

BOOK REVIEW:

SLOW LIVING BY WENDY PARKINS AND GEOFF CRAIG. PUBLISHED IN 2006 BY BERG PUBLISHERS, OXFORD AND NEW YORK. ISBN: 1845201590 (HARDBACK), 0-86840-987-1 (PAPERBACK), 256 PAGES

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The more we learn from about the dark genius and power behind the spread of Fast Food, the further the range of our mobile phones extends, the more time we spend commuting, the longer the work day grows, the harder it seems to imagine an alternative modern reality. Can we – and do we want to – find an antidote to the alluring convenience of the instant meal and the instant message? Can we turn away the purported reliability of genetically-engineered potatoes and the irresistible flavor of the carefully architected McDonald’s French (freedom?) frying oil?

Curious about the possibilities and options for alternatives embodied in the international movement called Slow Food – and what the search for them means about contemporary culture – scholars and partners Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig recently decamped from western Australia to the capitol of the ever-growing “Slow” world, Italy. The publication resulting from their Italian research, *Slow Living*, is the first book-length academic study of the Slow Food movement and its ancillary organizations. Drawing on interviews conducted with Slow Food leaders and activists in Italy and Australia, Slow Food publications and personal experiences, the authors explore the movement’s origins, goals and operations, and potential. Thoughtful and reflective, *Slow Living* raises and explores many of the possible critiques of Slow Food, but is nonetheless optimistic about the movement. Indeed, where they offer their own concerns and critiques of challenges facing Slow Food as a movement, Parkins and Craig do so in hope of improving a movement that offers in their words, “a means of critiquing or challenging dominant narratives or values that characterize contemporary modernity for so many” (p. i).

The length and style of the book – 140 pages of clear and accessible prose – are well matched to the book’s agenda and approach. The chapters on their own as well as the whole text have much to offer readers from across the food and agricultural studies spectrum and are suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi. Chapter Two offers a particularly helpful synopsis of Slow Food for those readers asking what Slow Food is and how it operates.

Parkins and Craig depict a vital force emerging in food, farm and urban design politics. Since its inception in response to the opening of McDonald’s in Rome’s Piazza di Spagna, Slow Food has grown from a small group of left-wing Italian activists with a food bent into an international movement and organization. Slow Food has 80,000 members from 100 countries and national offices in Switzerland, Germany, the United

States, France and Japan. Slow Food activities center around *convivia* – local chapters – that organize food-oriented educational and ‘convivial’ activities and network local consumers with local food producers. In addition, Slow Food administers major projects intended to celebrate and protect artisanal and unique foods and food producers and growers, including the biennial artisanal food fair, *Salone del Gusto* (Hall of Taste). The Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, a non-profit organization established in 2002, campaigns for its “Ark of Taste” – a catalogue of rare or threatened food products worldwide – and administers grants to aid artisan producers through its “Presidia” program. Slow Food led to the establishment of the independent entity Slow Cities (Città Slow) in 1999. Slow Cities is an attempt to encourage the practice of the principles of Slow Food through sensitive urban planning.

Parkins and Craig assess Slow Food within a cultural studies framework, seeking safe ground amidst ongoing theoretical debates about approaching everyday life as an object of analysis. “Slow living” refers to the principles and ideals that inform the Slow Food and Slow Cities movements, ideals that Craig and Parkins situate within a larger cultural reaction to the time/space dislocations and disjunctures of globalization. Slow living, they argue, can be understood as an attempt to ‘individualize’ (à la Ulrich Beck) and to challenge normative trajectories of global capitalism. A cousin to ‘downshifting’ and even voluntary simplicity movements, slow living, according to Craig and Parkins, is “fundamentally ... an attempt to exercise agency over the pace of everyday life” (p. 67). Parkins and Craig advance an argument that is in line with the core of Slow Food ideology: that Slow living is a potentially transformative paradigm because any attempt to slow down necessarily means engagement with all of the obstacles to slowing down. Slow living leads to reflection on the implications of transportation infrastructure, on food commodity chains, for lived experience, for personal satisfaction – reflection that Slow Food activists trust will lead to desire and activism for change.

The critical contribution of Parkins and Craig’s analysis is their emphasis on the ways that the personal, and in particular, pleasure, distinguish Slow Food from other genres of food activism or ‘lifestyle’ movements. Slow Food is governed by an “Official Manifesto for the International Movement for the Defense of the Right to Pleasure” and for the authors the pleasure connection constitutes the core of Slow living’s progressive potential. Their argument is developed in Chapter Five, which together with Chapter Six, on the politics of Slow Food, features the richest original analysis in the text. They argue that a focus on taste and pleasure offers a ‘third way’ out of a dualistic conceptualizations of food as either aesthetic (and thus a morally corrupt status symbol) or nutritionally vacant and as healthy (bland) or sinful (flavorful). Parkins and Craig deploy the phrase “eco-gastronomy” to characterize the foundational principles Slow Food, namely, the premise that cultivating taste leads to appreciation of and desire to protect place and process specific foods and products from the homogenization juggernaut of global food systems. Slow Food Italy’s activities have focused extensively on saving the *osterie* – the Italian version of a bistro/pub – as an alternative to Fast Food. The authors read this focus as indicative of a class-inclusiveness within the movement. For Parkins and Craig, the emancipatory potential of Slow Food exists in linkage of the “eco” to a “refined tastes for all” vision of gastronomy. So paired, ‘eco-gastronomy’ makes Slow Food a relevant

player in global food politics and safe from condemnation as a bourgeois preoccupation with “distinction,” according to Parkins and Craig.

Parkins and Craig’s positive and hopeful assessment of Slow living and Slow Food may raise hackles of those rural sociologists and geographers advocating deep skepticism towards “the romantic anti-politics of localism studies” (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005): Slow Food is deeply preoccupied with the project of rescaling everyday life along ‘local’ boundaries. Wary of the exclusivist and racist legacies of historical projects of the local, the authors go to great lengths to emphasize that Slow Food embodies precisely the “reflexive localism” for which critics have recently called. For example, Parkins and Craig describe Slow Food President Carlos Petrini’s adoption of the French concept of ‘terroir’ in his home region of Langhe, in Italy, as a forward-looking intentional “re-territorialization” grounded in place and tradition, proceeding from a syncretic rather than a reactionary impulse.

This set of arguments repeat a dominant motif in *Slow Living*: that rather than nostalgia or anti-modernism, creativity and syncretism inform the dominant ideologies of Slow Food and Città Slow. Città Slow, for example, does not advocate ‘slowing’ down commuters; getting to the right place quickly could be just as important as savoring the way there. The Slow living paradigm is about posing such a choice.

Ultimately, *Slow Living*, is an important first step in building a body of literature that will no doubt mirror the explosive growth of the movement itself. As with most rich scholarship, *Slow Living* raises many important questions that fall outside the scope of Parkins and Craig’s original project. Chief among them is what Slow Food looks like in terms of the quotidian realities – the personal, the household, the everyday acts of consumption – that inform so much of their argument about the transformative possibilities of Slow living. More personal narratives from the authors might have enabled the text to explore more fully just what happens in a Slow life or what the interface of Slow living ideology with prosaic existence looks like. Certainly, *Slow Living* will be a useful platform from which to base the case studies necessary to develop such an analysis. *Slow Living* is an exemplary place to start for those scholars who seek to “know” and question Slow Food from both within and outside the movement.

Work cited:

DuPuis, E. M., Goodman, D. 2005. Should we go “home” to eat?: toward a reflexive politics of localism. *Journal of Rural Studies* 21: 359–371