

Reflections on Carlo Petrini's Cape Town visit.

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On the 16th of August 2016, the president and founder of [Slow Food](#), [Carlo Petrini](#), visited Cape Town to give an address on the Slow Food movement and its initiatives around the globe. As a group of critical food politics and culture studies students and researchers, we attended the event. None of us really knew what to expect. I suspect that at the back of all our minds was the feeling that “slow food” would be presented as an indulgence of the North or at best, as a Northern initiative that we southerners should embrace – like so many other initiatives in today's North-South knowledge flows. But the event proved to be politically and culturally engaging and important.

First, the mere fact that it was held in Khayelitsha (and not the Cape Town Convention Centre or even some more prestigious venue) made it accessible to many who do not have access to these kinds of events. Several local organizations which collaborate or have shared interests with [Slow Food principles](#) were also present. The Slow Food Presidia, 10 000 Gardens in Africa and Slow Food Youth Network just to mention a few were some of the organisations that shared ideas with the audience. The event was interactive and it was evident from the audience and speakers that many organisations and people do not see the food issue in isolation, but in relation to intersecting relations of power, social justice, economic inequality and progressive efforts to challenge local and global injustices.

The event's emphasis on the agency of people at the local level was also evident in the attention paid to tasting and getting to know 'good, clean fair food' that was indigenous and local. Central to the event was also the cultural element which connect food, environment and human culture as well as preserving biodiversity and protecting the right to food sovereignty for all human beings. The above idea of 'good, clean fair food' is represented by the indigenous food below.



Some of the Local food at the event

Carlo Petrini is an extremely inspirational and enthusiastic speaker. Even the photograph below is indicative of his expressive nature.



Carlo Petrini

Although he spoke in Italian, the translator was equally good as he helped the audience to understand Petrini's passion about the movement, and most importantly, about the objectives of convincing people to find joy in eating original food or their own local food. He started with a brief history of the Slow Food International organization noting how the organization was formed in 1986 in Italy after a protest on the proposed location of a McDonald's at the Spanish Steps in Rome. The Slow Food organization was then formally instituted in 1989 in Paris, 200 years after the start of the French Revolution with its slogan being "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity". Slow Food "...was created to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us." The use of the phrase 'slow food' was a radical reaction to the emergence and expansion of fast food and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) which were a threat to the local and traditional foods.

In brief, Carlo Petrini raised a number of points on indigenous foods and how they are not being fully utilized or appreciated. These foods are being actively destroyed, to make us all dependent on agri-business - the commercial food industry that has put more importance on profit-making and capital accumulation. He draws on how on a global scale, farmers are outrageously exploited while the industry is earning real money. Distributors eat the biggest part of the cake. Hence, there is a need to rebalance this business practice and pay the right prices to the farmers. Farmers must be respected and the local economy must be respected as well. Carlo Petrini reminded us as South Africans and Africans at large that the land appropriation issue and ecological destruction are disastrous almost everywhere around the world; therefore, all progressives globally should be urged to take action and form local, regional and global solidarity networks in preserving the land for more healthy food that can feed the nations.

This point raised a lively discussion about the obstacles that local small-scale farmers and gardeners face in South Africa. Dr Yvette Abrahams, a feminist environmentalist

and small-scale farmer herself, observed that it was not just about access to land, but about the resources needed to make that land productive – following centuries of its misuse.

Petrini commented extremely critically on fast foods/junk food outlets (KFC, McDonalds etc.). He noted how genetically modified foods are some of the culprits destroying lives and that they are part of what can be termed ‘criminal food systems’. Petrini powerfully drew attention to the toxic effects of fast food – not only in terms of how it affects our bodies, but also in terms of how it reinforces a dehumanizing global capitalist society. To shed more light on this kind of destructive impact of certain food cultures he also mentioned the pressing issue of ‘food porn’.

‘Food porn’ – is made out of the emotionally overpowering food advertisements and cooking programmes on TV, magazines, newspapers and on the internet etc. In these, there is far too much advertising and glorification (food porn) of exotic foods. The result is to undermine the importance and awareness of traditional foods and, of course, our own ability and agency in creating healthy and tasty food. The constant messages that tell us what to eat and how to prepare food turn us into helpless consumers of others’ eating ideas, as well as food items and ingredients that we often have no knowledge of.

Petrini asserted that the idea of what “taste” means is culturally relative and people should not be influenced by the ‘food porn’ which is helping selling only culturally “prestigious” or unhealthy food. Petrini described his own adventures with exploring various cultures’ foods in different countries. Every country and community has its own food culture linked to particular traditions and cultural and ecological environments. The idea of certain cuisines and tastes being superior is an elitist one.

These food cultures and the beauty of traditional food are among our most precious heritages. Food allows for human creativity (especially women’s), for sharing and collective enjoyment. In short, and to us Petrini’s wonderful word, it can be the route to great joy. Petrini shared the floor with some presenters from South Africa who are working on related themes.



Carlo Petrini with some of the students, researchers and chef at the event

Slow Food: 10,000 Gardens in Africa project representatives also shared their ideas.

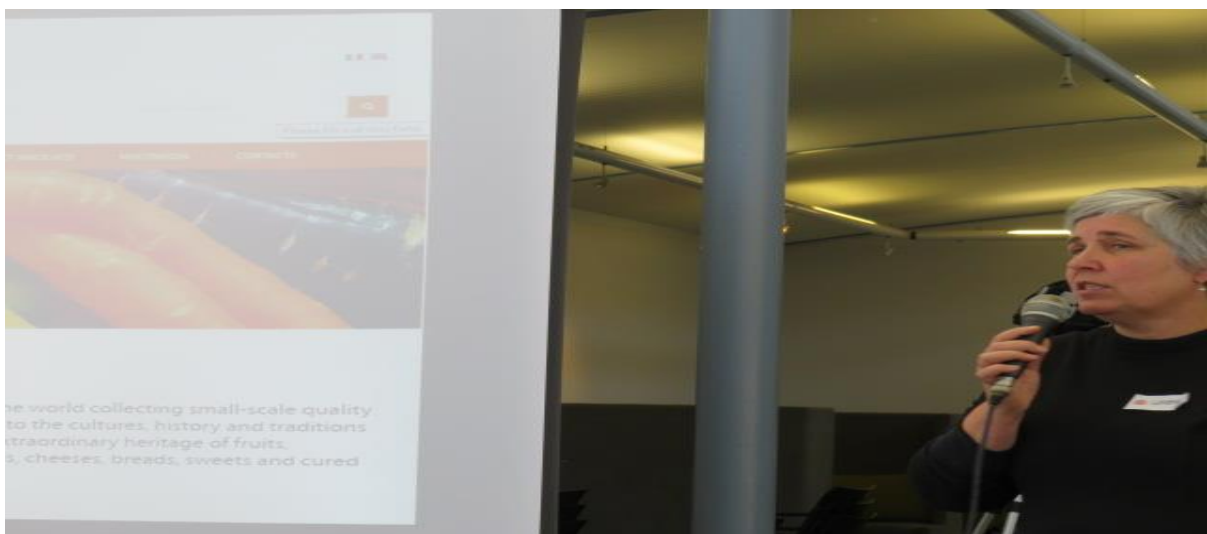
The objective of having 10,000 gardens in Africa is part of Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity in the global South. The presenters highlighted its focus on hygienic and just food gardens in schools and communities through empowering and enlightening the youths or young people (future leaders) about the significance of food biodiversity in connection to land and culture. It was interesting to learn that this project has the traditional interests preserving the local land and food in general. They drew on the importance of small-scale and household agriculture that allows people to eat healthy and affordably. In this way, the people are also able to safeguard and promote indigenous food in relation to food sovereignty and cultures and promote accessibility to good, clean and fair food for all Africans. Below are the photographs of the two presenters who shared the stage:



10,000 Gardens in Africa presenters

Slow Food: The Ark of Taste presentation.

The Ark of taste is part of the Slow Food Movement which embodies the revitalization of all Slow Food ventures that intent to safeguard biodiversity. Key things noted in the presentation are that food is linked to the history, culture, ethnic groups or tradition of a certain area/location; small-scale crop growing for consumption is very important and they encourage the cultivation and consumption of sustainable foods without undermining biodiversity. They also noted that they focus on rare traditional and wild foods and try to protect them to avoid extinction. Below is the photograph of The Ark of Taste presenter.



The Ark of Taste speaker



Local food at the Arc of Taste table

Impilo Market presentation.

The Impilo market presenter gave a background on reasons why they are embarking on the initiative. The problem statement presented noted that there is: 1. Complex problem set within a rigid food system dominated by large companies 2. The general lack of access to good, clean, fair food 3. Lack of markets in Cape Town which promote good, clean, fair food 4. Access constrained by economic and physical aspects 5. Specific constraints and opportunities in an urban township context (e.g. No space, no time etc.) Below is the photograph of the enthusiastic Impilo market presenter.



Impilo Market presenter

The main aims of the Impilo market are to trigger a culture of appreciation for healthy food, enable access to health food in urban townships, involve local people, encourage collaboration, creating platform for local talent in the form of gardening and culinary skills or education. Lastly, to encourage creativity in the growth, marketing and sale of locally produced and healthy food.



Prof Lewis (middle) consuming the local food at the event



Some of the local food present at the event.