Developing Radically-New Meanings through the Collaboration with Radical Circles

Slow Food as a Platform for Envisioning Innovative Meanings

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Abstract

Purpose

The importance and complexity of proposing radically-new meanings are well established in the literature. However, a limited number of contributions have analyzed how they can be developed. In this work, we analyze the development of radically-new meanings at the basis of the Slow Food movement to contribute to the topic.

Design approach

In order to better understand how social movements can propose radically-new meanings and how companies can take inspiration and build a competitive advantage by leveraging the proposed meanings, we deeply analyzed the genealogy of Slow Food, interpreted as an inspiring case study; we adopt a narrative approach.

Findings

The analysis of how Slow Food emerged and evolved into an international movement reveals an alternative way to develop innovative meanings in collaboration with groups of radicals. We identify three main phases in the evolution of innovative meanings: generation, institutionalization and development.

Practical implications

In terms of managerial implications we contribute highlighting the importance of a new type of collaborative innovation: the collaboration with radical circles and social movements in their early stage.

Social implications

From a societal point of view, if we acknowledge the importance of social movements in contesting and actively changing institutions, we can see the importance for policy makers to create loci and opportunities for the emergence of radical circles and their experimentations.

Originality

We propose that new meanings are frequently the result of small groups of individuals gathering in radical circles. The core attribute of such circles is group validation. The group supports the Slow Food leader in refining the meaning and confronting the dominant paradigm.

1. Introduction

The importance of proposing innovative meanings is well established in academia, and different studies have followed this line of inquiry in the past decade from a strategic perspective, e.g., blue ocean strategy (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005) and innovation perspectives, e.g., searching for new meanings (Verganti, 2009). Madsberg and Rasmussen (2014) explains how traditional problem-solving methods taught in business schools serve us well for some of the everyday challenges of business, but they tend to be ineffective with situations involving a high degree of uncertainty. At the heart of this model, they would argue, "Is the belief that business problems can be solved through objective and scientific analysis and that evidence and facts should prevail over opinions and preferences. … In the midst of human complexity, it is tempting to believe that businesses can obtain a clear picture of what is right and what is wrong, to take opinion, beliefs, feelings, doubt, and confusion out of the equation by focusing on the pure facts". Developing innovative meanings, especially when proposing a radically new conception or understanding of a reality, requires a different type of analysis and dynamics than the one proposed by the well-established and well-diffused problem-solving approach to innovation. Problem solving sees innovation as the result of cognitive work that combines individual knowledge, skills, behaviors and processes in the search for an optimal solution to a given problem (Simon, 1982; Clark, 1985), whereas in innovation of meaning, the outcome is not an optimal meaning but a different interpretation of what a product or service could mean (Verganti and Öberg 2013; Öberg, 2012). Differently than in the problem-solving approach, innovative meanings do not come only from exposing oneself to new, unknown fields. A meaning does not build on sudden ideas or creativity; its origin goes much deeper. Innovative meanings take shape and evolve within people and their reflections with others. It can be described as something that makes humans strive further (Verganti, 2009; Dell'Era and Verganti; 2010; Verganti and Dell'Era, 2014). Several studies have demonstrated that companies willing to do innovation of meaning need to step back from users and their products. These companies need to take a broader perspective and try to understand changes in society, culture and technology to propose innovative meanings – to later transform it into a specific product, retail experience or else like (Verganti, 2009). The so-called "interpreters" belong to either the world of cultural production (e.g., cultural organizations, artists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.) or to the world of technology (e.g., suppliers, designers, companies in other industries, retailers, suppliers, etc.) (Verganti, 2009). Collaboration with interpreters requires going through a detailed process of selection and briefing before the moment of sharing insights with a company. The paper focuses on a specific category of interpreters able to propose radically-new meanings and consequently to support companies in embedding them in new products and services (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

In a dramatically changing world in which not only are demographics being altered, but the impact of globalization is significant, the food industry is not an exception, and it must find its role within these revolutionary challenges. More specifically, having to feed 2 bn additional people by 2050, and with a world population peak expected at roughly 10 bn within the next century, poor food distribution appears to be critical (FT, 2013). In facing these challenges, companies are looking for new paradigms and researching innovative scenarios of consumption. As a consequence, a number of cultural and social movements have emerged in recent years that speak to different issues regarding food: locavores, the NC 10% Campaign, fair trade, Slow Food, etc. Both locavores and the NC 10% Campaign advocate locally farmed and produced foods and are committed to building sustainable local economies in North Carolina. Not surprisingly, the number of farmers markets rose from 1,755 in 1994 to 8,144 last year, a more than 350 percent increase, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture - USDA (Zacka, 2014). Fair trade labels certify that growers and producers of fair-trade products are receiving living wages for their labors and that the products are sustainably produced, which is also in the interests of the local community. Last but not least, Slow Food was formed in Italy in 1989, initially as a reaction against fast food. It has since evolved into a philosophy that embraces variety, especially in preserving our food heritage, and sustainability, as well as encouraging people to slow down and appreciate food. Now one of the world's most prominent food movements, it has more than 100,000 members in 132 countries and has been instrumental in raising awareness of disappearing food heritages.

In this paper we focus on the inspirational role played by Slow Food in the food industry. We explore how Slow Food proposed radically-new meanings and how food companies took inspiration and built a competitive advantage by leveraging the proposed meanings. In the first section, we review the main literature streams about innovation of meanings and social movements. In the second section, we describe our methods and introduce the Slow Food movement as the empirical setting. We then report the empirical results, and in the last section, we discuss our results, specifically, how a group of radicals crafts a meaning and then conveys it through a number of actions, moving from pure communication to nourishment.

2. Literature Background

As was previously mentioned, developing innovative meanings can require *ad hoc* approaches and practices. For this reason, we review the literature stream about innovation of meanings. Considering that the paper focuses on the inspirational role played by Slow Food, we analyze the main literature contributions about social movements.

2.1 Innovation of Meanings

The literature stream about innovation of meanings shows that some of the most intriguing and valuable events in innovation come from a process of interpretation and envisioning (Verganti and Öberg 2013; Öberg, 2012). Preliminary investigations of case studies on radical innovations of meanings indicate that the major challenge is not to solve problems or generate ideas but to recognize the value of these ideas by envisioning them in new contexts (Verganti and Dell'Era, 2014). The scholars who developed actor network theory (Latour, 1987; Bijker and Law, 1994) and on sense making in organizations (Weick, 1995), adopt a similar stance. Whereas they introduce a sociological dimension to innovation, their approach considers meanings to be contextual factors of innovation: something that explains how innovation (in technology or strategy) occurs, through interactions in society, in markets and within organizations. The meaningful dimension of innovation has been recognized and underlined by a number of scholars and theorists (Margolin and Buchanen, 1995; Cooper and Press, 1995; Petrowski 1996; Karjalainen, 2003; Friedman, 2003; Lloyd and Snelders, 2003; Bayazit, 2004; Norman, 2004; Redstrom, 2005). Of course, meanings cannot be imposed (they depend on the interaction between a customer and a product), but firms can design multiple elements to encounter and stimulate meaningful user interpretations, from the product's functionality to its design language (that is, the set of a product's signs, symbols and icons, of which style is just an instance and which includes materials and sensory features such as sounds, user interfaces, etc.). Therefore, meanings can be innovated (Verganti, 2009), and organizations can leverage them when generating their innovative meanings. The specific case of the innovation of meanings requires a distinct approach of collaboration with external networks for a number of reasons (Verganti, 2009; Dell'Era and Verganti; 2010; Verganti and Dell'Era, 2014). For example, customers play little role in anticipating possible radical changes in product meanings. The sociocultural context in which consumers are currently immersed guides them towards interpretations that are in line with what is happening today. Radical changes in meanings instead ask for radically new interpretations of what a product is meant for, and this is something that might be understood (and affected) only by looking at things from a broader perspective. The innovation of meanings is therefore driven by a firm's vision of possible breakthrough meanings that people could embrace. The firms that develop innovation of meanings must take a step back from the users and collaborate with different categories of "interpreters" to explore new scenarios in which people's lives can be improved: firms in other industries that target the same users, suppliers of new technologies, researchers, designers, and artists, among others, can provide complementary and synergistic knowledge. As argued by Verganti (2009), these interpreters must demonstrate specific characteristics to generate value and support companies in the identification and development of new scenarios. Interaction with interpreters does not consist of a plain, straightforward dialogue in which novel interpretations are presented, discussed individually, and then accepted as dominant or rejected; it is instead a noisy and confused debate in which several interpretations co-exist. From a managerial perspective, the collaboration with the interpreters aims at leveraging their ability to understand

and influence how people attribute meaning to things. This process can be organized in three main phases (Verganti, 2009):

- "Listening" entails accessing knowledge about new possible product meanings by interacting with interpreters. Firms that "listen" better develop privileged relationships with a distinguished group of key interpreters. These key interpreters are forward-looking researchers who are developing, often for their own purposes, unique visions and explorations about how meaning can evolve in the context of life (Verganti, 2009). Firms that realize innovation of meanings are capable of detecting, attracting, and interacting with key interpreters better than their competitors;

- "Interpreting" aims to develop a firm's unique value proposition. Interpretation is the internal process through which the knowledge accessed by interacting with interpreters is recombined and integrated with the firm's proprietary insights, technologies and assets. Interpretation implies the sharing of knowledge through exploratory experiments rather than extemporaneous creativity (Verganti, 2009);

- "Addressing" aims to prepare for groundbreaking proposals because as unexpected occurrences, innovations of meanings can sometimes confuse people initially. Firms therefore leverage the seductive power of interpreters. By having interpreters discuss and internalize a firm's novel vision, they will inevitably change the context in a way that will make the company's proposal more meaningful and attractive once people see it (Verganti, 2009). Companies see their network of interpreters not only as agents who support them in analyzing socio-cultural contexts and developing new scenarios but also as providing support during the product launch by creating the most appropriate communications media to push the product's meanings within the market (Dell'Era et al., 2008).

2.2 Social Movements and collaborative practices that support the generation of innovative meanings

Recent innovation theories are underlining the importance of collaborative strategies (Chesbrough, 2003; Christensen et al., 2005; Gassmann, 2006; Huston and Sakkab, 2006; Vanhaverbeke, 2006; West and Bogers, 2013). External sources of knowledge are particularly crucial in the case of radical innovations (Leifer et al., 2000; O'Connor and Ayers, 2005; Capaldo, 2007). Key sources of innovation are customers and in particular lead users and creative consumers (Von Hippel, 1986; Von Hippel, 2005; Berthon et al. 2007). Similar to radical technological innovations, which ask for profound changes in technological regimes (Latour, 1987; Callon, 1991; Bijker and Law, 1994; Geels, 2004), radical innovations of meaning ask for profound changes in the sociocultural regimes. In other words, radical innovations of meaning may be considered a manifestation of a "re-constructionist" (Kim and Mauborgne, 2004 and 2005) or "social-constructionist" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000) view of the market through which the market is not "given" a priori (such as in the structural perspective, e.g., in Porter, 1980) but is the result of an interaction between consumers and firms:

new radical meanings are therefore co-generated. Innovation of meanings is not an answer to but a dialogue with and a modification of the market.

Scholars have acknowledged the importance of social movements in contesting and actively changing institutions (Davis et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2000; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008). Social movements comprise 'collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities' (Tarrow, 1994, pp. 3–4). Some authors emphasize the importance of strategic action on the part of groups seeking to establish new fields (Beckert, 1999; Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004; Perkmann and Spicer, 2007). Existing studies clarify how movements create new fields by mobilizing scarce resources such as expertise, funding and technologies (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1987), taking advantage of political opportunities (e.g. Tilly, 1978; Kriesi, 1995; Meyer, 2004;) and mobilizing 'action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate activities and campaigns' (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614; Lounsbury, 2001; Creed, Scully and Austin, 2002; Lounsbury, Ventresca and Hirsch, 2003). Some authors have shown that social movements are coalitions of different actors and that theories of hegemony can describe how a dominant group forge relations with other groups in such a way that their particular interests are represented as the interests of the whole (Levy and Egan, 2003; Mumby, 1997; Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011).

The most interesting contributions on social movements from the perspective of our research are the ones that focused on the role of small groups of individuals in the development of social movements. Kadushin (1976), underlines the importance of networks and circles in the production of culture, defines the concept of circle in terms of boundaries, interactions and institutionalization. Furthermore he clarifies the differences between circles in science (elite invisible colleges) and intellectual or cultural circles. Farrell (2001), focusing on cultural sectors, introduces and explain the dynamics and the role of collaborative circles, such as the ones behind the French Impressionist painters, Picasso and the cubists, Freud and his early collaborators, Lewis, Tolkien and the Inklings.

3. Research Method

As previously mentioned, the food industry is facing crucial challenges, such as the expected population growth of 30 percent and waste (FT, 2013). As a consequence, companies that operate in this industry are looking for new paradigms and researching innovative scenarios of consumption. Several movements have emerged in the last decades such as molecular gastronomy (Svejenova *et al.*, 2007) or nouvelle cuisine (Rao *et al.*, 2003); Slow Food serves as a relevant platform for food companies that aim to reinvent themselves to propose innovative meanings. Slow Food is a global, grassroots movement that was founded in 1989 to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the increased pace of 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. Slow Food was started by Carlo Petrini and a group of activists in the 1980s with the initial aim of defending regional traditions, good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life. In over two decades, the movement has evolved to embrace a comprehensive approach to food that recognizes the strong connections between plate, planet, people, politics and culture. Slow Food envisions a world in which all people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, those who grow it and the planet. They believe that everyone should have access to *good, clean and fair food* (see also Appendix 1):

- *good*: quality, flavorsome and healthy food;
- *clean*: production that does not harm the environment;
- *fair*: accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for producers.

Since its beginnings, Slow Food has grown into a global movement involving millions of people in over 150 countries. Slow Food works around the world to protect food biodiversity, build links between producers and consumers, and raise awareness of some of the most pressing topics that affect our food system. These initiatives range from community activities organized by local convivia to larger projects, campaigns and events coordinated by Slow Food's national offices and international headquarters. For example, the *Presidia* project sustains quality production of products at risk of extinction, protects unique regions and ecosystems, recovers traditional processing methods, and safeguards native breeds and local plant varieties. Slow Food supports groups of small-scale producers to resolve their challenges, uniting isolated producers and connecting them with alternative markets that are more sensitive to their situations and appreciative of their quality products.

A number of companies, directly or indirectly, have shared in and further developed the radically-new meanings proposed by Slow Food, for instance:

- Eataly (www.eataly.net) is a high-end Italian food market/mall chain comprising a variety of restaurants, food and beverage stations, bakeries, and retail items. Eataly was founded by Oscar Farinetti, an entrepreneur who had previously been involved in the consumer electronics business. Farinetti wanted to develop a food store rooted in the quality of the food while offering a number of services such as restaurant management and training. Slow Food represented a fundamental inspiration for Eataly, even consulting with Farinetti in designing the Eataly concept. Farinetti and Petrini had been friends since adolescence because they are from nearby towns and they frequented the same political venues[1]. *"Petrini taught me to explore a different relationship with food. He was the first to make me understand that behind food, there's a patrimony of culture and values. I've simply tried to put these ideas into practice by creating the Eataly business model"[2]*.

- Grom (www.grom.it) is an Italian gelato (ice cream) chain that applies the common principle of the world's best restaurants to producing artisan gelato: buying the absolute highest-quality raw

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[1] Source: interview by the authors with Sebastiano Sardo (18th July 2014).
[2] Source: http://www.wuz.it/intervista-libro/2642/oscar-farinetti-eataly-mercante-utopie.html.

materials. Grom has pursued this goal since 2002 by rigorously researching the best products the agricultural world has to offer: only fresh fruit from the best consortium in Italy and from their own organic farm, Mura Mura®, and no added artificial colorings, aromas, preservatives or emulsifiers. According to Guido Martinetti, one of the two founders, the initial idea was inspired by Slow Food: *"During my lunch break, I was eating a sandwich while reading the newspaper, and my eyes came across a Carlin Petrini's article. It said that no one in Italy makes 'gelato like it used to be made.'"*[3]

In order to better understand how social movements can propose radically-new meanings and how companies can take inspiration and build a competitive advantage by leveraging the proposed meanings, we deeply analyzed the genealogy of Slow Food, interpreted as an inspiring case study.

Insert Figure 1 about here

More specifically we adopt a narrative approach: as underlined by Bruner (1986), the main aim of this paper is to endow experience with meaning. The story around Slow Food can inspire other companies about new modalities of interactions with social movements (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). At the same time investigating the genealogy of social movements, from its generation, passing through its institutionalization, to its development, can provide additional interpretative tools to those companies that would collaborate with them. From a research methodology point of view, because of the complex system of variables that characterize the problem, we use the case study approach because it allows us to develop a holistic and contextualized analysis. We feel that this method is properly suited for the exploratory nature of this research because it allows us to not only explore the phenomenon in its complexity but also identify the variables we deem critical. Based on Voss et al. (2002), we use a theory-building approach with the purpose of identifying patterns and linkages between multiple variables. Consequently, the case study we conducted is both exploratory and retrospective in character (Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). We used multiple data sources: semi-structured interviews with key players in the Slow Food story and archival data, including publications, websites and materials provided by informants (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

We conducted four interviews during spring and summer 2014. We returned to one interviewee (#1) to further discuss issues that we had not addressed initially but that emerged in the conversations with the later interviewees. The interviews were 90–120 minutes, two researchers were present and all were tape-recorded and transcribed. The authors conducted the content analysis of the interviews individually, coding

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[3] Source: www.grom.it/en/ (2nd November 2014).

the principal phases of the development of the radically-new meaning (Eisenhardt, 1989). The data analysis was based on the interview transcripts. Each interview was analyzed by at least two researchers. The transcripts were analyzed regarding factual elements that would allow for comparison between interviews along the three main phases of the genealogy (generation, institutionalization and development). The next step was the construction of a data matrix (interviews / phases). The transcripts and the matrix were analyzed iteratively and separately by the authors. We looked for and found regularities and patterns across interviews.

4. Empirical Results

In the next paragraphs, we describe the genealogy of Slow Food beginning from the early discussions between a group of friends in the 70s to the worldwide movement that now involves millions of people in 150 countries (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

4.1 First talks in the 70s and 80s between a group of friends who wanted to change the food industry

Between the 70s and the 80s, Italy experienced widespread social conflicts, unprecedented acts of terrorism and strong political ideologies and social activities. In this context, a small group of young men led by Carlo Petrini[4] in a little town called Bra (Piedmont, Italy) was organizing volunteering activities for the poor such as the *first experience of ecologic recycling a*nd a *school for the illiterate* (Slow Food Story, 2013).

> *"Without Petrini, nothing would have happened. He was the aggregator and the puller.*
> *He had the most important intuitions. Then, he had the chance to find people who were*
> *able to build his intuitions."*
>
> Silvio Barbero (Interview 17th July 2014)

In 1971, this group formed a political and cultural club, the *Circolo Leonardo Cocito* (named after an antifascist partisan). The club established the newspaper *In Campo Rosso* and the radio station *Bra Onde Rosse*. The radio station underwent two sequestrations because of its strong political reading of the ongoing situation. Even though Dario Fò, who had won the 1997 literature Nobel Prize, and others wrote a manifesto to defend the station, Bra Onde Rosse closed down in 1978. As highlighted by Piero Sardo, this event played a crucial role:

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[4] In the beginning, the group involved Petrini and two of his school friends: Azio Citi and Giovanni Ravinale. Shortly after, Piero Sardo, a young political activist, joined the group. Silvio Barbero and Firmino Buttignol joined in the early 80s.

> *"If the free radio had not been subject to the sequestrations, most likely the circle would have continued on in the politics direction and Slow Food would not have been born."*
> Piero Sardo (Slow Food Story, 2013)

The small group grew in numbers and moved towards more cultural activities, taking an interest in popular culture. They opened the cultural club and library *Cooperativa Libraria La Torre,* which still operates today. Even as the group slowly grew, its convivial essence remained untouched over time. This was aligned with Carlo Petrini's idea of needing to enjoy what you do: they had found what they liked doing, and they were strongly committed to it, carefully maintaining the initial, core essence of the entire movement:

> *"If you are not able to enjoy anymore, it is better if you leave what you are doing.*"
> Carlo Petrini (Slow Food Story, 2013)
> *"We talk about interesting topics and in a funny way, with self-criticism and irony. We have always talked with everyone. These things have helped enlarge the network."*
> Alberto Arossa (Interview 17th July 2014)

Meanwhile, disastrous environmental and agricultural developments were occurring. To raise production, more and more chemical fertilizers were used in agriculture, and food quality was worsening in pursuit of increased profits (e.g., selection processes, reduced biodiversity, mixing higher- and lower-quality products). From a cultural point of view, there were two contrasting trends. On one hand, because of the little attention that was paid to food quality, the pleasure of eating well was considered a catholic sin or something limited to a few rich people; in Italy in the 80s, there were gourmet clubs devoted to tasting luxury food and wines that were seen as exclusive intellectual circles similar to secret confraternities.

> *"The idea was to affirm the pleasure of eating quality food against the catholic assumption of something sinful or the idea that it is a right for only a few people."*
> Silvio Barbero (Interview 17th July 2014)

On the other hand, American culture was beginning to became very popular. Beginning in 1983, Italian television began broadcasting a very successful comedy show called "*Drive in*" as an elegy to fast food to eat while driving or watching a movie. In the following years, the diffusion of McDonald's restaurants was giving birth to an "*americanization*" of historical locals all over Italy, provoking a consumerism that was despised by the radical circle led by Petrini (Padovani, 2004).

In reaction to these trends, the group begun to dedicate itself to valorizing traditional foods and wines. They contributed to opening important osterias (traditional restaurants) that are still open today, such as the *Boccondivino* (*Godly bite*), and they created an association to promote Italian wines as more than an élite product (*Associazione degli Amici del Barolo*). They also organized guided tours to the historical farms in Piedmont and wrote reviews for a gastronomic journal (*La Gola* – The throat). These activities on 26th November 1983 led to the establishment of *Arci Gola*, the *Arci* Enogastronomic Association. *Arci Gola* was initially financed by Arci, the largest Italian promoter of social development based on antifascist values. The "*guys of Bra*" distinguished themselves through their support for food interests rather than workers' rights and interests as other movements focused on (Padovani, 2004).

> "We decided to take part in Arci because we thought it could become a vehicle for us."
> Silvio Barbero (Interview 17th July 2014)

4.2 The birth of Slow Food in the late 80s

Environmental and agricultural news grew increasingly worrying. First, the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986 spread a radioactive cloud across Europe, provoking a dramatic decrease in vegetable consumption and increasing suspicions about the quality of the milk and meat that came from the East. Second, other tragedies such as *mad cow disease* occurred that proved the inadequacy of European control over food quality. In Italy, pesticides led to the poisoning of the aquifer, forcing the Italian National Health Service to forbid the use of the water in the north and the center of Italy. Finally, on 20th March 1986, the first Italian McDonald's restaurant was opened in Rome with the purpose of serving a full meal in less than one minute. It was the largest McDonald's in the world, with the giant "M"—the restaurant's logo—affixed to an ancient building in Rome's Piazza di Spagna. This opening provoked general disagreement among politicians, architects and intellectuals; they defined it as "*a bomb in the city center*" and attempted in vain to convince authorities to move it.

> "In 1989, McDonald's opened a restaurant in a central square of Rome, provoking the first reaction to fast food. From that moment arose the idea of a movement against fast food also in a literal way."
> Silvio Barbero (Interview 17th July 2014)

In July 1986, the group decided to transform *Arci Gola* into an association that was independent from the Arci network called *ArciGola*, with Carlo Petrini as president. The birth of what would become the Slow Food Association was partly in reaction to a specific fact: That year, many producers were found guilty of selling

wines diluted with methanol, and one such incident caused the deaths of 23 people in Narzolé, a town close to Bra.

> *"We asked to Folco Portinari* (journalist and Arci member) *to write a manifesto, and he proposed to us a text showing a great vision. We had already had the idea to create a 'mass association,' not a close club. The novelty was to deliver a gastronomic culture to a larger public."*
> Silvio Barbero (Interview 17th July 2014)

One of the first projects was the *Gambero Rosso* guide to restaurants and food. Born as an insert for the left-wing newspaper *Manifesto*, it quickly became an independent company that still is one of the most important producers of food and wine guides in Italy. Similarly, Petrini wrote a column for a travel and leisure insert in *L'Unità*, the other main left-wing Italian newspaper. These publications contributed to spreading the Slow Food philosophy and led to the formation of two hundred local *convivia*, local Slow Food associations. According to Bonilli and Petrini (2014), *"It represented a "cultural revolution"; for the first time, it was acknowledged that the working class could also experience gastronomic pleasures."*

On 3rd November 1987, on the first page of *Gambero Rosso*, the *Slow Food Manifesto* was published. The manifesto was subtitled "*Movimento Internazionale per la Tutela e il Diritto al Piacere*" (International Movement to Protect the Right to Pleasure) to express the desire to grow abroad. The manifesto condemned industrial culture, finding that machines had reduced homo sapiens to a dying species:

> "S*low food is eating slowly and good against the fast food ideology that thinks that fast is the first value of life. […] While we ate and drank in our osteria, we had the idea to dam that 'barbaric invasion' of fast food with slow food as a defense line."*
> Folco Portinari (Slow Food Story, 2013)

Piero Sardo affirms that "*something was missing because to realize a revolution, the involvement of one country was not enough*" (Slow Food Story, 2013). However, the decision to internationalize created among the circle a strong debate because for some it meant leaving the left political front. The moment "*to present the Slow Food movement to the world"* was organized in the form of an event with thirty simultaneous conferences all over the world on 10th November 1989. Contributions came from intellectuals, politicians and artists. The *New York Times* wrote "*A faintly amused answer to fast food*", a Japanese television station came to Bra and the French journal *Le Monde* also talked about the slowness movement. At the Theatre Opera Comique in Paris on 10th December 1989, the international movement was founded with 400 associates from 18 different countries. A new manifesto was written, presenting the concepts of the first version in a synthetic form. It emphasized the concept of the folly of fast-paced life and an elegy for "*an adequate portion*

of pleasures". It advocated the need to defend local culinary richness against fast food's flattening. The association was renamed *ArciGola Slow Food* to underline its international ambition (see Figure 4).

> *"Slow Food works for the protection of the pleasure right, for respect for human life rhythms and*
> *for a harmonic relationship between men and nature"*
> Slow Food statute

Insert Figure 4 about here

4.3 The growing path described by Slow Food in the 90s and 00s

As Carlo Petrini writes in his book *Cibo e Libertà* (2013), beyond the food quality defense, Slow Food had to undertake new tasks to preserve biodiversity and safeguard products and the territories. Petrini asserts that a gastronome who consumes local products cannot be insensitive to environmental questions and economic problems:

> *"In those years, if you discussed the environment, everybody related to WWF activities. We tried*
> *to say that food does not exist just in a dish but it has a long story of care for and awareness of*
> *political, economic and environmental questions."*
> Alberto Arossa (Interview 17th July 2014)

In 2005, Carlo Petrini and the journalist Carlo Bogliotti wrote a book to promulgate the new principles of eco-gastronomy, and they looked for a title to give more evidence of the global Slow Food philosophy. The chosen title was *Good, Clean and Fair*. *Good* refers to the quality and flavor of foods, *clean* to environmentally friendly production methods and *fair* to dignity and fair pay for producers and accessible prices for consumers. These three words soon became the concise slogan of Slow Food.

Slow Food Italia grew significantly, including forming two limited liability companies: *Slow Food Promotion* (conferences and events), with 45 fixed employees, and *Slow Food Editor* (publishing), with 30 fixed employees and more than 200 collaborators. Furthermore, the local network developed into 6,500 *convivia*. Currently there are more than 400 *Slow Food Presidia* around the world (245 in Italy and 193 abroad). The Italian Slow Food Presidia involve more than 1,600 small-scale producers: fishers, butchers, shepherds, cheese makers, bakers and pastry chefs.

In the international operative structure, the organization now includes the *Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity*, the *University of Gastronomic Sciences (2004),* the *Terra Madre* network (international network of producers) and the *Mercati della Terra* (farm markets). The University of Gastronomic Science (UNISG) came to being in 2004 in Pollenzo (Italy), becoming the first university of its type. It "offer[s] a holistic

approach to food studies" that "combines humanities and sciences with sensory training and first-hand experience of artisanal and industrial food production with study trips around the world"[5]. It is an international research and education center for those who are working on renewing farming methods, protecting biodiversity, and building an organic relationship between gastronomy and agricultural science. It promotes a new professional figure—the gastronome—who is skilled in producing, distributing, promoting, and communicating about high-quality foods. To date, more than 1000 students have studied or are studying at UNISG[6].

The worldwide *Terra Madre* network is working to create an alternative model of food production and consumption. The biannual Terra Madre world conferences are intended to focus on topics such as developing organic foods, sustainability, water rights, and the impact of globalization on traditional food cultures. Launched by Slow Food in 2004, this global project unites food communities from 160 countries that share a vision for food production rooted in local economies and with respect for the environment, traditional knowledge, biological diversity and taste[7].

In addition to these internal Slow Food initiatives, as noted in the methodology section, many companies based their development on the new meaning proposed by Slow Food, including Eataly and Grom (previously described), Rosso Pomodoro (a chain of pizzerias), Obicà (a chain of mozzarella bars), Micibo (a start-up focused on farm markets), and others. Today, Eataly is "valued more than 1,2 billion and is growing 33% every year"[8]. It has restaurants and shops all over the world and is going to be quoted on a major stock exchange. Rosso Pomodoro has 86 restaurants worldwide and changes its menus four times a year according to seasonal changes in produce. Obicà has restaurants worldwide that promote buffalo mozzarella. Finally, and also attributable to Slow Food, cooking has become "*fashionable*" (Padovani, 2004). Food has become an exhibition subject, and some chefs have become famous showmen.

> "*When we came back from Paris, we understood that we had to consolidate our profile and to really build an international movement.*"
> Carlo Petrini (SlowFood story, 2013)

5. Discussion

The analysis of how Slow Food emerged and evolved into an international movement reveals an alternative way to develop innovative meanings in collaboration with groups of radicals. In this section, we describe the concept of radical circles, and we discuss the key findings about the evolution of the innovative meaning.

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[5] Source: www.slowfood.com (22nd November 2014).
[6] Source: www.unisg.it (22nd November 2014)
[7] Source: www.slowfood.com (22nd November 2014).
[8] Oscar Farinetti interview: "Eataly? Vale 1,2 miliardi di euro," Corriere della Sera, 19 November 2014

5.1 The concept of radical circles

As was highlighted in the previous section, the essence of the emergence of Slow Food does not lie in the work of a single genius but rather in the collective effort of four friends. Together, they began to explore new avenues for the territory in general and food in particular, in clear contrast to the prevailing dominant assumptions in the industry. In this radical circle we have seen how the eagerness towards proposing new visions started with a feeling of discomfort or malaise in regards to the reality surrounding few people that were not directly operating in the food industry. This initial trigger was very personal and individual. Being a closed collective is the distinctive characteristic of the circle, and it is this fact what makes its members be radical and dare to try out things. In the radical circle none of the members is forced to be part (i.e., participation is voluntary). This means that what makes these people get together and form the circle is their willingness to cure the malaise, and not any external or outside reward, such as money or grades. The motivation is intrinsic to the point that they start "fighting" with the villain, interpreted as one of the symbols of the malaise. By challenging one another, these four people came to develop a new, shared meaning that guided their work. The circle itself acts as a protected laboratory where its members feel encouraged to take their thoughts forward and draft a new vision. The work is based on criticism and exploration.

As such, Slow Food exemplifies the concept of the radical circle. The core attribute of these circles is group validation. When working alone, an individual may be tempted to attempt something new or even forbidden by authorities in his field, but alone, the person often does not follow through on the impulse (Farrell, 2001). Instead, when the impulse is shared with and validated by others, it is more likely to be carried through to fruition, as happened with Slow Food. Note that by definition, a circle is not open, and this also applies to the case of Slow Food; despite the initial closeness, the four friends soon began *"to think about an association that would address the culture of food pleasure and target mass society. The transition from a closed club to a mass association was in our mind since the beginning"*[9].

5.2 The evolution of the radically-new meaning

These groups of radicals typically explore new avenues without having a precise objective in mind but are, rather, willing to propose a vision (Farrell, 2001). The criticism that rules in the radical circle helps its members to first understand their own assumptions, their own truths, to later challenge them and try to open new avenues. Moreover, this critical interchange happens through experimentation, meaning circle members try things out (i.e., real action happens). And even more importantly, reflecting upon the experiment is what allows them to take the step forward – therefore, experiments should always be followed by reflective critical

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[9] Source: interview developed by authors with Silvio Barbero (17th July 2014).

discussions. In analyzing the Slow Food case study, we have identified three main phases: generation, institutionalization and development (see Figure 5).

Insert Figure 5 about here

Generation of the Radically-New Meaning

Radically-new meanings are generated within socioeconomic contexts that evolve and change over time but in which, despite the changes, there is a main paradigm that determines the widely accepted rules or logics of how things should or best work in a given setting (De Bono, 2010). In the early stages of a radical circle, being aware of these dominant rules is crucial, and actors come to leverage the rules to begin drafting their meanings. During the generation phase we have seen how spotting the villain is the first action that helps to open a new path, to see the "new". By understanding his believes you start to slowly comprehend your thoughts. Then, thanks to the unequivocal support of circle members these thoughts start to get more and more clear, up until the moment in which the inner force of the collective feels the need to speak out loud and make a public statement; i.e., to manifest its believes. This public manifestation is indeed what marks the start of the institutionalization phase; it is the moment in which they voluntarily decide to break the protective membrane that they had built in the past.

Furthermore, it is only when you identify a concrete authority whom you oppose and would like to act against, a villain, that you are able to begin exploring a divergent path. Fast food represented the *dominant paradigm* in the 80s and McDonalds, the villain of Slow Food: *"In the second half of the 80s, McDonald's opened its first shop in Italy. This event convinced us to develop a movement that could counteract the values proposed by the fast food movement"[10].* Together with the villain, having alternative paradigms rooted in values that also contrast with the dominant logics and that are slowly developed in niches but that will not disrupt the market could positively influence the group's thinking (Geels and Schot, 2007).

A few characteristics of this group of four radicals are worth highlighting: *open-mindedness*, having *shared roots* and being *friends* coupled with the guidance of a *charismatic leader*. The first attribute was widely discussed by Ennis (1991) as a requirement for being critical, which aligns with the radicalness of the meanings these circles propose. The critical attitude shown by the circles goes beyond finding fault and being negative. It implies not taking things for granted, not just accepting the situation as it appears or is portrayed but questioning and evaluating claims before deciding or acting (Mingers, 2000). In addition to open-mindedness, both the shared roots and the friendly relations proved to be relevant to the Slow Food group's healthy dynamics. As highlighted by Silvio Barbero, *"The story comes from politics. Part of the group that met Carlo again was actually born in the 60s within the extra-parliamentary movements."*[11] This reinforces the

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[10] Source: interview developed by authors with Silvio Barbero (17th July 2014).
[11] Source: interview developed by authors with Silvio Barbero (17th July 2014).

study developed by Farrell (2001) in which he concluded that many creative people do their best work when collaborating with likeminded friends. Moreover, when exploring radically new paths, leadership is more important than ever. The research has highlighted the crucial role played by the charismatic leader: *"Without Petrini, nothing would have happened. [...] He had the most important intuitions."*[12]

Institutionalization of the Radically-New Meaning

Despite dismantling or not, sharing the vision with the society is simply the first step in the public life of the radical circle. It requires bravery and determinacy, as well as an action plan to make sure there is a follow up and the story does not simply end with this public announcement. In order words, once the vision has been institutionalized it is time to consolidate that vision. As this case highlights, the tipping point between the generation and institutionalization phases could be a disturbing event (e.g., the wine-methanol crisis of 1986). This trigger is similar to the concept of *specific shock* that was introduced by Geels and Schot (2007) to describe the different types of environmental change or to the 'jolts and crises' highlighted by organization theorists when naming the different types of field-level conditions that enable institutional change (Battilana et al, 2009). According to Farrell (2001), when circles evolve, the desire to establish a self-conscious group identity and make an official statement of who they are and what they aspire to achieve arises. The *manifesto* is the document that often symbolizes the crowning. It is the public declaration of the group's intentions, motives, or views.

Development of the Radically-New Meaning

Radical circles could be considered one category of change agent because they initiate and implement divergent changes. According to the change management literature, change agents can undertake particular activities to support the implementation of change projects (Kotter, 1995; Rogers, 1962) (for reviews on types of activities, see Battilana *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that the actions following the meaning institutionalization are also manifold for radical circles. According to our empirical results, the radical circle (i.e., Slow Food) is a valuable platform for envisioning innovative meanings (i.e., *"[a] concept of food that is defined by three interconnected principles: good, clean and fair"*[13]). Developing the innovative meaning requires specific activities to allow its implementation in concrete innovations. As was previously mentioned, the meaning proposed by Slow Food significantly influenced a number of initiatives in the food industry. In addition to the many local associations and small-scale producers who are directly involved, Slow Food has been the platform of values that inspired successful companies such as Eataly, Grom, Rosso Pomodoro, Obicà, etc. Slow Food was able to develop its innovative meaning through five specific activities:

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[12] Source: interview developed by authors with Silvio Barbero (17th July 2014).
[13] Source: www.slowfood.com (20th November 2014).

- *Communicating the Radically-New Meaning.* The first activity refers to the mere action of expressing thoughts, feelings, or information. As highlighted by Alberto Arossa, *"In the early 90s, Slow Food was conducting a number of activities, and it became necessary to establish a publishing house that was willing to promulgate something"*[14]. In 1989, Slow Food Editore was founded, and, as Silvio Barbero[15] highlighted, it had an *"instrumental role"* in communicating the pillars of the movement;

- *Explaining the Radically-New Meaning.* Going one step beyond communication, that is, just sharing thoughts or information, a radical circle can also have a specific target in mind and the willingness to impart knowledge to the target. In the case of Slow Food, the University of Gastronomic Sciences exemplifies this activity. Founded in 2004, its goal is to create a new professional figure—the gastronome—who is skilled in producing, distributing, promoting, and communicating about high-quality foods. To date, more than 1,000 students have studied or are studying at UNISG[16]. Explaining the radically-new meaning could therefore be valuable for radical circles to ensure that successors and the university have the "incumbent room" to work on that legacy (Geels and Schot, 2007). In other words, this category of platform can enable the emergence of visionary spill-overs;

- *Embodying the Radically-New Meaning.* Giving concrete form to the meaning is another project that radical circles can work on in the development phase. The aim here is to create a mechanism that will help to incorporate the meaning into specific realities. Slow Food managed to create such a mechanism—the Presidia—in 1999, a decade after its institutionalization. The *Presidia* project can be considered a platform for visionary Slow Food spin-offs;

- *Transferring the Radically-New Meaning.* The act of transferring the new interpretation crafted by the radical circle to another agent (e.g., a company) could be the equivalent of consultancy work. Before moving into this type of work, the radical circle must have matured. It was in 2003 that Oscar Farinetti contacted Slow Food, and together they began to work on the Eataly project. Slow Food put together *"a team of four people to virtually create what Farinetti had in mind"*[17];

- *Nurturing the Radically-New Meaning.* Last but not least, the radical circle can get off the stage and be the audience of the play. The aim here is to update and nurture the meaning. To fulfill this objective, Slow Food launched the *Terra Madre* project in 2004. As Sebastiano Sardo noted, *"this food community—Terra Madre—helped us understand what we had to do next"*[18]. Having Terra Madre become the cornerstone of what Slow Food is today shows that nurturing is as relevant as communicating, teaching, embodying and transferring.

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[14] Source: interview by authors with Alberto Arossa (17th July 2014).
[15] Source: interview by authors with Silvio Barbero (17th July 2014).
[16] Source: http://www.unisg.it (21st November 2014).
[17] Source: interview by authors with Sebastiano Sardo (17th July 2014).
[18] Source: interview by authors with Sebastiano Sardo (17th July 2014).

6. Conclusions

The importance of proposing innovative meanings is well established in academia, and different studies have followed this line of inquiry in the past decade from a strategic perspective, e.g., blue ocean strategy (Chan Kim and Mauborgne, 2005) and innovation perspectives, e.g., the search for new meanings (Verganti, 2009). The need for a clear meaning is becoming even more relevant in a radically changing world in which not only are demographics being altered, but the impact of globalization is significant. The food industry is no exception, and it must find its role within these revolutionary challenges. Since its foundation in 1989, Slow Food has aimed at preventing the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteracting the rise of fast-paced life and combating people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us. A number of companies, directly or indirectly, have shared and further developed the innovative meaning proposed by Slow Food. For this reason, we were interested in analyzing the nature and the evolution of this meaning. The emergence of Slow Food does not rest in the work of a single genius but rather in the collective effort of four friends. These four people began to develop a new, shared meaning that guided their work. As such, Slow Food exemplifies the concept of the radical circle. The core attribute of these circles is group validation. When working alone, an individual may be tempted to attempt something new or even forbidden by authorities in his field but alone, the person often does not follow through on the impulse (Farrell, 2001). Instead, when the impulse is shared with and validated by others, it is more likely to be carried through to fruition.

The Slow Food case study highlights three main phases in the evolution of the innovative meaning: generation, institutionalization and development. The early stages are fundamental for identifying the concrete authority that the radical circle opposes and would like to act against. Identifying the *dominant paradigm* allows for drafting and shaping the new one. Looking at the Slow Food case study, a few characteristics link the four people who constitute the radical circle: *open-mindedness*, *shared roots*, *friendship* and the presence of a *charismatic leader*. Similar to the concept of *specific shock* that was introduced by Geels and Schot (2007), the tipping point between the generation and the institutionalization phases could be a disturbing event. According to Farrell (2001), when circles evolve, the desire to establish a self-conscious group identity and make an official statement (*manifesto*) of who they are and what they aspire to achieve arises.

These results have important implications for practice and society. In particular, from a societal point of view, if we acknowledge, as many authors do, the importance of social movements in contesting and actively changing institutions (Davis et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2000; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008), we can see the importance for policy makers to create loci and opportunities for the emergence of radical circles and their experimentations. Social movements research, that has normally focused on big groups dynamics and the role of charismatic leaders, could benefit from a focus also on these small groups of radicals. In terms of

managerial research and literature we have contributed highlighting the importance of a new type of collaborative innovation (Chesbrough, 2003): the collaboration with radical circles and social movements in their early stage. Similarly we have contributed to the research on innovation of meanings highlighting the potential of interactions and dialogue with radical circles and social movements. According to our empirical results, the radical circle is a valuable platform for envisioning innovative meanings. Developing radically-new meanings requires specific activities to allow its implementation in concrete innovations: communicating, explaining, embodying, transferring, and nurturing.

Given the limits of our work, and in particular the focus only on one case study in only one sector, further research is needed on one hand to understand the generalizability of our observations and on the other to deepen the specific mechanisms through which the value generated by the radical circles can be captured by firms and society in general trough the development of successful social movements. Considering the explorative nature of this research, future studies can verify whether these results can be generalized to other industries (e.g., the industrial design industry in Memphis or the software industry's Free Software Foundation), how radical circles evolve into successful movements, what are the mechanisms through which firms can identify the radical circles and evaluate them, how firms and public institutions can support the radical circles and collaborate with them to develop, absorb and transform innovative meanings, which firms' internal resources and organizational structures have to be developed to better interact with these peculiar generators and champions of new meanings.

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Appendix 1: Slow Food Manifesto[19]

Born and nurtured under the sign of industrialization, this century first invented the machine and then modelled its lifestyle after it. Speed became our shackles. We fell prey to the same virus: 'the fast life' that fractures our customs and assails us even in our own homes, forcing us to ingest "fast- food".

Homo sapiens must regain wisdom and liberate itself from the 'velocity' that is propelling it on the road to extinction. Let us defend ourselves against the universal madness of 'the fast life' with tranquil material pleasure. Against those - or, rather, the vast majority - who confuse efficiency with frenzy, we propose the vaccine of an adequate portion of sensual gourmandise pleasures, to be taken with slow and prolonged enjoyment.

Appropriately, we will start in the kitchen, with Slow Food. To escape the tediousness of "fast-food", let us rediscover the rich varieties and aromas of local cuisines.
In the name of productivity, the 'fast life' has changed our lifestyle and now threatens our environment and our land (and city) scapes. Slow Food is the alternative, the avant-garde's riposte.

Real culture is here to be found. First of all, we can begin by cultivating taste, rather than impoverishing it, by stimulating progress, by encouraging international exchange programs, by endorsing worthwhile projects, by advocating historical food culture and by defending old-fashioned food traditions.

Slow Food assures us of a better quality lifestyle. With a snail purposely chosen as its patron and symbol, it is an idea and a way of life that needs much sure but steady support.

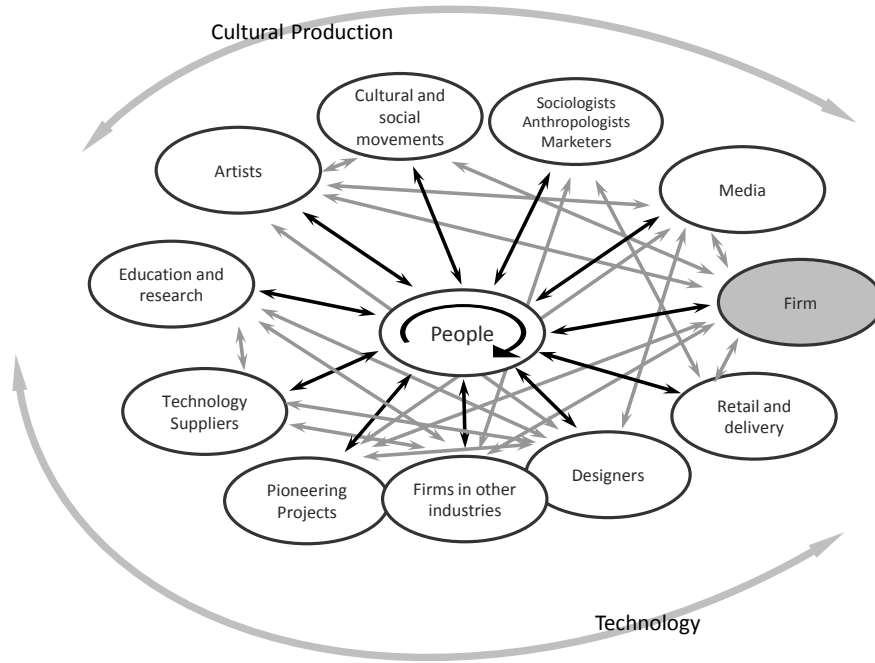[19] Source: www.slowfood.com (02nd November 2014).

Figures

Figure 1: The interpreters that enable the innovation of meanings (Adapted from: Verganti 2009)
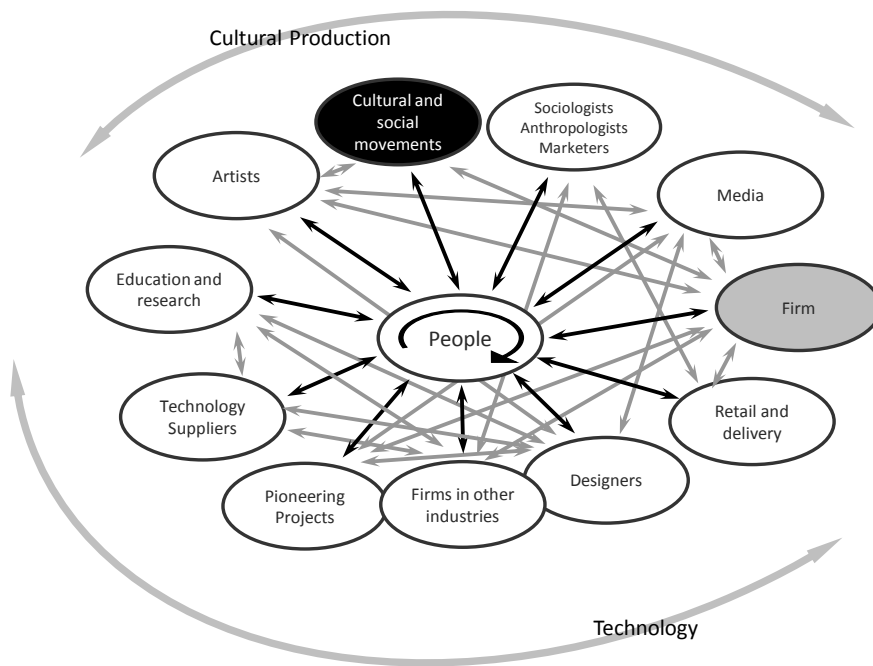
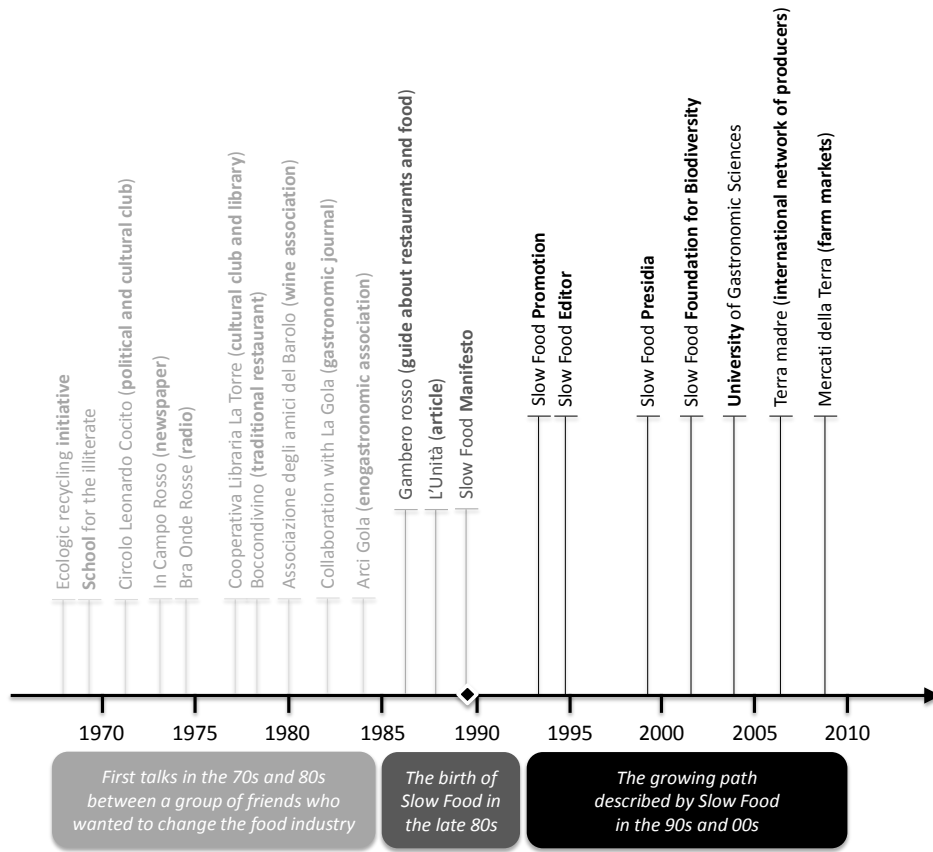**Figure 2: Focus on the contribution provided by Cultural and Social Movements (Adapted from: Verganti 2009)**
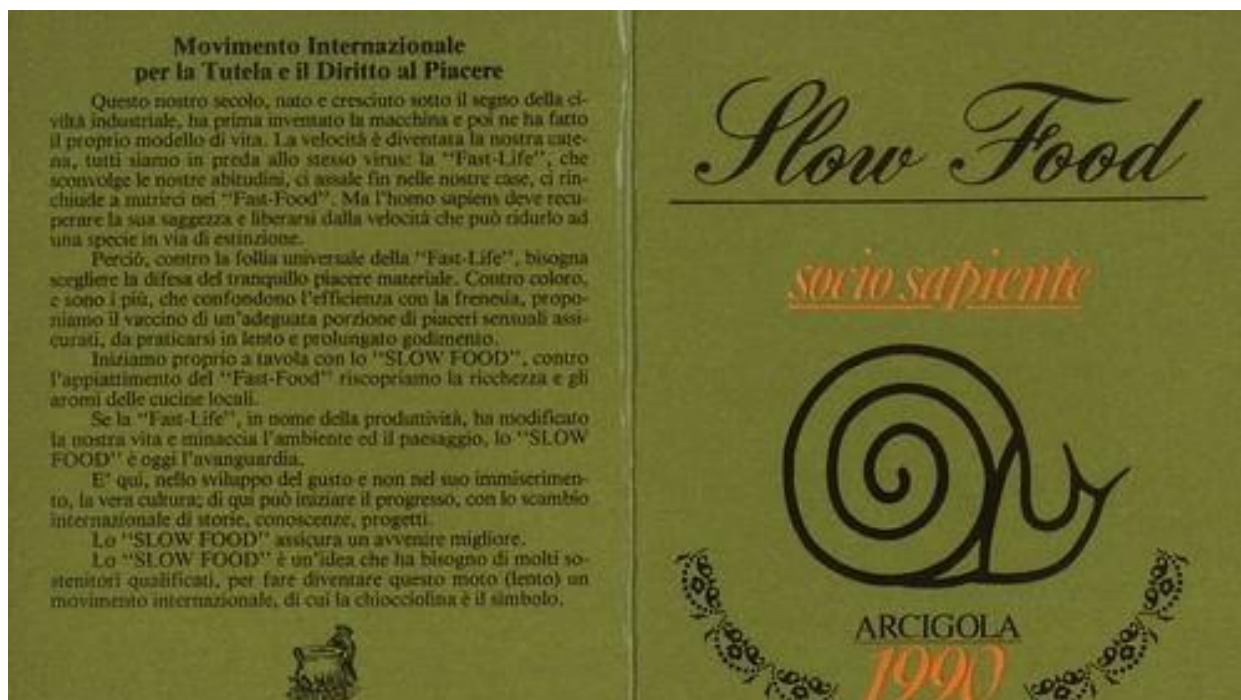
Figure 3: Genealogy of Slow Food
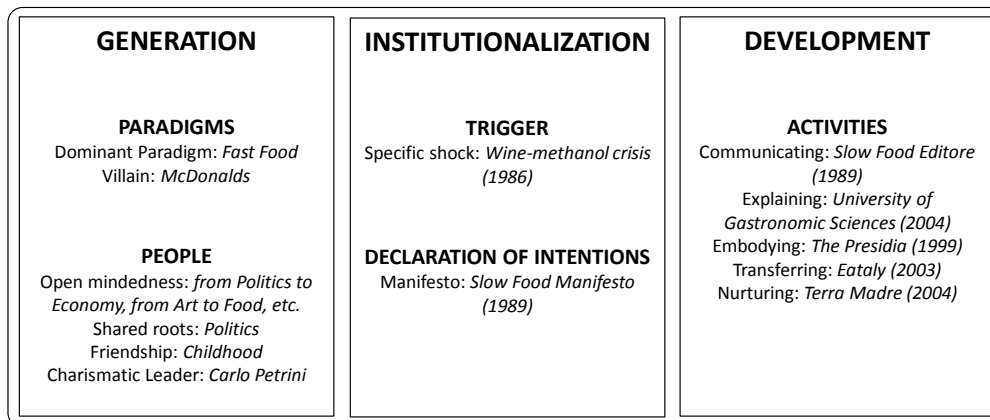
Figure 4: Slow Food *Manifesto* (1989)

GENERATION	INSTITUTIONALIZATION	DEVELOPMENT
PARADIGMS Dominant Paradigm: *Fast Food* Villain: *McDonalds*	**TRIGGER** Specific shock: *Wine-methanol crisis (1986)*	**ACTIVITIES** Communicating: *Slow Food Editore (1989)* Explaining: *University of Gastronomic Sciences (2004)* Embodying: *The Presidia (1999)* Transferring: *Eataly (2003)* Nurturing: *Terra Madre (2004)*
PEOPLE Open mindedness: *from Politics to Economy, from Art to Food, etc.* Shared roots: *Politics* Friendship: *Childhood* Charismatic Leader: *Carlo Petrini*	**DECLARATION OF INTENTIONS** Manifesto: *Slow Food Manifesto (1989)*	

Figure 5: Main phases in the evolution of the radically-new meaning

Tables

Data source	Details about collected data

In-person interviews	***Interview #1: 19th March 2014 – Milan (MI) [approximately 2 hours]***
	Alessandro Cecchini and Paolo Bolzacchini
	    Presidia officers at Slow Food
	    Members of the Slow Food teams that are running the projects Nutrire Milano and Mercato della Terra
	
	Interview #2: 17th July 2014 – Bra (CN) [approximately 2 hours]
	Alberto Arossa
	    Communication officer at Slow Food
	    Member of the Slow Food team that is running Nutrire Milano, Mercato della Terra and Slow Food Editore
	
	Interview #3: 17th July 2014 – Bra (CN) [approximately 2 hours]
	Silvio Barbero
	    Founder of Slow Food
	    Vice-President of the University of Gastronomic Sciences
	
	Interview #4: 17th July 2014 – Bra (CN) [approximately 2 hours]
	Sebastiano Sardo
	    Former Slow Food employee
	    Member of the team that consulted on Eataly and current Eataly employee

Archival data	***Books*** Petrini C and Padovani G. (2006). *Slow Food Revolution. A new culture for eating and living*. Rizzoli, New York (NY). Petrini C. (2013). *Cibo e Libertà – Slow Food: storie di gastronomia per la liberazione*. Slow Food Editore. Petrini C. (2014). *La coscienza del cibo*. Slow Food Editore, . Petrini C. (2010). *Terra Madre – Come non farci mangiare dal cibo*. Slow Food Editore, . ***Websites*** www.slowfood.com www.slowfood.it www.slowfoodfoundation.com www.terramadre.info www.unisg.it ***DVD*** The Story of Slow Food (2013) by Stefano Sardo ***Other secondary data*** Corigliano M.A. and Viganò G. (2002). *I presidi Slow Food: da iniziativa culturale ad attività imprenditoriale*. Università Bocconi.

Table 1: Details on Data Collection