing along with local autonomy. However, as Carlo Petrini points out in his book about Slow Food, in many areas of the country agricultural property was still fragmented, and rural activities were carried out in the old ways, often in close association with workers' cooperatives that supported either the Communists or the Christian Democrats.31 This longstanding rural structure assured the survival of many products that otherwise would have disappeared and that have now become fashionable again.
Over the past few years, bureaucratic decentralization and a demand for greater autonomy have changed the institutional structure of the Italian state, allowing more space for the local. At the same time, dialects have become a banner for all those who have complaints against the central authorities. For instance, many politically engaged hip-hop artists have chosen dialect to voice their discontent against society, while rapping on rhythms imported by new waves of immigrants: ragamuffin, Algerian raï, Slavic brass music.32

Like pleasure and tradition, localism is also a floating signifier: while connected in a progressive context to multiculturalism and openness to difference, it has also become the trademark for the federalist and often secessionist demands formulated by the North League. This party, quite popular in certain parts of northern Italy, rather overtly considers the South unproductive and parasitic, and the immigrants troublemakers, job-stealers, and disrupters of community. A similar conception of the Other can be recognized in the discourse of the Right, which has always emphasized the importance of cultural identity and of the nation.

Furthermore, many transnational corporations seem to operate in a dimension that has been called “glocal,” where the global and the local are intermingled to promote localities within the framework of transnationalism. Thus McDonald’s, for instance, relies on local products to assemble dishes that are the same all over the planet. But “the nation” also turns out to be a floating signifier that can be used by the Left. Both Slow Food and Gambero Rosso point out that Italy has enormous international marketing potential because of its numerous products and the variety of its traditions, as well as its image as a land of good eating and good living. But particularly at a time when all of the European countries are trying to have their specific products recognized and classified by the European Union, no coordinated effort is being made to take advantage of this situation. The emphasis here is on the nation as made up of tradition and local identity (although Italy as a sutured, homogeneous entity is mainly a foreign concept) as opposed to globalization, which is seen as the new incarnation of international capitalism, as indicated by the spread of McDonald’s. It is necessary to maintain the local by fighting globally—a near contradiction in terms.

José Bové, the almost mythical founder of the Confédération Paysanne and the arch-nemesis of McDonald’s in Europe, stresses the principle of “alimentary sovereignty,” according to which “every country, or groups of countries, must be able to reach the highest level of security—for all citizens—concerning agricultural products, and has the right to establish autonomously its own alimentary necessities and to refuse the imposition of those agricultural practices considered dangerous for the individual (hormones, genetic mutations, patents of living beings).”33 At the same time, Bové acknowledges the necessity for some form of international action to oppose the transnational globalization of the market. The tension between the global and the local is not an easy matter, since both locality and the global are socially produced, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in their highly controversial book, Empire. It is necessary to abandon the naive point of view that sees the local as “natural,” original, and connected to biodiversity and heterogeneity, as the last defense against the homogenizing, unnatural forces of globalization.34

Biodiversity and Anti-globalization

Quite often, the critique of globalization is closely associated with another issue, one that is particularly important for Slow Food—ecology, i.e., sustainable development and biodiversity. Slow Food’s US branch has launched an initiative called the Ark of Taste, aimed at protecting and revitalizing fruits and vegetables that face the risk of disappearing along with the independent farmers who grow them (another indirect reference to the importance of labor versus the omnipresence of super-national companies).

The Ark of Taste was born in 1996 at the first Hall of Taste in Turin. A year later, in Serralunga d’Alba, a manifesto was drawn up for the project. Its objectives are to save and protect small-scale quality food production from industrial standardization, hyper-hygienist legislation, the rules of modern retail systems and a modernity which meets 95% of the world’s food requirements with fewer than 30 plants; and to protect it from a policy which is seeking to sweep biodiversity away altogether; and to save this outstanding economic, social and cultural heritage of unwritten but rich and complex peasant and craft skills, of old traditional competences and techniques.35

The critique of globalization extends to another hot issue: genetically modified food, a cause of deep concern among European consumers that is becoming another point of resistance against globalization and a catalyst for concrete actions from demonstrations to boycotts of suspect products. Multiculturalism and ethnic diversity thus find their natural union within this discursive frame through a chain that connects ethnic and local traditions to anti-globalization via biodiversity. The result is a series of mediated political equivalencies among heterogeneous elements that would not automatically form a coherent project. A related issue is organic produce, which is becoming so
popular in the United States that large corporations are also starting to market organic product lines—the same corporations that are wiping small farmers off the map and that are often responsible for the exploitation of destitute farmers. Is there a place for feminist and gender issues? Yes, of course. Since, in the organization of external work and domestic life that is prevalent in the West, women are increasingly freed from the preparation of meals, cooking is no longer considered a female task, a typical expression of a patriarchal society. Instead, it becomes an occasion for conviviality and enjoyment in which men also play an important role. It goes without saying that this holds true especially for the affluent and more educated segments of society, which overlap with the readership of Gambero Rosso and the members of Slow Food—people who can spend money on fresh foods and local produce, which are usually more expensive than supermarket products. Although these issues are closely connected with sustainable agriculture and biodiversity, ecology sometimes is associated with women in a subtle anti-feminist narrative. In a world doomed by pollution, biological homogenization, and globalization, women are transformed into the defenders of the holy environment that constitutes the family. Their role would be to stay home and protect it against the evil forces that haunt our present.36

The discourse on food and wine produced by Gambero Rosso and Slow Food has now become mainstream, partially losing its original leftist connotations, or at least articulating them in a less ideological way. Events sponsored by both organizations attract thousands of people. The evaluations in Gambero Rosso and Slow Food’s annual Italian wine guides determine the domestic market and have begun to influence foreign markets as well. Gambero Rosso has launched its own TV channel; although its shows still reflect a strong interest in the cultural aspects of food beyond recipes and restaurant critiques, and although great coverage is given to Slow Food and its initiatives, the larger audience of television poses new problems of language and communication. Pleasure from food is now recognized as a value by most segments of society. Will it lose its potential as a stimulant for social change?

A Handful of Doubts

At this point, some doubts emerge. I have attempted to construct a linear narrative that illustrates certain recent developments in the Italian Left. Considering that I still consider myself part of the Italian Left, my narrative should be viewed with extreme suspicion. Could it (like many other leftist narratives) be part of the discourse on the repression of pleasure within the tradition of the militant Left? Do we believe that our increasing talk about food makes us less repressed? Might it not be an unwitting attempt to redirect energies that can no longer be employed in any revolutionary project toward some other goal, which somehow shares the same liberating character of the original plan? And are not the attempts to protect local producers, disappearing vegetables, and forgotten traditions simply a way of overcoming one’s sense of guilt for having repudiated the protection of the People and the Working Class by other, more engaging means?

NOTES
1. Music and lyrics by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.
5. These certitudes, which were particularly evident in Stalinism, have often been bitterly criticized, especially by Marxists in the countries of the former Communist bloc. “The perversion of the Stalinist Communism consists in the fact that the view by means of which the Party looks at history coincides immediately with history’s gaze upon itself. To use good Stalinist jargon, today already forgotten, Communists act immediately in the name of ‘objective laws of historical progress’, it is history itself, its necessity, that speaks through their mouths.” Slavoj Žižek, Looking Aways (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 108.
6. Leonard Barkan has commented that “[i]n ways that Americans of whatever party affiliation have trouble understanding, the postwar cultural and intellectual life of Italy was always in the hands of the political left.” In “Border Crossings,” Beard House 14, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 53.
9. Democratic centralism was a decision-making procedure consisting of three different stages: discussion between the militants and the cadres, decision at the central level, and implementation at all levels. The central organs were not so interested in the opinions of the lower echelons; they were mainly concerned with their participation in the implementation phase.
11. The first referendum was held on May 12, 1974, on the divorce law. The pro-divorce side passed with 60 percent of the votes.
12. “We are not talking of a ‘leftist alternative’, but rather of a ‘democratic alternative’, that is the political possibility of a collaboration and understanding between the communist and socialist popular forces and the catholic popular forces, without excluding other democratic formations.” Enrico Berlinguer, La “Questione Comunista” 1965–1975 (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1975), 653.
13. The institution of regions, although already present in the 1948 constitution, was realized only in 1970. The PCI got 33.4 percent of the votes, compared to 35.3 percent for the Christian Democracy Party and 12 percent for the Socialist Party. The PCI got the majority in various regions, but this implied an involvement in administrative practices that demanded compromise and negotiation with the Center-Right forces.
14. This mechanism, called scala mobile (“moving ladder or escalator”), assured raises in workers’ salaries in case of inflation.
15. During this process, the Party was called the “Thing,” curiously echoing the way fundamental lack and objects of desire are defined in Lacanian theory.
17. I owe this formulation to Professor Leonard Barkan of Princeton University, the US Wine Editor of Gambero Rosso.

18. Stefano Bonilli worked for manifesto from 1971 to 1982. He was sent to Portugal to cover the revolution, and also covered the kidnapping of Moro. Before founding Gambero Rosso, Bonilli was responsible for the union and business section of the paper. He had already dealt with issues of consumption in the segments he produced for a TV show, Di Tasca Nostra, which focused on quality and consumer protection.


20. Carlo Petrini, “I neoforchettoni,” in Gambero Rosso 1, 16 December 1986. This article was very ironic towards certain sectors of the Left. “In this part of our country, close to the Alps, we are used to talking and arguing about good wine, about the typical dishes from our tradition, about the alimentary liberation from our ancient misery. I have been lucky enough to be involved in that part of the intelligent Left which gathered around manifesto and the PDGF. Well, one day I was talking to a famous confratello and, while we were ruminating about gastronomy, I was abruptly interrupted by the assertion: ‘You people from Langhe, you are always talking about food, you sound like country priests.’ Later I learned that the illustrious confratello used to spend his vacations in France, and systematically visited the restaurants on the other side of the Alps: he loved their cuisine, their service, their extraordinary selection of wine. I still remember this detail because it clearly exemplifies the strange relationship between the Italian Left and gastronomy. A private, almost secret approach to the little pleasures of a good table and, generally speaking, distance and lack of interest toward a sector of civil life that, extended to agro-alimentary production and its commercialization, involves more than a quarter of our population.”

21. The manifesto was first published in Gambero Rosso 11, 3 November 1971.


24. The philosopher Edward Casey has aptly labeled this pervasive phenomenon “dromocentrism.” “Dromocentrism amounts to temporocentrism writ large: not just time but speeded-up time (dromos connotes running, race, racecourse) is of the essence of the era. It is as if the acceleration discovered by Galileo to be inherent in falling bodies has come to pervade the earth (conceived as a single scene of communication), rendering the planet a ‘global village’ not in a positive sense but as a placeless place indeed.” Edward S. Casey, The Fate of Place (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xiii.


30. Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, La cucina italiana (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1999), vii-xvi. See also Carlo Petrini, “Le multinazionali del dis gusto,” in Micromega 5, 1999: 15: “It is necessary to reflect on the fact that the territorial identity of a product must necessarily coexist with its commercialization and its exchange of other identities.”


32. This kind of music was born in the so-called Centri Sociali, often abandoned public spaces illegally occupied by groups of young people usually belonging to leftists groups. In the Centri Sociali a youth counterculture is consciously trying to develop new projects and forms of art outside the logic of capitalism and consumerism.