I. Elite that creates power / Les élites créatrices de puissance
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Commensal Soft Power Tools for Elites in European States: Networks and Dramaturgy between Divergence and Convergence

Abstract

Focus on the elite tables, following the (luxury) food chain and the networks of the eaters, and study the dramaturgy of commensal micro-politics in order to understand how soft power via feasts and gastronomy, distinction strategies and elite cultures functioned in Europe in the past five centuries (and continue to do so). All this is important in the study of the processes of convergence and divergence as well as trajectories of continuity in eras of rapid change. Actor-network analysis, performance studies and sensitized comparative historical research offer promising tools to demonstrate and explain the relationships between corporeal performances, conviviality and micro-political work, as well as macro-processes outside the black box of elite table culture. The reign of Louis XIV, the Napoleonic era (see Cambacérès, Talleyrand, Carême), or the gastronomy politics in present-day France provide eye-opening examples of yielding and wielding power via tables, discourses and food.

Keywords
Table
Commensality
Feasts
Elite cultures
Soft power
Networks
Actor-network analysis ANT
Dramaturgy
UNESCO
The nasty little secret of history is that states and empires are very fragile, volatile, and transitory—far more so than their buildings and monuments. They are a fluid process rather than a durable thing, and they depend upon constant hard work in the micro-political struggles of negotiation and legitimation to survive and operate [...] Material monuments and institutions provide arenas (of variable effectiveness) for this interpersonal activity to be carried out, but they do not replace it or make it redundant. Hence, practices such as feasting are every bit as important to the operation of states as they are to other forms of political organization.¹

Can beautifully dressed tables, spoons, menus, convivial conversations and refined food, in short commensal cultures, be part of an arsenal of power tools? Can they provide a key to understand, decode and explain complex issues, such as divergence and convergence in consumer behavior, markets and identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Can they help us to explore the suggestion of Abner Cohen that “today all societies are regulated by elite minorities, who employ ideologies and techniques of mystification to maintain themselves in power, as well as serve the public”?² Does Joseph Nye, who coined the term “soft power” to describe a nation’s ability to attract and persuade rather than to coerce or buy (“hard power”), have a point when he suggests that:

More than four centuries ago, Niccolò Machiavelli advised princes in Italy that it was more important to be feared than to be loved. But in today’s world, it is best to be both [...] Yet political leaders have spent little time thinking about how the nature of power has changed and, more specifically, about how to incorporate the soft dimensions into their strategies for wielding power?³

But how can we achieve this? Let us first read what Machiavelli wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori in December 1513:

When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. On the threshold I strip off the muddy, sweaty clothes of everyday, and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the antique courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity, reply to me. And for the space of four hours I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death; I pass indeed into their


world. And as Dante says that there can be no understanding without the memory retaining what it has heard, I have written down what I have gained from their conversation, and composed a small work de principatibus, where I dive as deep as I can into ideas about this subject, discussing the nature of princely rule, what forms it takes, how these are acquired, how they are maintained, why they are lost.\(^4\)

In this article, I will focus on real food, real tables and real (powerful) people eating, and not just as a figure of speech. In this context “commensal” refers to sharing a table or eating together (“com mensalis”). We need a context-oriented eclectic approach, for instance to make bridges between anthropology, sociology and historical research.\(^5\) There is a whole repertoire of sensitizing devices available. In this contribution, I wish to draw attention to the potential of a combination of approaches, models and methods: a pragmatic dramaturgy or performance studies approach, combined with (among others) actor-network theory or cultural mobility studies.

1. Divergence, convergence and elite cultures

**Degrees of power distance**

Tendencies of divergence or convergence and variables like (“national”) “culture” are connected in influential studies about consumer behavior and global marketing. Is globalization in twenty-first century Europe characterised by processes of convergence of media and technology that will lead to a more homogeneous consumer behavior (needs, tastes, lifestyles, ...)? Did the new eurozone yield more similar consumers, eating the same food and wearing the same clothes? Why then do empirical studies provide evidence of more variation and more divergence?

To explain statistics suggesting that in Europe more ice cream is consumed (more milk is drunk, more freezers are owned, ...) in colder countries than in warmer regions of Europe, not only “collective memory” is mobilized, but also notions like “national culture.”\(^6\) Statistics in regards to drinking bottled

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mineral water, for instance, are used by marketing sociologists to debunk the hypothesis of economists that, with converging incomes, cultural values and habits will also converge. Or to support the hypothesis that cultural values in nations are stable and become manifest with converging incomes. For me as a historian, ethnologist and Flemish citizen it is puzzling to see how a so-called “Belgian national culture” is being used as a factor in those kinds of studies.

One of the underlying frameworks is the Hofstede model of “dimensions of national culture”. Next to degrees of uncertainty avoidance, long/short term orientation, gender, individualism/collectivism, “power distance” is also used as a variable. It is quite a challenge to try and use an indicator for a country like France, if you try to study what happened in the centuries before and after the French Revolution. Hofstede:

The power distance dimension can be defined as the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. In large power distance cultures, everyone has his or her rightful place in a social hierarchy. The rightful place concept is important for understanding the role of global brands.

Food historians should be aware of how historical constructions, myths and sometimes studies about convergence and divergence are (unfortunately for the scholarly work: often not) used in such studies that matter for decision-makers, in this case influencing the marketers of global brands and multinationals for fine-tuning advertising and retail strategies. Debunking or enriching this kind of influential models, with real effects in your kitchen, fridge or supermarket, is a challenge to make comparative and empirical (historical) food studies matter.

Culinary cultures of Europe

Sometimes books on food history actually reach the coffee-tables of European decision-makers or other elites. This was the case with a political and identity “tour de force” in 2005: the Council of Europe project “Culinary cultures of Europe”. It is a macédoine of 40 “country essays” between two scholarly buns. In one bun, the introductory essay “Food: identity and diversity”, Fabio Parasecoli explores what is at stake:


The time has finally arrived for the European cultural establishment to acknowledge the role of food in the constitution of local, regional and national identities and their connections in our global era [...] Meals unite and divide. In both cases, either by inclusion or by exclusion, they connect diverse identities. The table can become more than that: a space for the actual, productive sharing of dishes, traditions, emotions and why not – food for thought.9

He identifies a positive attitude towards “diversity”, on and around the table: managing the European convergence and glocal (culinary) divergence is presented as a crucial project.

In the other bun, the concluding chapter, Stephen Mennell tries to detect transitions in the national essays. Are there for instance references to the formation of socially stratified cuisines in pre-industrial societies? Are the roles played by courts, aristocracies and bourgeois dealt with? Is there any information about processes of national culinary integration in the course of nation-building?10 The figuration theory (Norbert Elias and his followers) is called upon to discuss the first issue:

When the social divisions between strata are very deep and the interdependence between them is very unequal – when the power that they have over each other is very asymmetrical – then the power and status of the upper strata is more likely to find expression in quantity rather than quality, in periodical displays of indiscriminate heaps of food at ceremonial banquets, for instance, rather than through the quality and labour-intensiveness that are among the marks of a true haute cuisine [...] the rate of change in ‘taste’ accelerates when the strata of society become more closely and more equally interdependent, and when social competition becomes more intense.11

Early modern kings, queens and courts could have played an incubator role by pulling networks closer together and providing an exchange platform. After 1660 France was, for over two centuries, the paradigmatic example of this process, providing formats for upper-class eating in Europe and North-America.

10 After the Spring of the Arab World and the Elections in Turkey of 12 June 2011, the issue of studying and reviving Ottoman Culinary heritage in restaurants, coffee-books and historical research has become even more acute, problematic and interesting for “soft politics” and the evolution of elite cultures around the Mediterranean Sea: see Marc JACOBS, “Van minaret naar imaret. Hoe en waarom wordt de Ottomaanse keuken vandaag opgedist?”, in Marc JACOBS et al., Haremnavels, leeuwenmelk en aubergines. Culinair erfgoed uit het Ottomaanse Rijk (Brussel, 2009), pp. 6–42.
Commensal culture was turned into a medium for exercising “soft power”, the ability to attract and persuade (rather than to coerce by the hard power of direct violence or payment). From the nineteenth century onwards, the better restaurants provided another relay system, using a commercial rather than a political logic, using product and dramaturgical differentiation to attract consumers. Another diffusion mechanism often mentioned in this context is a trickle down effect, through communication, imitation and appropriation. Mennell even referred to “trickle up” processes, for instance by the translation (e.g. using the butterisation techniques of Escoffier) of regional cuisines for constructing emblematic cuisines for nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Combined with an increased mobility and migration of people, ingredients and eating formats, this yields the diversity celebrated by Parasecoli.12

Burke, Thompson and Goffman
Mennell made an interesting comment, which provides a lever for food and other cultural historians:

> Across much of Europe today, the eating scene is reminiscent of Peter Burke’s description of popular culture in the late Middle Ages. Then, all ranks of society participated in popular culture, and it was only with printing and more widespread literacy that the upper classes withdrew into a more exclusive high culture. Today, one might argue that all ranks participate in the fast food and manufactured food cultures, even if only the better-off come to sample elite cuisines and search for new ways of distinguishing themselves.13

Peter Burke’s path-breaking book about popular culture in Early Modern Europe triggered thirty years of scholarship, shattering any false impression of homogeneity in elite or popular cultures and introducing notions like appropriation (Roger Chartier). Looking back in the 2009 edition of his book, Burke reflected on how new evolutions influence the perception of his thesis:

> Thanks to television and other media, Europeans have acquired something more like a common culture than anything since what I call the great withdrawal of early modern elites from what they came to call “popular culture”. The “modernist” condemnation of “mass culture” has been replaced by the “postmodernist” interest in popular culture.14

Another important comment was made by E.P. Thompson, warning (the readers of Burke’s book) for overconsensual interpretations of culture “as a system

13 Stephen MENNELL, Conclusions..., p. 485.
of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are embodied.” He urged us to include associations like a conflict-laden pool or platform of diverse resources or as an arena of conflictual elements.\(^{15}\) The plot of Burke’s synthesis is compatible with theories of Michel Foucault (disciplining) and Norbert Elias (civilizing processes).\(^{16}\) The stories echo the attempts to control or coerce the behavior of groups and turn this into internal processes, self-control and eventually commodification and facilitating consumption: enhancing attraction and persuasion. Elias and his followers focused on table manners: the set of written and unwritten conventions that frame the way we eat together, most often sitting at a table.\(^{17}\)

The special role commensal interactions played in courts in the transformation of elite cultures has been more intensively explored in the early modern period. Until recently, few studies were available about the role of commensal occasions in royal and government circles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but this is changing, partly thanks to research by the Brussels FOST-group.\(^{18}\) The “civilizing process” or the evolution and trickle down effects of commensal politics was accompanied by a proliferation of material objects, cutlery, serviettes, plates on and around the table, the tables and chairs themselves, etc.\(^{19}\) But the boundaries between human bodies among one another and between the people and the food were increasingly policed as well.

Theatrical metaphors are very useful here, as Erving Goffman has demonstrated in path-breaking studies of the dramaturgy of everyday lives, life in asylums or the processes of framing.\(^{20}\) The combination of the theoretical frameworks of Elias and Goffman with intensive archival research and a dialogue with the work of historians like Burke, has yielded an eye-opener study by Robert Muchembled. He used metaphors from the world of the theatre and


\(^{17}\) See also Margaret VISser, The Rituals of Dinner. The Origins, evolution, eccentricities, and meaning of table manners (New York, 1992).


\(^{19}\) Consider the comments about the word “assiette” in : Claudine HAROCHE, “Position et disposition des convives dans la société de cour au 17e siècle. Éléments pour une réflexion sur le pouvoir politique dans l’espace de la table “, Revue française de science politique, vol. 48, no. 3–4 (1998), pp. 376–386, p. 377. There is much potential for art historians and archaeologists to feed the debate. See, next to the oeuvre of Michael Dietler and Tamara Bray, for instance the case study Randy HAHN, Andean commensal politics and alternative rituals of power at Jatagua, Peru (Montreal, 2009).

paid special attention to impression management and divergence in cultural repertoires, not only in eating and drinking, but also in the ways of dressing. Convergence and divergence in methods of using (soft or hard) power make this a very complex story to trace on a European or global scale. Elias urged to take the structural characteristics of social networks seriously (the theory of figurations). He also suggested that the new regimes and rituals of table culture were triggered or generated by a quest for social distinction.

2. Elite cultures: tables, mystiques and dramaturgy

Daloz and distinction
“Distinction” has been subject of much sociological work, in particular since *La Distinction* (1979) by Pierre Bourdieu. Today, the oeuvre of Jean-Pascal Daloz is the new reference point in international sociological research about elites and distinction. In his studies Daloz integrates recent insights of food studies. On the basis of his comparative research, he questions the possibility or desirability of a grand theory (in particular Bourdieu’s) of social distinction applicable to most societies. It is useful to apply sensitizing frames in order to perceive and analyze aspects of the links between table cultures, elites and distinction. Consider for instance the contrasting functions of ostentation or the opposite, or the relative value given to quantity and quality.

Bourdieu, Cohen and the dramaturgy of power
How do elites try to maintain hegemony in eras of rapid economic, social, religious and political change (with the political and cultural biography of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754–1838) as one of the ultimate examples)? How do elites succeed (or fail) to maintain their elite status? What are the cultural foundations of legitimacy and authority? The notion of the dramaturgy of power was introduced in explorations of elite culture by

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Abner Cohen to deal with these questions. Legitimacy or explanations of the high status can be sought by assuming or strongly suggesting service for the public, what Cohen called “universalistic functions or ends”. This is dramatized, mystified and enhanced.

In nineteenth and twentieth century Europe elites are usually not recognized as such, as a separate group or a caste. They are viewed as a category of persons that are supposed to have achieved their status by merit or investment, in a competitive way, rather than simply by passive inheritance. Taking a closer look at the mechanisms of trying to continue and pass on the elite status, it is clear that these are still fully active, in particular through socializing children to assume an elite status and acquire the privileges that go with it. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, the school system and in particular higher education function to achieve this kind of symbolic violence. He zoomed in on the École Nationale d’Administration (ENA) as a crucial institution in France since the Second World War. The publication in 2011 of a special issue, A Table! Ou l’Art de la Gastronomie, in the review of the alumni of the ENA speaks volumes and illustrates what I wish to demonstrate in this article.

Some of the universalistic functions cannot be served by formal organization or institutionalized reproduction mechanisms. That is why the commensal cultural or micropolitical repertoire (extended to reception rooms, cafés, salons, ...) is so crucial. Abner Cohen stated that senior civil servants or politicians, for instance, “must often coordinate their actions through personal contacts, dealings, understandings, and compromises, without the exchange of formal documents. These ‘undercover’ dealings may well be in the public interest, but they cannot be formally articulated.”

Expressing, enjoying and upholding the elite status involves, on a group level, the development or combined cultivation of a culture characterized by the so-called three C’s: cohesion, consciousness and conspiracy. The clue then would be that the full range of qualities of excellence, the mystique of “eliteness”, can be learned only informally, among peers. It is cultivated in a repertoire of symbols and dramatic performances like table and other manners, etiquette, styles of dress, housing and other elements of a way of life.

In all societies, power groups assume mystiques, i.e. ideologies and techniques of mystification, that are both particularistic and universalistic [...] By their very nature, symbols are highly mystifying, in that they connote different shades of meaning to different people, or to the same people at different times.

27 A TABLE ! OU L’ART DE LA GASTRONOMIE, L’ENA hors les murs, nr. 413, 2011.
28 Abner COHEN, Politics..., p. xvi.
29 Ibid, p. 6 and quotation on p. 7 and p. 10.
Cohen proposed the concept of a “dramaturgical technique” of commensality to explain why eating and drinking together can be of crucial importance.

**Dietler and commensal politics**

It is obvious that “table” is a Eurocentric metaphor, as people in many places in the world (used to) eat together without this device. On the other hand it reflects aspects of hard power world history in the second half of the second millennium A.C. But you can go much further back in time. Michael Dietler zoomed in on three types of feasts in the repertoire of forms of what he calls “commensal politics”.

In the “entrepreneurial feast” the competitive manipulation of commensal hospitality leads to the accumulation of symbolic capital and social power or “prestige”. Prestige refers here to the ability to influence group processes derived from relations created and reproduced in the process of personal interaction, rather than from an institutional position or role. Many life cycle (e.g. marriage) or year cycle rituals are also occasions to stage this kind of feasts, with significant liminal bandwidth. The underlying model is the reciprocal conversion of economic and symbolic capital. The feast serves as a conduit, and at the same time caters for the (re)production of social capital.

The second type is the patron-role feast, referring to a “formalized use of commensal hospitality to symbolically reiterate and legitimize institutionalized relations of unequal social power.” Just like the previous type, the patron-role feast stimulates reciprocity, but not equal reciprocation. It is driven by commensalism through extreme generosity and lavish hospitality in a patron/client relationship.

The third type is the “diacritical feast”, using cuisine and styles of consumption as a symbolic device to reify concepts of ranked differences in social status. Not reciprocity in hospitality is the driver, but “tournaments of value” (Arjun Appadurai). In this case, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is emphasized. There has to be an exceptional, extraordinary element, very rare or expensive foods, utensils or food service vessels, special preparation or consumption. It is a matter of style that is yielding symbolic power, formulas that offer chances to be emulated by people aspiring to a higher status (and hence also the danger of devaluation or “inflation”).

Important in all these types of feasts and in particular in the last one, are the cues or framing devices that establish the ritual significance of events:

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settings, special service vessels, the complexity of recipes, the way food is served, the way luxury goods are mobilized.\textsuperscript{33}

3. Follow the tables, what is on them and what happens around them: dramaturgy

One of the advantages of focusing on elites, e.g. when studying issues of divergence or convergence, in particular in comparative analysis, is spelled out by Daloz:

In contrast to many analyses which are all too often conducted at an excessively abstract level, this approach is obviously centered on actors. One may endlessly wallow in rather sterile discussions about the nature of “the state”, for instance, but things become much less elusive when researchers look into the actual behavior of real persons at the top of such institutions. It should be added that studies on elites commonly lead to realist, as opposed to idealist, conceptions.\textsuperscript{34}

Jean-Pascal Daloz emphasized that around an elite meal, with luxury food and grand eating, all the key elements he focused upon in his studies about elite cultures presented could be mobilized: residence, adornment and dressing up, impressive vehicles, gastronomic and discourse competence, and entourage (selected guests, …).\textsuperscript{35} Eclectic models are necessary to fully grasp and appreciate why and how for instance architecture and cooking, dress and guest lists can and should be combined.

Follow the links
How does soft power work and how can it be as effective and sustainable as hard power or even better? By constructing “black boxes”, “immutable mobiles” and successfully managing “translation processes”, the answer (in Bruno Latour lingo) would lie in an analysis inspired by the actor-network theory. At this point, however, it is useful to apply a methodological rule of

\textsuperscript{33} See the recent status quaestionis in Rengenier RITTERSMA, “Putting Social Status and Social Aspirations on Display: A Panoramic Study on Manifestations of Luxury in the Low Countries, 1500 to the Present”, in Rengenier RITTERSMA (ed.), Luxury in the Low Countries. Miscellaneous Reflections on Netherlandish Material Culture, 1500 to the Present (Brussel, 2010), pp. 10–24 and Maxine BERG, “Concluding Remarks. The Contemporary World and Histories of Writing about Luxury”, in ibid., pp. 261–271.

\textsuperscript{34} Jean-Pascal DALOZ, “Introduction: Elites and their Representation: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives”, Historical Reflections/Reflexions historiques, vol. 36, no. 3 (Winter 2010), pp. 1–6, 2.

\textsuperscript{35} Jean-Pascal DALOZ, Sociology..., p. 78.
thumb propagated by the ANT movement. Follow the actors wherever they lead you, that is the famous advice of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour. And there are not only human actors, but also networks. And actor-networks. But the objects, actants or food, can play an active role as well. Follow the food chain. Follow the recipes, formats, scenarios and formulas in time and space wherever they take you. Consider the dedicated spaces, the contexts, etc.

Sugar for instance
Interesting results in food studies have been obtained when some of these “follow the lines” guidelines have been used, even if not always in the radical mode of translation sociology or actor-network analysis, but when different lines were followed and recombined in a causal or at least interconnected story. A successful recipe for studying elite cultures prior to the twentieth century is for instance to follow sugar (and tragacanth). You can follow the use of constructions in sugar, from “medieval castles” over the sixteenth and seventeenth century subtleties and triumphs to the famous “pièces montées” of Antonin Carême in the nineteenth century, a good lead to trace very special occasions of liminal communication about status changes and power.36 In this context we think in particular about the work of Sidney Mintz, focusing on sugar, but following it from the plantations to where the sweet stuff leads him, from slavery in the Americas to tea and coffee tables in Europe. This resulted in a eye-opener study about how marketed edible luxuries were turned into everyday necessities.37

Or networks and envelopes
Social network analysis is a very powerful tool to describe and analyze interpersonal networks, as Danielle De Vooght has demonstrated in her work about the table in the Brussels royal palace in the late nineteenth century.38 More research (tools) and larger models are needed to explore and prove the connection between micropolitics and corporeal performances of real people and


macroprocesses and evolutions, in particular as we are increasingly going for global and glocal histories.

To study globalization, Bruno Latour proposes to move beyond the notion and graphic representation of networks, and in particular their anorexic and anemic appearances and characteristics. One way to tackle this would be more “thick description” (Clifford Geertz). Another possibility is to combine globalization with other notions, such as spheres (local and fragile contexts) and “envelopes”: “identities – the walls – are made possible only through the double movement of connecting distant anchors and stitching together local nodes. If you believe that there are independent bubbles and spheres that can sustain themselves, you are clearly forgetting the whole technology of envelopes.”

This comes close to what we are exploring, how and what makes tables of elites “work”, “the very possibility of having an envelope around a local habitat is given by the length, number, and solidity of the connectors that radiate out in all directions.”39 This is compatible with the concept of “envelope of mobility and durability” that was used by John Law to study the ships and instruments in the history of European “discoveries” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.40 The breakthrough in the European early modern and modern period is related to the combination of new and enhanced immutable mobiles and other means and tools for exerting power at a distance (e.g. the printing press or indeed the postal system).41 The “dining table” or commensal dramaturgy should be reconsidered as one of those instruments. Not only “As an assemblage, a sheaf of relations that come together then go again their separate ways, the table occupies a special place among things. It is a born negotiator. It draws us together; it holds us apart,”42 but also as an “envelope” or “black box” in the technical sense mentioned above.

Performance and combinations
Performance studies connecting the analytical power concepts of ANT with notions of liminality (Victor Turner) are promising.43 The program defined in

43 Peter BURKE “Performing history: the importance of occasions”, Rethinking history, vol. 9, no. 1 (2005), pp. 35–52 and Jeffrey ALEXANDER, “Cultural pragmatics: social performance between
the “cultural mobility studies manifesto” by Stephen Greenblatt is yet another compatible perspective. This could lead to interesting experiments. Who will try to write a study about decisive moments and performances, tipping points and episodes when commensal politics or micropolitical negotiations seem to have made a crucial difference? Would it be possible to construct an eye-opening book about European history, using for instance representations and performances of Last Suppers, rituals or games like “the King drinks”, about the consequences of forbidding the reformist banquet in the Paris 12th arrondissement in 1848 or about the soft protest power role kitchen tables played in the process leading to the Fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989?

This could become more than a nice “trouvaille” or virtuously composed anecdotal coffee table book, on condition that suitable theoretical frameworks are provided that can reveal the food related power dramaturgy in action. A follow the “elite table (culture)” perspective could make the difference between a book providing deep insight and a hotpot of anecdotes, e.g. when writing about the significance and effects of dining in moving restaurant carriages (or in-depth studies about the realizations of elite entrepreneurs like George Pullman (1831–1897) or Georges Nagelmaekers (1845–1905) that could lead to real progress in the convergence/divergence debate in food studies in the nineteenth century), first class dining facilities on ships or first class seats in aircrafts.

**At the tables of power**

Several recent books have tried such an endeavour, without completely succeeding (due to the lack of suitable boosting theoretical instruments and frameworks). Roy Strong provided such a repertoire history of elitist dining culture in a long-durée perspective on feasts. In a recent synthesis about tables of power in (French-)European history, from Antiquity to Sarkozy, Jean-Marc Albert refers to the discoveries of the New World (America) and

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the printing press as being important for tastes, manners, ingredients and ways of preparing food (although he did not push the argument and did not connect them on a theoretical level). Albert presents the tables of Louis XIV in Versailles as the nexus where many evolutions and power instruments (like the fruit and vegetable gardens organized as a “laboratory” in the Latourian sense) converged. Albert claims that:

La table devient le point culminant du rituel monarchique français au point de se confondre avec lui et d’apparaître comme le cérémonial par excellence de l’expression du pouvoir suprême. On exporte donc ce modèle partout en Europe.⁵₀

Not only the seating arrangements, the position of the plates and dishes on the table had significance, but also the position of the dining tables in the palace and other houses was important.⁵¹ In the words of Jean-Marc Albert:

La disposition des plats [...] selon une métrique rythmique parfaitement cadencée [...] La table s’architecture, son centre devenant le lieu géométrique du pouvoir [...] Mais la table se sédentarise, en même temps que la Cour, même si l’on ne parle pas encore, avant l’extrême fin du XVIIᵉ siècle, de la salle à manger [...] chaque convive peut, en théorie, manger selon ses goûts mais en fonction de la place qu’il occupe, il ne jouit ni du même confort, ni du même accès aux plats: les mets raffinés et coûteux sont au centre, les moins recherchés, aux extrémités.⁵²

Special places, techniques and objects have become part of the ever growing repertoire of framing devices, of the “composition”, helping the convergence of time and space, while the food on the plates or, even better, the menu has increasingly diverged and diversified. In the Habsburg Empire, table culture was also connected to power rituals.⁵³

In late eighteenth century France the negotiation of elite status via tables and special food constituted an important tool for the nobility:

⁵¹ See also Sandrine KRIKORIAN, Les rois à table. Iconographie, gastronomie et pratiques des repas officiels de Louis XIII à Louis XVI (Aix-en-Provence, 2011).
⁵² Jean-Marc ALBERT, Tables..., p. 117.
La codification des gestes et des convenances de table se complexifie jusqu’à les rendre inaccessibles à une bourgeoisie que l’aristocratie n’invite plus à sa table [...] À la veille de la Révolution, les comportements de table des élites traduisent les crisps d’un groupe qui tend à devenir une caste [...] Pourtant, les attitudes alimentaires laissent deviner une relative porosité de la culture du goût nobiliaire influencée par les usages populaires.54

In the same era and in the nineteenth century, contestation emerged around tables in cafes, salons and later on restaurants.55 In England and France discourse about table culture, gastronomy, became itself a distinctive tool, but with a double effect of divergence and convergence: articulating elite standards and democratizing tastes, via mass media, at first books, today television.56 In France the table was actively used in the nineteenth century:

Par l’excellence de la table, les élites établissent de nouvelles alliances et consolident d’anciens réseaux. En reprenant la tradition des banquets mon-archiques, les notables veulent surtout affirmer leur position politique. La bourgeoisie oscille entre désir d’imitation de la noblesse et volonté d’afficher, par l’affirmation de ses propres valeurs commensales, le fruit de sa réussite.57

In the nineteenth century, banquets were instruments, platforms and arenas for political activity, in particular for the newly rising elite groups. Food remained an important instrument in the world of diplomacy.

Talleyrand, Napoleon, Carême

“One peut tout faire avec des baïonnettes, sauf s’asseoir dessus.” This expression is attributed to Talleyrand: one can do all sorts of things with bayonets except sitting on top of them. During and after the French Revolution, Talleyrand preferred chairs at dining tables to the exertion of power, especially when Antonin Carême was at work in the kitchen. The joint efforts of Talleyrand and Carême provide excellent examples of how at crucial junctures food history and world, or at least European, history merged and intertwined. What makes Talleyrand particularly interesting is of course that he managed to survive and even grow in very turbulent – revolutionary – times for elites in the center of hard and soft power. In those power situations, the ritualized form of eating, top gastronomy, liminality was particularly effective and

54 Jean-Marc ALBERT, Tables..., p. 157.
57 Jean-Marc ALBERT, Tables..., pp. 188–189.
strong. Both the biographies of Talleyrand and Carême, and in particular where they intertwine, contain several stories about wonderful dinners and suppers where crucial decisions on the highest level were forged, facilitated, taken or influenced.\textsuperscript{58}

Choosing the era of Napoleon as a milestone might seem strange, but has everything to do with the exceptional combination of hard and soft power in the period of the Revolution, the Empire, the Congress of Vienna and the Restoration in France, and the role tables and exquisite food played. In Napoleon’s extraordinary effort of standardization and concentration of power tools, the bayonets were supported by the chairs at elite dining tables in France. In his history of feasts, Roy Strong seems to downplay the role of Napoleon, except when he mentions a limited use of big court feasts and a role of Louis-Philippe, comte de Ségur, as grand maître des cérémonies:

Although Napoleon himself ate his dinner in ten minutes flat from a pedestal table over which a napkin had been thrown, he revived public dining for great occasions. These occasions numbered only eight. Later in exile on Elba, he was to regret that he had not fully revived the grand couvert as practiced by Louis XVI which, on account of its free admittance to the royal presence of anyone respectably attired, would have given people access to the emperor and thus built up a wider circle of allegiance to the imperial cause.\textsuperscript{59}

But as closer inspections reveal, Napoleon and diplomatic brokers working with him made some fascinating interventions: setting up court-like occasions and settings, bringing a mix of new elite groups whose networks had to be interconnected. The family of Napoleon and the other high ranking officers and power brokers actively used and employed their own top chefs: “La dispersion de ces chefs avant et après la débâcle de Waterloo vers d’autres cours inaugure la domination de la cuisine française en Europe.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Cambacérés}

It would take a book to explain this, but let me just refer to two power brokers who during and after this period actively perfected the table as an effective tool for soft superpower: next to Talleyrand, there was the famous gay freemason Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérés (1753–1824; also known as the father of the Napoleonic code). On 2 November 1801 Napoléon Bonaparte gave very

\textsuperscript{58} The story of how Talleyrand convinced Tsar Alexander I during a fantastic night supper composed by Carême on 31 March 1814 to replace his old master Napoleon by the old Bourbon dynasty, in particular by the future gourmand king nicknamed Louis Dix-huitres, speaks volumes. Philippe ALEXANDRE, Béatrix de l’AULNOIT, \emph{Le Roi Carême} (Paris, 2003) pp. 9–29.

\textsuperscript{59} Roy STRONG, \emph{Feast…}, p. 276.

\textsuperscript{60} Jean-Marc ALBERT, \emph{Tables…}, p. 171.
detailed written instructions to Cambacérés to implement in Paris a policy of commensal culture to contribute to the consolidation of the process of state formation. He asked Cambacérés to coordinate a sustained effort of receptions and dinners of the different ministers (Talleyrand, Fouché, ...) on an organized basis. He had to fix a day during the ten day week (decade) for such dinners of each of the ministers, doubled by a similar parallel system for ten of the conseillers d’État. Everybody had to invite “sa famille et ses amis, les principaux agents avec qui il a des relations, et nécessairement une partie du corps diplomatique, et quelques étrangers de marque.” Every ten days, decade after decade. The table and the list of invited people of the Second consul Cambacérés himself had to be the corner stone of that system, sustaining a list of invited people that had to be as large as possible and that varied on every occasion. The set of detailed instructions reveals a carefully orchestrated strategy of networking among the new elites via the table, patterns not emerging by chance, but organized almost as a military strategy, right up the point of the obligatory starting hour: 22.00 p.m.

Here again we see an endeavor like in the heydays of Versailles under the Sun King, an instrument pumped up to full force, which does not imply that it was subsequently used in Europe in all courts, diplomatic circles and government issues at full force. The efforts of Talleyrand, Carême and others to be the link between the Ancien Régime and the later Republics, did consolidate a soft power technique as a “black box” that could be mobilized in later phases (and Talleyrand did actually use it often), to conduct micropolitical struggles that make empires and states operate and to exploit the liminal power of commensality.

4. The Globe, the State and the Table

Tables, food and coffee (breaks) are still of crucial importance in international diplomacy, European and global institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO or UNESCO. Recent research shows how a new global elite is emerging around those organizations. In the twenty-first century one of the most promising fields in anthropology and ethnology is the study of how these networks and organizations function. It should be clear that studying food culture and coffee-breaks can offer new perspectives on the activities of these new elites that are shaping and running the world, just like the CEOs of multinationals and international financial networks.62

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62 See for instance Marc ABÉLÈS (ed.), Des anthropologues à l’OMC. Scènes de la gouvernance
Also fascinating is that attempts of an organization like UNESCO to counterbalance the effects of globalization (in the sense of convergence) by trying to safeguard cultural diversity (divergence) with international conventions and experts, can now also be used for soft power programs. Notice how Jean-Marc Albert in the last pages of his book *Aux Tables du Pouvoir* talks about Nicolas Sarkozy: “Curieusement, ce président qui ne laisse transparaître aucune prédilection, ni aucune aversion d’ailleurs, pour la grande cuisine est le premier à proposer d’inscrire la gastronomie française au patrimoine mondiale de l’UNESCO.”63 Anyone specialized in the 2003 UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, knows that using the word “world heritage” in this context is both very problematic (almost a deadly sin) and revealing. It signals that it would be a perfect case for the approach we have proposed in this article.

If “a table” were not be so flagrantly and ostentatiously tangible, the word could have figured in the title of the item called “The gastronomic meal of the French” inscribed in 2010 on the representative list (article 16) of the 2003 convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO. Now it is hidden in the dossier itself, in the identification part as “the setting of a beautiful table according to classic French taste, based on symmetry that fans out from the centre.”64 The dossier is a daring masterpiece of compromise, mystification and composition, ideal for academic awareness raising and dialogue about commensal elite cultures and networks, illustrating the recent blurring of the concept of “popular culture” (see Peter Burke) used all over the file and in fact touching almost all other convergence/divergence issues and problems I evoked in this article.65 It would take a book to analyze this dossier thoroughly, but as an eye-opener it fully deserves to be evoked here, as the ultimate “pièce montée de résistance” in this article: a real challenge for who wishes to understand and demonstrate why critical food studies could be important. Frédéric Mitterrand, then French minister of culture, provided in many speeches delivered in 2010 and 2011 a puzzling amount of

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65 Ibid., pp. 5–6: “Les Français ont conscience que leur pratique actuelle est investie d’un sens hérité d’une histoire partagée, qu’elle porte des valeurs qui fondent la culture française : attachement à l’univers agricole (important dans l’imaginaire des Français, d’où leur attention aux bons produits) ; à la commensalité ; aux manières élégantes, à la conversation (le repas de la Haute Société transmis par la France révolutionnaire a inspiré les pratiques populaires) ; à l’idéal du bonheur pour tous (héritage de la philosophie du XVIIIe siècle) et à l’idéal populaire d’opulence festive. Il rappelle leur histoire et leur procure ainsi un sentiment de continuité.”
clues or challenges. The icing on the cake is no doubt (the title – also notice the American English – of) Mitterrand’s contribution to the special August 2011 “A TABLE!” issue in the aforementioned journal of L’ENA hors les mures: “La gastronomie, élément du soft power français”. Convergence and divergence, commensality, food history, translation processes, actor-networks, elites, grand strategies, managing globalization and nation states: “à table!”