



The morality of cheese: A paradox of defensive localism in a transnational cultural economy

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ABSTRACT

The extension of consumption under contemporary capitalism is aided by a capacity to qualify products as cultural, with the ability to reproduce nature, community and tradition. In this paper, I consider this 'economy of quality' as dependant on the work of mediators that circulate models of consumption and articulate production practices with those models through practices of qualification that attach consumers to those products. Qualification requires an institutional and organizational structure responsible for attributing, stabilizing and objectifying qualities. Slow Food International provides just such a structure. I use the case of cheese (the product) and **Cheese!** (a biennial Slow Food festival) to: (1) identify practices of qualification that characterize cheese as a moral good; (2) describe the institutional mechanisms of Slow Food that articulate qualification with models of consumption grounded in a new politics of distribution and recognition; and (3) analyze the ways in which qualification not only configures (and is configured by) practices of consumption but demands the reorganization of practices and locales of production in order to meet the multiple and often contradictory demands of actors brought into relation by the transnational circulation of cheese. The paper highlights the ways in which a diversity of actors actively configures material and symbolic resources across space to produce and circulates new discourses and prescriptive models of consumption grounded in cultural practice by attending to invocations of culture, configurations of power, and the way in which the production and defense of "the local" and "local" commodities is tied to translocal networks.

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1. Introduction

*A poet's hope: to be,
like some valley cheese,
local, but prized elsewhere.*

W.H. Auden (1907–1973)

For 4 days in the fall of every other year Bra, a small town in the Italian Piemonte, is taken over by tens of thousands of people with, at least on the surface, the simple goal of celebrating a single product – cheese.¹ The reason is an event called **Cheese!**, a biennial fair organized by Slow Food International (SFI), and designed to create a festive atmosphere around "rare and vanishing dairy products" while promoting the protection of what it labels as not only artisanal but *indigenous* dairy products (Petrini and Padovani, 2005). On first appearances, **Cheese!** might be described as a microcosmic spectacle of consumption that reflects a significant growth in markets for fine

cheese. This growth is global and the signs are evident in the relatively affluent sections of cities where one of the early signs of retail rejuvenation or gentrification is a specialty cheese shop. It is also evident in the rise of market devices that link distribution with popular culture: cheese appreciation classes, newspapers with cheese-of-the-week columns, cheese plates in good restaurants, cheese blogs, management consulting services for entrepreneurs wishing to open specialty cheese shops, and in the ultimate sign that a product has secured a place of prestige in society, cheese now has its own consumer-oriented magazine.²

But a celebratory depiction masks a deeper political purpose for **Cheese!**; one that aligns Slow Food's early goals of 'taste education' with its recent claims of integrating production and consumption such that consumers become "co-producers", involved in acts of moral salvation and ecological responsibility by contributing to the protection of 'traditional' lifeways and landscapes. Much of Slow Food's work is integrally linked to the formation of alternative agro-food networks (Hinrichs, 2000; Marsden et al., 2000;

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, when I use the word cheese in this paper, I am referring to what is commonly known as artisanal, farmstead, or 'fine' cheese.

² In the Maitre Fromager classes I take as part of my research, many of my classmates are people who operate cheese shops – the very people we might expect to already have a detailed knowledge of cheese. They are, however, learning as they go and see cheese as a "good retail niche".

Goodman, 2003; Winter, 2003; Goodman, 2004a,b) and what has been labeled the ‘quality turn’ (Murdoch et al., 2000; Bridge and Smith, 2003; Sage, 2003). But where research that would fall under those labels has often adopted an explicitly political economic stance – invoking Polanyi’s construct of embeddedness and looking to the shortening of food supply chains and alternative modes of distribution as one vector of his double movement – the role of more avowedly cultural practices and logics in reconfiguring relations between food production and consumption have been understudied as have the ways in which local and translocal actors actively construct embedded markets, and how processes of qualification “affect local social, cultural, economic, and ecological resources” (Bowen, 2010, p. 214; Douget and O’Connor, 2003).³ Critiques of contemporary food systems often overlook the ways in which shifts are not simply driven by the “many problems associated with the industrialization of food chains” (Murdoch et al., 2000, p. 107) but are brought into being for a variety of reasons and out of the desires of a multitude of collective but differentiated actors, all of them highly contextualized, and in which the mechanisms that define the constitution of ‘alternative’ reconfigure power relations. They also often overlook the ways in which a diversity of actors actively configures material and symbolic resources across space to produce and circulate new discourses and prescriptive models of consumption grounded in cultural practice. These critiques have, in short, paid insufficient attention to invocations of culture, configurations of power and the way in which “the production of ‘local’ commodities is nested in wider regional, national, and international networks.” (Bowen, 2010, p. 213).

Slow Food, as an organization and a movement, represents one such set of actors. While it is composed of individuals ostensibly interested in orienting food production toward the ends of reproducing cultural and biological diversity, these ends rely not only on direct mediation of practices of production and consumption but in processes of qualification that seek to produce a good, in this case cheese, specifically aligned with those practices (see Callon et al., 2002; Sjögren and Helgeson, 2007; McDonald and Topik, 2008). Much of this work involves attempts to naturalize discursive configurations of integral relations between ‘the natural’, ‘the local’, and ‘the traditional’ by attaching associated qualities to goods like cheese. In mobilizing these practices of qualification SFI (re)produces a particular politics of scale by attempting to ‘save’ locally-based social relations, practices, and ecological conditions associated with the production of morally and aesthetically ‘good’ products. However, this process of qualification also involves practices that align products with prescriptive models of consumption that Slow Food helps to produce and circulate to a spatially extensive network of members and markets. The strategy of defensive localism, then, is articulated not only with the conditions of locale, the presence of actors willing and able to reproduce community, and the historical processes of production enacted by members of those communities, but with a transnational cultural economy built around the qualification and circulation of the product, representations of its mode of production and the application of prescriptive models that explicitly seek to produce cultures of consumption. This articulation also draws actors into relation around a product that assumes or is assigned different forms of value in relation to its circulation. In locales of production, the narratives and practices built around the production and consumption of cheese are understood as a process of socialization into ‘a culture’, and consequently as a condition of producing culture. However, as products like cheese break the parochial bounds of their

historical production, a partial gap is opened in which a new politics of recognition and distribution becomes possible. It is in this political space that new forms of value creation are brought into being, and new practices of mediation and qualification created to mediate the encounter with new, unfamiliar, audiences. These politics also bring new sets of actors into relation: producers and modes of production that help to eliminate production bottlenecks created by growing market demand; distributors and modes of distribution like centralized wholesale markets that reduce the time between order and delivery; regulators and regulatory mechanisms concerned with vouching for the safety and ‘authenticity’ of a good destined for unfamiliar retailers and consumers; distributors, marketers and associated practices oriented toward increasing the knowledge base of retailers and the ‘sophistication’ of consumers; consumers and new modes of consumption shaped by engagements with diverse forms of cultural knowledge and practice (see Cook et al., 2004). All of these, however, draw value from the politics of recognition that relies on some implied ‘cultural’ quality of the good – for example, as a manifestation of durable ‘traditional or sustainable’ livelihoods’, cultural knowledge or practice, or natural, non-industrial food, cannot be separated from its capacity to facilitate acts of distinction through the association of a food with ‘the local’, ‘the nation’ or class (de Certeau, 1986). None of this is to detract from recent explorations of the visceral, or the sensory, in experiences of eating (e.g., Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008) but to point to the ways in which even taste is iteratively shaped through multiple and diverse attachments to forms of qualification, and the politics of distribution and recognition, and therefore crucial to the configuration of transnational cultural economies of food (see also Korsmeyer, 2005; Johnston and Baumann, 2009).

In what follows I use *Cheese!* to explore these articulations and the practices of qualification through which Slow Food produces cheese as a moral good, brings ‘the local’ into being and simultaneously ‘displaces’ it by situating the social relations of production in translocal circuits of regulation and consumption. I use ethnographic data from *Cheese!* to describe how Slow Food reterritorializes ‘the local’ through the application of its regulatory practices, the spaces of affiliated institutions, its own entrepreneurial agency, and ultimately in the ideological domain of its loose network of parochial, yet transnational, members. Indeed, an important point of the paper is that food festivals, while understudied, reveal the mutuality of culture and economy involved in the formation of alternative agro-food networks as they provide a site that makes visible practices, but more importantly relations, often hidden from view (Peace, 2008). Attending and attending to events like *Cheese!* reveals organizations like Slow Food as important nodes, mechanisms, and actors in the development of a transnational cultural economy. In concentrated time–space it effectively builds associations of diverse actors and interests (Latour, 2007) around consumption in ways that reveal the instrumentality of ‘culture’ in structuring the value of commodities.⁴ It also effectively configures a microcosm of that cultural economy in which it becomes possible, at one ‘site’, to observe how the creation of value in relation to a product like cheese represents “the strategic interests and partial knowledge with which particular actors encounter and construct a commodity at different moments in its circulation.” (Foster, 2006, p. 288)

³ Sydney Mintz reminded us over 50 years ago that “the economy too is a cultural product” (Mintz, 1958, p. 584, see also Buck-Morss, 1995) and others have pointed out the difficult trick of understanding the coproduction of ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ (e.g., Bridge and Smith, 2003).

⁴ In using the phrase ‘association’ I am following Latour (2007, p. 65), who does not use the term to mean some formalized collective of individuals, but to signal “the social”, in which “social is the name of a type of momentary association” facilitated by effort, intent and mechanisms that work to shift weak, and hard to maintain, social ties into more durable kinds of links. It is the creation of these durable links – associations rather than social ties – that we see happening through events like *Cheese!*.

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