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the micropolitics of  
**slow living**

WENDY PARKINS AND GEOFFREY CRAIG

*Slow Living*

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In his 1987 book *Time Wars*, Jeremy Rifkin heralds the arrival of a new kind of politics. No longer oriented according to the traditional (spatial) metaphor of right vs. left, political positions will be increasingly defined by attitudes to time. At one end of the spectrum are temporal rationalists, who emphasise efficiency over sustainability in the name of promoting economic growth. At the other end are those who insist on the irreducibility of time, and who call for the 'resacralisation' of life, driven by the values of empathy and ecology. The fate of the planet hinges on the outcome of the growing conflict between these two temporal perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later the traditional poles of left and right are intact, but beginning to sway slightly in response to the currents of new global social movements. Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig's *Slow Living* offers a critical analysis of one such movement and its reverberations throughout contemporary social life. Theirs is, as far as I know, the first critical study of Slow Food and its many offshoots, which is somewhat odd given the overwhelming popular media attention the movement has received over the last decade or so. Rather than signalling a general recognition that this is a movement whose time has come, so to speak, the lack of critical attention may be due to academics' general squidginess about a movement that, in the words of its founder, claims 'taste' as a 'new moral imperative'.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than attempting to play down the association of Slow Food, and slow living more generally, with taste and pleasure, Parkins and

Craig focus their critical attention on this element of what they identify as a new and significant form of micropolitics. (14) The authors prefer this term, advanced by William E. Connolly, over Anthony Giddens's 'life politics' because of its capacity to convey the ethical—as well as the *macropolitical*—possibilities of a conscious approach to living in the 'global everyday'. (2) Slow living represents an attempt to articulate and to cultivate connections between a careful, 'slow,' attention to the ordinary activities of everyday life and the global networks that enable and define them. Sensual awareness and pleasure are not frivolous diversions from this practice but absolutely central to it.

Much of Parkins and Craig's impressively researched book focuses on Slow Food, a case study in, and arguably the inspiration for, the broader philosophy of slow living. Slow Food's beginnings can be traced to a small group of Italian journalists who, in the mid-eighties, began publishing a regular food and wine supplement in the left-wing daily *il manifesto*. They also organised events focused on the rich local heritage of wine-making and market gardening. By far the most colourful such event, the one generally identified with the movement's birth, was a 1989 demonstration against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant on the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. In explicit contrast to later, more strenuous demonstrations like the dismantling of an under-construction McDonald's that sent French farmer José Bové and five others to jail, this was an oddly gentle protest, featuring the giving of free bowls of penne to passers-by. Later that year, delegates from

fifteen countries came together at the Opéra Comique in Paris to form the International Slow Food Movement for the Defense of and the Right to Pleasure, based on a manifesto that stated, among other founding principles: "A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of the Fast Life". (Appendix 141)

Nearly twenty years later, with 80 000 members in over a hundred countries, Slow Food still features wine and food preparation and tasting workshops, organised through its more than 850 *convivia* (local chapters), and continues to publish periodicals and food and wine guides. It has also expanded its mandate to include more intensive educational initiatives, from school garden projects to a recently established university, which awards Masters Degrees in Gastronomical Science. The most significant innovation is the movement's gradual transformation from a gastronomic to an *eco-gastronomic* one (20), reflected in such initiatives as the Ark of Taste, a catalogue of endangered fruit and vegetables, animal species and food products that Slow Food International works to protect. In addition to nurturing networks between producers and consumers via markets and educational events, grassroots initiatives called *presidia* (Latin for 'garrison fortress') help producers directly, by funding infrastructure and by helping farmers to set up associations and to navigate bureaucracy around food regulation. The non-profit Slow Food Association for Biodiversity also sponsors annual awards for individuals and groups who work to preserve ecological diversity and traditional food cultures.

The combined effect of these initiatives is an increased focus on the global implications of individual food choices—enjoyment married to awareness and responsibility—as well as greater attention to the conditions (ecological and political) of food production. Clearly, Slow Food is ‘not just a food and wine club’. (18) Neither, however, does it fit under the rubric of traditional emancipatory politics, in its enthusiastic endorsement of commerce over conflict, its primary constituency of privileged Western consumers and its resolute focus on pleasure. Parkins and Craig are particularly acute in their analysis of Slow Food’s contradictions, which are emblematic of many of the new social movements spawned by globalisation. Chief among their features is a focus on the everyday, which is ‘no longer the background against which important public issues are considered [but] *itself* the issue.’ (8)

Parkins and Craig usefully contextualise their understanding of the everyday within a broad survey of how the concept has been mobilised in cultural studies, including charges by critics such as Rita Felski that the avant garde move to defamiliarise and resanctify select aspects of everyday life is really a kind of back-door elitism, that only ends up re-affirming the banality and triviality of real life domestic routines. *Slow Living* also takes up the common dismissal of concerns with everyday issues such as work/life balance as the preoccupation of the privileged. Noting that an increasing preoccupation with the management and planning of daily life is mandated by the circumstances of globalisation (the decline of traditional structures of affiliation, the flexibilisation of labour,

loss of economic security), they cite the argument advanced by Giddens and others that, far from being a frivolous or elitist concern, “access to means of self-actualization [has] become itself one of the dominant focuses of class division and the distribution of inequalities more generally”. (qtd 13) Those divisions and inequalities clearly inform the over-representation of the middle-class in Slow Food which, ‘with its attention to good food and wine ... may seem an obvious target for critiques of the political efficacy of a social movement based on supposedly bourgeois habits, tastes and values’. (35) While acknowledging that elitism remains a significant challenge for the movement (13), Parkins and Craig also cite critics such as Alberto Melucci and Paul Bagguley who caution against a reductive class-based analysis of new social movements, noting that the middle class, which also tends to dominate more traditional political organisations, brings with it both its (admittedly sometimes narrow) interests but also its social and economic resources for mobilising social change. (35)

Part of what makes Slow Food and slow living hard to classify politically is their oblique and in some ways contradictory approach to social change. Notwithstanding its deployment of traditional political forms like the manifesto (analysed by Parkins in an earlier essay, excerpted in *Slow Living*, [52–7]), Slow Food explicitly eschews Bovéesque confrontation; indeed its spirit would seem to be precisely antithetical to the urgency and vigour of revolution. However ‘slow’ does not equal ‘reactionary,’ as Parkins and Craig point out; neither does it

constitute a defensive or nostalgic retreat from the complexity of twenty-first century life. The movement calls rather for a commitment to live more consciously in the present, which entails if anything a more acute, more mindful inhabitation of that complexity.

In this respect it differs from movements such as Voluntary Simplicity, whose endorsement of simpler, less consumer-based lifestyles tend to be inflected with a critique of modernity. (3) A more pointed difference between the two movements revolves around the competing values of asceticism—a key aspect of Voluntary Simplicity—and pleasure. Of course the focus on pleasure—and, in the case of Slow Food, taste—opens the movement up to charges of conservatism of a different sort. Keeping in mind the nexus between education, taste and the cultivation of cultural capital noted by Pierre Bourdieu, Parkins and Craig acknowledge that ‘the word “taste”—especially when coupled with “education”—can never be an innocent term but bears the trace of class-based notions of value’. (27) However, they argue that the ‘taste’ advocated by Slow Food is akin less to conventional practices of cultivation (traditionally associated with cerebral rather than corporeal pleasure) than it is with appetite and the joys of the body—joys that themselves may be linked to inspiration and imagination. (Adam Phillips, qtd 27)

Joy remains hard to recuperate politically, however. Parkins and Craig concur with Petrini that the left suffers from an allergy to pleasure,<sup>3</sup> a condition inherited by critical theory via the Frankfurt School (95); however, they complicate any attempt to draw a necessary link

between progressive politics and pleasure avoidance, by highlighting comparable streaks of asceticism not just in Christianity, where we might expect to find it, but also in fascism. Austerity was a cardinal virtue for Mussolini, who cautioned against the social dangers of happiness. (qtd 151, n. 8) More specifically (and bizarrely), the Italian Futurist movement took aim not just at sensory enjoyment in general but, bizarrely, at the specific comforts of pasta, which were seen to inhibit ‘the virility and creativity of the body’. (93)

Having identified the anti-pasta element amongst fascists, Parkins and Craig do not set out to prove a converse connection between pasta and progressive politics. For one thing, they point out that meaning in slow culture lies not in specific foods or practices, but in the dynamic webs of social and ecological relations in which food, the getting, the making and the eating of it, are embedded. The more serious question is whether a lifestyle or micro-politics oriented around the recognition of those delicate connections and a commitment to nurture them can ever form the basis of large-scale social change. Here Parkins and Craig hedge their bets. As members of Slow Food, they clearly endorse its principles, with some reservations; however, as cultural critics they are necessarily reluctant to claim political purchase for individual lifestyle choices that still seem indissolubly wedded to economic and social privilege. The reality of inequality dogs the slow movement, as Parkins and Craig acknowledge, noting the potentially troubling gender implications of marrying ‘food’ and ‘tradition’ in an uncomplicatedly celebratory way,

(114–15) and harkening the danger of embracing a philosophy that risks re-affirming the aesthetic preferences of a particular, privileged group, and the unequal social arrangements that sustain them. (91) With respect to the problem of economic disparity, particularly as it plays out in North–South relations, they also resolutely reject any model of slow politics that would impose a uniform (slow) speed on everyone. While denying that this is an aim of Slow Food, they do acknowledge the potential for significant policy dilemmas arising from situations in which the producers whose traditional practices the organisation wishes to ‘save’ are actually keen to move on to less traditional and more profitable methods. ‘It remains an open question,’ they note, ‘whether producers will choose to continue with their “slow lifestyle” once they assume greater autonomy’. (128) The question of what holds more value here—producers’ autonomy or the ‘lifestyle’ goals of Slow Food—remains unanswered.

This unanswered question lies at the crux of the larger hypothesis presented by Jeremy Rifkin’s *Time Wars* and fleshed out more substantially in this book. Slow culture, inspired by Slow Food, may be the harbinger of a new political order defined around the ethics and ecology of time. It remains to be seen whether there will be room at the table for everyone.

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1. Jeremy Rifkin, *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987, pp. 228–43
  2. Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001, p. 71.
  3. Petrini, p. 10.