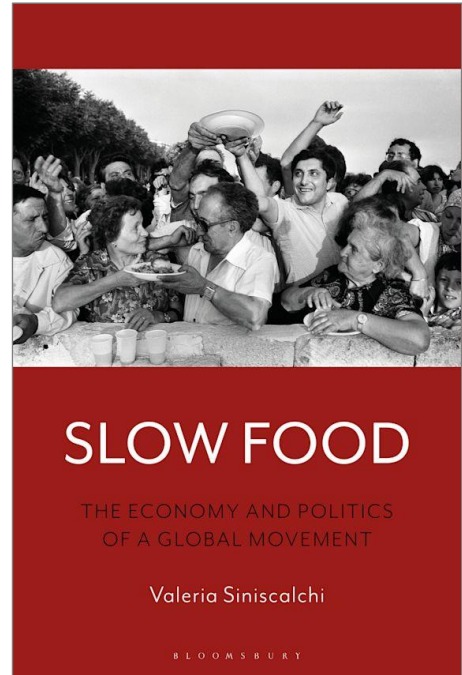


The *spia* who loved food

Book review by

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Review of *Slow Food: The Economy and Politics of a Global Movement*, by Valeria Siniscalchi. (2023). Published by Bloomsbury. Available as hardcover, paperback, Ebook (Epub, Mobi, and PDF); 256 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/slow-food-9781474282444/>



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In 2012, for the first time, two of Slow Food’s major events shared a single space and ticket: The Salone del Gusto, a large commercial food fair, and Terra Madre, a political conference that brings together a worldwide network of small farmers, food producers, activists, and scholars dedicated to biodiversity and “participatory democracy.” In the penultimate chapter of Valeria

Siniscalchi’s monograph *Slow Food: The Economy and Politics of a Global Movement*, she uses the relationship between these two simultaneous flagship events to explore a dichotomy that her entire book grapples with: is Slow Food more about “the market” or “the community”? “Competition” or “mutuality”? “Politics” or “economics” (p. 203)? Siniscalchi’s answer is that Slow Food, the international organization that encompasses an events team, a publishing house, a university, a national and international political structure, and more, is about all of the above. In the case of Salone del Gusto and Terra Madre, she argues that if at first these two events seem contradictory, they are actually “complementary spaces presenting ways to create new economic forms, to imagine a new

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economic order and to determine new food policies” (p. 204). Slow Food is thus hard to pin down, and Siniscalchi argues that anyone trying to do so misses the point: Slow Food contains “two visions with different approaches to the social reproduction of the movement” (p. 222) and the coexistence of these visions *is* the point. From the start, she is interested in exploring the “opacity of this object” (p. 1), and from her unique position of access, she is able to respect its unknowable quality while still bringing the inner dynamics to light.

The first chapter offers her method, an exploration of her positionality, and a brief theoretical discussion of how other scholars have dealt with Slow Food and what it means to study a food movement. The second tells the history of Slow Food, starting prior to the association’s founding with the proto-organization “Arcigola,” a leftist association of “gourmets dedicated to good wine and good food and to local culinary traditions” (pp. 21–22). This chapter importantly demonstrates the political origins of Slow Food and its founding members’ intensely ideological bent. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 approach the questions of internal functioning and power struggles as the organization has grown. Siniscalchi looks at the hierarchies within the headquarters in Bra, Italy, how Bra manages relationships with other regions of Italy, and how Slow Food Italy manages relations with international chapters such as Slow Food France. Chapter 7 offers a fascinating discourse analysis of the movement’s slogan “good clean and fair.” Chapter 8, perhaps the book’s most successful chapter, brings together a series of case studies that explore how Slow Food influences, protects, and shapes European cheese markets. Chapter 9 explores the way that Slow Food uses the concept of “taste” to define itself, creating opportunities for both inclusion and exclusion. Chapter 10 includes an interesting analysis of the restaurant guide produced by Slow Food and how its wine guide has struggled to manage commercial success while holding onto organizational principles. Chapter 11 outlines the evolution and purpose of Slow Food’s three major events: Salone del Gusto, Terra Madre, and the off-year Cheese, focusing on the tension between emphasizing lucrative sponsorships and more radical initiatives. Finally, the conclusion, “The Prag-

matic Utopia of Food Activism,” asks where the values of the organization exist today. Not surprisingly, her conclusion articulates that they are ever adapting.

Siniscalchi’s perspective is shaped by her unique position as “la spia” (the spy), an outsider hidden on the inside of this inscrutable organization. As a French and Italian speaker, who informally participated in Slow Food in France and Italy before beginning her official study, she was able to both observe—almost invisibly, without asking for translations or clarifications—and also play an active role when appropriate. For instance, she occasionally has written for Slow Food publications. By the time she began formally researching the headquarters in Italy, she had developed relationships with major and minor figures in the movement and had earned their trust. This position is acknowledged by the author and her interlocutors; at one point she cites the fact that “several of the movement leaders, including Carlo Petrini, president of Slow Food, told me that they felt I was the only one who has an overview of Slow Food, who knows all its mechanisms in the different offices and services” (p. 7). The story behind how she got her nickname (it was bestowed on her by Piero Sardo, president of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity) exposes her intimacy with the organization’s inner circle and the unique perspective that she possesses compared to other scholars. Her closeness to the central leaders of Slow Food shines through most clearly in moments where she refers to Carlo Petrini, founder of the movement, by his nickname “Carlin.” This proximity to the organization allows Siniscalchi to share a close account of the many arms of the Slow Food movement, making a unique and major contribution to the field of scholars dedicated to understanding Slow Food. However, at times this proximity may be a constraint, as it leaves her just short of criticizing the organization herself. She writes that she often held opinions that were “more radical than those of my contacts” (p. 9), but she put this aside in order to reveal the object of her study: how the organization worked. She is explicit that she did not aim to evaluate the coherence of the organization’s philosophy or actions, although at times it seems like this evaluation

would have strengthened the text. Throughout the book, Siniscalchi cites critiques articulated by other scholars, but often responds to them with the organization's party line. For instance, I would have liked to see her explore the political ramifications of inviting politicians from both the left-wing and right-wing parties of Italy to speak to the allegedly militant organization instead of hedging by implying that the capricious nature of Italian politics almost made these invitations irrelevant against the persistence of Slow Food. She cites scholar Adrian Peace's argument that the 2006 Terra Madre was "political theatre," but Siniscalchi herself does not build on the consequences of the organization's political agnosticism. She contends that Slow Food is important for politicians across the spectrum and therefore has power, but from political participation alone, it is already clear that Slow Food possesses power. The question, which would have been valuable to evaluate from Siniscalchi's proximate position, is what the organization does with its power. More could have been done to consider the consequences of Slow Food from the vantage of broader politics.

Another arena in which Siniscalchi seems too lenient with the organization is with her discussion of gender. Although she repeatedly refers to the absence of women in the early days, the paucity of women in leadership roles today and the numerous sexist comments that were jokingly thrown her way—at one point, one of her interviewees responded to her joke that maybe she could be president with, "That's impossible, you forget you're a woman!" (p. 118). Thus she fails to really grapple with gender in the organization. She acknowledges that the election of Vandana Shiva to the position of vice president is significant although largely symbolic, but I would have liked to see her truly interrogate whether Petrini's call for "indigenous people, peas-

ants, women and the elderly ... [to] be at the front line of the challenges" (p. 120) really represented a substantive indication that "the women who are vital to the daily functions of the association inside the territory [can now] ... think differently about the role of women within Slow Food" (p. 120).

As with any book, the text will mean different things to different readers. One wishing for a glimpse into the candle-lit osterie of Bra, where the leaders of Slow Food clink glasses and debate, will be thrilled. Carlo Petrini, Piero Sardo, and other famous Slow Food figures feature prominently, debating whether the organization should focus on its pleasure-oriented origins or turn a page into a visionary global future. Their conversations play out in cited speeches, correspondences, memos, and anecdotes that exist beside data from in-depth interviews with Slow Food actors up and down the organizational hierarchy. Readers looking to confirm their belief that Slow Food is too connected to big industry and established politicians across the Italian spectrum and lacks a singular mission will find evidence for their concern. Readers wanting to delve into the minute details of this both deeply Italian and global story should pick up this book.

When I turned the final page, I felt like I had been sitting for hours around a long table with dozens of loud, opinionated, dissenting voices with big plans for the world, emboldened by bottles of wine and platters of meticulously sourced food products. This book provides a rare glimpse into the Byzantine structures of this international organization and its evolution over time. I am looking forward to reading scholarship that builds on this work. Siniscalchi has shown us that slow food is many things; future research might use her argument to evaluate what Slow Food accomplishes. 