

## **IDENTITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN NEW RURAL COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>**

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The international community is being called to make increasingly complex and controversial choices regarding food and food safety at the beginning of this new century. We see huge economic interests confronting each other with mutually incompatible models of development affecting the agricultural policies of sovereign states and the destiny of millions of people.

The opposing positions of the United States and the European Union over the use of genetically modified organisms in agriculture is being highlighted this year with the September meeting of the World Trade Organization in Cancun, Mexico. The developing countries are lands of conquest, seduced by unscrupulous multinational companies who unhesitatingly present themselves as the answer to the problem of world hunger. This technical solution to the problems of hunger and underdevelopment is misguided since it ignores economic, social and political factors as well as the way trade is organized. The introduction of transgenic rice to the Asian continent has led to sharply increased industrialization of agriculture; it has reduced the range of varieties of rice, impoverishing millions of small farmers who cannot resow using the seeds from their own crop. This has encouraged an exodus from the countryside and uncontrolled migration to cities, with consequent new problems of malnutrition.

The attempt to blame Europe for underdevelopment and hunger is the sign of an unprecedented campaign. It occurs at a time when Europe is beginning to realize that industrial agriculture, with its excessive use of chemicals and pesticides, is in irreversible decline, subject to criticisms by increasing numbers of agronomists, chemists, biologists and plant pathologists. The scientific and economic basis of agriculture today is clearly crazy. Industrial agriculture – and transgenic crops to an even greater extent – require massive water resources. The estimate that in France 50 percent of nitrates run off and contaminate aquifers, with serious effects for animal and human health, is not the conjecture of some environmental organization but the result of scientific analysis carried out by the French National Institute for Agronomic Research.

Water, whose worldwide use has increased by 350% since 1950, with 73% used in agriculture, is becoming the most valuable resource now and into the future. This should make us reflect on what Piero Bevilacqua has stated: “Agricultural practice is at the center of an unsustainable paradox: it is the largest consumer of water resources worldwide, and is also the main source of pollution for these resources”.

Faced with these increasingly unmanageable situations, the so-called international community has created new institutions to ensure free trade is carried out according to legal requirements. The World Trade Organization and the Codex Alimentarius Commission are the institutions which govern trade and food safety. Created in 1962, the Codex Alimentarius Commission establishes safety regulations “to protect the health of consumers and ensure fair practices in food trade”. The European Union and the United States have 60% of the delegates though only representing 15% of the world population. Needless to say the agrifood lobby exercises a major influence within these organizations. It is enough to remember that in 1997 the Codex

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<sup>1</sup> Slow Talk, Slow Web, Slow Food, July 18, 2003

Alimentarius Commission placed a US proposal on the agenda to prevent products based on raw milk being traded. The basic structures of the World Trade Organization are extremely unjust and undemocratic. The dogma of free trade stands opposed to sustainable development, since it is based on the assumption that the whole world and future generations can consume resources at the levels of the richest countries without provoking environmental collapse.

In confusing development with growth, we mistakenly equate quality of life with the accumulation of material goods and frantic pursuit of greater profits, which do not necessarily generate a qualitative improvement. When a cook in the Langhe area of Piedmont was asked why she kept her restaurant closed in the evenings and on holidays, given that her business was so popular, she answered that she had no ambition to be the richest person in the cemetery. It is possible for sustainable development to be development without growth and this does not imply the end of economics. As Herman Daly of the University of Maryland states: "These choices represent the subtle and complex economics of maintenance, qualitative improvement, sharing, of frugality and adaptation to natural limits. It is an economics of better, not bigger".

From this perspective, agriculture can be a model for enormous transformation, abandoning the model of industrial agriculture and embracing an agriculture of small farming. This type of agriculture is consistent with the principles of small farming, providing income and product quality while respecting natural resources. Small-farming agriculture should not therefore be confused with a reactionary evocation of rural life and bucolic nostalgia; it is the most practical activity in the world and deserves consideration and respect. We need to forcefully assert the right of people to provide their own food and to freely and democratically choose what type of agriculture they prefer. Small-farming agriculture is a basic requirement in the struggle against GMOs, reasserting the importance of biodiversity, food sovereignty, maintenance of small farmers, occupation of the land, protection of the environment, and opposition to the agrichemical and agri-food multinationals. How long are we going to helplessly watch genetic piracy and expropriation of seeds; the invasion by our food companies of countries whose costs are low and regulations less protective of welfare?

This practice creates imbalances in local agricultural economies and transfers more low-cost food to our economies, which are already experiencing massive surpluses of low-quality food. But in developing countries there are increasing numbers of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition. For this reason, the document on the Future of Food, drawn up by a group of scientists from various countries, and to be presented to government delegations at Cancun, firmly asserts not only the principle of food sovereignty for single countries, but also that these countries should not encourage exports of food products if the scourge of hunger and malnutrition is present within their borders.

The issues are very complex and the opposing forces are firmly entrenched with substantial financial support, which makes these campaigns difficult to conduct despite impressive protest demonstrations. But it is not enough to change the relative strength of the two sides or to influence millions of small farmers, who are often unaware of their fate and subject to a propaganda barrage which will lead to them being impoverished and disconnected from their history and identity.

The principles of small-farming agriculture and food sovereignty can help rebuild the fabric of productive rural communities based on strong human relationships. They can create a new small-scale agricultural economy that respects the environment and provides small farmers and their families with dignity and skills. The results experienced with Slow Food Presidia, now

being set up in developing countries after the success achieved in Italy, give me reason for optimism.

We were told we were utopian dreamers and that our area of operation was marginal and irrelevant compared to mainstream European agriculture. Our intuitions have now borne fruit and are proceeding not only with our help but also through new groupings in rural communities. Economists at the Bocconi University are studying our Presidia, the regions of Europe are rediscovering this type of agricultural development and looking into options for creating activities that support local regions.

The idea of growing GMOs in this scenario is totally misconceived. It is difficult for two types of crop that are so different to coexist since the genetically modified variety tends to spread and infest neighboring areas. Our fields are too small to permit coexistence of organic and genetically modified crops. The Piedmontese Regional Authority has done the right thing in destroying unauthorized fields of transgenic maize and it would be sensible for other regions to take similar action, since a policy of *fait accompli* is a more irresponsible action towards unsuspecting small farmers.

Perhaps it will only be possible for coexistence to occur in the United States, since fertile California is already converting to organic production in enormous market gardens and the quality wine growing areas of the Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino valleys. At the same time, beyond the Rocky Mountains, the vast cultivations of maize are nearly all transgenic. There is no contamination between these two different and distant regions.

Returning to the theme of productive rural communities, science has an important role in adapting to the culture of small farming. This will require the organization of research and training of scientists to be reformed. Research is increasingly complex, but increasingly specialized. Different research groups do not meet to discuss issues, work is focused in fragmented areas rather than in a multidisciplinary environment. Developing a model for agriculture and supporting productive rural communities requires careful and comprehensive integration of agronomy, animal husbandry, sociology, economics, anthropology and ethnology.

This multidisciplinary effort will be the soil allowing gastronomy, the most poorly-regarded of the human sciences, to flourish once more. Gastronomy was relegated by the academic world to being an exotic curiosity and was not able to make a contribution to the development of nutritional science or the achievements of food technology. It had no input into the incursions of bureaucratic pettifoggers drawing up designations, creating regulations, laws and handsome profits.

Within the joyful confines of informed gourmandizing, a new generation of gourmets honed their sensory capacities and extended their organoleptic knowledge of foods and beverages. But at the same time the spread of appallingly low standards through the media was without precedent. Television, in particular, continues to screen programs totally divorced from the traditional knowledge, which has provided us with extraordinary gastronomic treasures. Great chefs are reduced to caricatures, talk shows present traditional local products accompanied by ignorant commentaries, percentage points are awarded for the benefit of self-satisfied TV viewers. This is truly crazy given the serious situation we face with the systematic loss of plant species and animal breeds.

The new University of the Science of Gastronomy with campuses at Pollenzo and Colorno will confer greater respectability on the discipline, it will provide training and education for thousands of young people from all over the world and will serve the new rural communities and their food production.

If it is true that individual communities tend to withdraw into themselves and assert their own identity, it is equally true that food is an intermediary between different cultures. “Exactly like language,” states Massimo Montanari, “cuisine contains and expresses the culture which practices it, it is the repository of the traditions and identity of the group. It is therefore a special medium that can represent itself and communicate. Even more than words, food can mediate between different cultures, opening different cuisines to every sort of invention, combination and influence.”

Identity and exchange are the basis for any dynamic of community life; if the degree of exchange increases, then identity becomes less stable and fixed. Food is often strongly identified with national life. The baguette, cheese and wine are symbols of Frenchness; just as fish and chips are immediately associated with Britain, or pasta and tomatoes with Naples. But having said that, it is necessary to stress that identities do not exist outside of a system of exchange and that protecting “cultural biodiversity” does not mean closing every identity into a protective shell, but linking it to the network. This dynamic concept of identity answers those who regard our work on recovering traditions and our attention to territory as an outmoded, almost archeological operation. On the contrary, rediscovering traditions and the relationship between local cultures and the global market – seemingly a conflictual relationship, though with wide areas of coexistence – is a very modern concept.

In emphatically reiterating these concepts of identity, exchange, and defense of biodiversity embodied in the historical heritage of our communities, our work to protect traditional local products has attracted an interested audience. We have struck a chord with a lot of people, these products are part of our genetic make-up. Standardization, the leveling down of taste and large-scale industrial production have not eradicated the memory of earlier knowledge and flavors. It is only a short step from this point to making these products economically viable. Even though the battle is not yet completely won, the indications are very encouraging – this is evident not only from the commitment displayed by various communities to supporting these products but also from the first signs of a return to the land by young people.

Motivated by this situation, we decided to extend the Presidium project to the rest of the world at the Salone del Gusto last year. It is a logical move and consistent with our status as an international movement. Our Award for the Defense of Biodiversity has been running for four years with a body of 700 jury members from 86 countries. The award winners, mainly small farmers and fishermen, come from backgrounds very similar to those found in our Presidia. They are often isolated, without any institutional support; they have protected endangered plant species and animal breeds; they have collected, preserved and spread significant stocks of heritage seed; they have passed down valuable knowledge and methods for small-scale food production. From the Andean mountains to the desert regions of the Maghreb, from the Amazon forest to the great Siberian plains, the humble work of countless men and women has convinced us of the huge value of the legacy for which their communities are trustees.

When operating in developing countries it becomes evident how complex are the economic and social issues in countries where two waves of colonization have had a devastating effect on agricultural practices and food. Where colonial rule encountered strong civilizations, while not

encouraging a policy of exchange, it adopted many foods and ingredients, which entered the daily life of the colonizing people. We can think of curry, which has become a widespread ingredient in British cuisine, or the famous Worcester sauce, which is of Indian origin.

On the other hand the attitude of colonizing powers in Africa was of total indifference to the ingredients and dishes of the subject peoples who were considered inferior. The most widespread dish in sub-Saharan Africa is *fufu*, a sour-tasting mass reminiscent of mashed potato made from cereal, vegetable and fruit: it was completely ignored because it was considered an inferior foodstuff eaten by native people. As Jack Goody states in his clear account of African food in white and black cultures: “The process of interchange was all one way in favor of the colonizing powers, each of which clung to its national foods: wine and Roquefort in French-speaking territories, beer and cheddar in the English-speaking territories. The French went so far as to bring their own bakers to make baguettes and cooks to open restaurants”.

But the greatest harm was done during the second wave of colonization, with the imposition of food diets and customs which were totally alien to the territory. These diets brought with them a whole range of newly imported ingredients, making the communities extremely dependent on the costs of these products and causing knowledge passed down by past generations to be lost. The effect of these imports on the delicate finances of new post-colonial countries was devastating and created new areas of poverty.

Small farming organizations in Senegal are currently taking a stand against what they call the “tyranny of imported rice”. The food customs imposed by the colonizing power led to large-scale consumption of rice, so Senegal is seeing its trade balance increasingly burdened by the weight of rice and cereal imports. If each Senegalese person were to replace rice with millet just once a week, Senegal would save 4 billion francs per year. If each Senegalese person were to replace imported rice with local rice just once a week, then Senegal would save 13 billion francs per year. But the most serious effect, say the small-farmer organizations, is that it creates difficulties for family-scale agriculture, which is the basis for the stability of the family itself and an assurance for continued food production and custodianship of the land. The rural exodus and emigration to Western countries are clear signs of the problems of survival for these people.

As you can see, the implications of industrial-style agricultural policies directly involve us all; if the fervently desired Western interventions in these countries are of this type, then the flight from people’s communities of origin will be unstoppable. Once again we can see how people’s freedom to choose agricultural practices, fair trade and food sovereignty are the only acceptable principles for development policy. We have a long way to go and there are no shortcuts for these rural people forgotten by God.

Who can persuade the multinational chocolate companies that the price they pay for raw materials is ridiculously low compared to their advertising budgets? They know how to transform fermented cocoa beans into chocolate bars with a range of organoleptic qualities. The product is fit to enter attractive boutiques selling chocolate, where master chocolate makers personalize the final product. If we could have a spell cast by these temperature-controlled oases of pleasure, or take an overdose of Nutella chocolate spread with our eyes closed and be transported to a plantation in West Africa – where, according to a report of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture published at the end of last July, 300,000 children are victims of cruel unscrupulous traffickers, and work in conditions seriously

endangering their lives – would we realize just how much greed there is in the cocoa business?

The information reported in the March issue of our magazine, *Slow Ark*, clearly highlights how small cocoa farmers are only the first and weakest link in the long chain of intermediaries, exporters and transformers. The price is fixed in the London Commodities Exchange, following an economic rationale often totally disconnected from the producers and their countries. 80 percent of the chocolate market is controlled by just six multinational companies. If we were to take 100 cocoa producers at random, 70 of them would be African, 20 Asian 10 Latin American. Ninety of them would farm less than five hectares, 10 would be owners of large plantations. But the fact that bothers me most, and that highlights how alienated the small farmers are from the product, is that out of 100 producers, 75 would never have tasted a bar of chocolate.

It is true that we live in a complex world and complexity reserves many surprises, but if we do not develop the decency to be shocked and face up to these injustices, we will not be able to understand much of what is going on around us. But it is the fact that things are complex that motivates us to persist; I doubt that there are grand political and economic strategies able to sort out such a complex situation. For this reason, a small movement such as *Slow Food* is able to make a modest contribution by placing small farmers and their rural communities at the center of the issue of agriculture.

A rural community, with its customs, festivals, social relationships, agricultural practices and beliefs, is not only the object of anthropological analysis, but can also affect politics, economics and science in amazing and unexpected ways. Naples, which will be hosting the *Slow Food International Congress* from 6 to 9 November, with delegates from 46 countries, will be the venue where these issues will be investigated and discussed. This region was a crossroads of European winemaking, it is where ancient agro-pastoral civilizations left us cheeses such as the *Conciato Romano* (perhaps the oldest Italian cheese), where shrimps and anchovies bear the names of old fishermen's equipment, the *nassa* and *menaica*, where the *Sfusato Amalfitano* lemon, an ecotype derived from the *Femminiello commune* cultivar, can be found portrayed in frescoes on houses in Pompei, where vines in the municipality of Taurasi are still bearing fruit after 150 years. Well, it is appropriate to deliver a message of hope from these lands.

Our idea of getting different rural communities from around the world to meet will take shape in Naples; it is a mistake for anyone to think that the small-farming world is populated by quaint figures from folklore, dominated by inefficient and slow production methods, featuring people destined to live at the margins of history who are attached to oral traditions in a world of TV news and are dependent on a subsistence economy. That is an ethnocentric picture based on time and money, or rather, on the time which is money.

We who have adopted slowness as a homeopathic remedy are suspicious, as Franco Cassano says, of economists who are “theoreticians of *homo currens*, knowledgeable medics who never tire of repeating that for the good of our health it is necessary for us to run every moment of the day and every moment of our lives. Our health depends on how much we run and our cities are full of pathetic figures who are even happy to run in their free time. This breathless, purple-faced religion, this morning or evening sacrament, sweating in the shadow of skyscrapers, fills the pores of our minds and prevents us from seeing other lifestyles beckoning at the door. Why should this existence please everybody? Do we really believe that a game can be equally enjoyed in the same way by someone who loses every time they play and someone who wins every time? It is perfectly normal that the losers don't want to shake hands with those who have imposed the rules so they win every time.”

At a time when we are committed to discussing issues with other communities, I think we have to have a critical look at the hidden and aggressive side of our culture and, in doing so, refuse to accept ethnocentrism. I am certain that if we show mutual respect, exchange different experiences, interchange knowledge among different groups of small farmers, fishermen, artisans of good food, cooks and innkeepers, we will enrich the cultural heritage of what Edgard Morin, Emeritus Member of Slow Food, defines as our “community of terrestrial destiny.” So now, dear teachers and students of this distinguished institution, and friends who wished to share this happy moment in my life, if my arguments and ideas seem sensible and achievable, please support the good work of Slow Food and help swell the ranks of our association; you may consider there is a streak of utopian thinking in what I say, but I do not mind that, on the contrary.

It is time for me to draw to a close and for us to be thinking of our meal. As you know, utopias are good for our health when they are expressed in poetry and make you smile. Well, I have been talking about community and you will know that the good, wise Gargantua, son of Gargamagna and Gargamella, built the Abbey of Theleme and installed a community of men and women whose lives were not governed by laws, statutes or regulations, but by following their wishes and free will. They got up when they wanted, drank, ate, worked, and slept when they felt the need: nobody woke them, nobody made them eat, drink or do anything else. That was what Gargantua had determined.

There was just a single clause in their rules: Do as you will. To make it clear who could not form part of their community, the following inscription was placed over the main gate of Thélème:

*Enter not here, smug hypocrites, holy loons,  
Puffed-up imposters, bigoted baboons,  
Idiot wrynecks, scroungers and scoundrels,  
Dissembling varlets, beggarly mongrels,  
Fat chuff-cats, doltish gulls  
Slippered humbugs, contentious bulls,  
Mischief-makers and fomenters of lies,  
Be off elsewhere to sell your merchandise.*

*Your hideous deceits  
Would fill my fields and streets  
And with their falsity  
Would mar my felicity*

*Enter not here attorneys, barristers,  
Nor bridle-champing law-practitioners:  
Clerks, commissaries, scribes, nor pharisees,  
Wilful disturbers of the people's ease:  
Judges, destroyers, with an unjust breath,  
That, like dogs, worry honest men to death.  
We want not your demurrers, nor your pleas;  
So at the gibbet go and seek your fees.  
We are not for attendance or delays;  
But would with ease and quiet pass our days.*

*Lawsuits and wrangling  
Set us not jangling.  
We are here for pleasure,  
But may your leisure  
Be filled up with tangling  
Lawsuits and wrangling.*

*Enter not here miserly usurers,  
Gluttons for money, everlasting gatherers,  
Tricksters and swindlers, mean pettifoggers  
Hunchbacked, flat-nosed, you fill your  
coffers  
Would ne'ertheless add yet more to that  
hoard,  
Insatiable fiends and never overawed ,  
Go on scrawny dastards, pile away  
How much you pocket you won't say.*

*The body healthy and sound  
The heart happy without bound,  
Let here honor and friendship reign,  
And do not the value of praise disdain  
Joy's the better, tears are not,  
For laughter is man's proper lot.*

LIVE HAPPILY!