

# **Diplomatic gastronomy: The convivial nature of the power of prestige, cultural diplomacy and soft power**

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*“In what we choose to eat, we express who we are and where we come from... cross culturally, food is an invaluable tool for communicating emotional messages...”*

A Trapido (Trapido 2008 III-IV)

*“...the fate of nations has often been sealed at a banquet.”*

*(Brillat-Savarin 1970 55)*

## **Introduction**

Food is an ever-present object in society; a common object that is communal across history (Tannahill 1988). It is consumed daily to sustain life, yet full of secondary meanings and symbolism (Fischler 1988 ; Mintz and Bois 2002). Since the 1900s academic writing about food has developed into a multi-disciplinary academic area, no single discipline having a monopoly over the food agenda due to food’s interlinked nature with humanity. The field of political science has contributed little to this discussion since the end of the Cold War.

However, Paarlberg (2010), Schanbacher (2010) and Reynolds (Reynolds 2010) have begun re-introducing a food based agenda to political science that had been left dormant since Morgenthau (1985), by proposing that food is not only crucial to the survival of individual consumers but also to the survival and proliferation of the modern nation state. With Brown (2011) suggesting that food policy, food security, food sovereignty and food culture are all becoming determining factors in a nation state’s bank of food power.

This paper will add to this aforementioned body of work by updating and expanding upon an idea raised by Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations* (1985 86-97): The 'power of prestige'. The power of prestige, can be understood to be a proto-conceptualisation of how elites use cultural diplomacy and soft power to achieve their goals. This paper will firstly examine this classic theory highlighting the similarities of the power of prestige to modern understandings of soft power and cultural diplomacy through the lens of food and conviviality. It will then investigate how food can be utilised by actors and elites as a form of cultural diplomacy.

### **Prestige and diplomatic gastronomy as soft power and cultural diplomacy?**

Morgenthau introduced prestige in *Politics Among Nations* as a method to illustrate to outside observers the relative powers of actors. Prestige is also the vehicle for power within which political elites are able to interact. Morgenthau lists diplomatic ceremony as a form of prestige that can enhance and illustrate the power relationships between nations, elites and other actors. Under the framework of the power of prestige, diplomatic ceremony serves both as a "barometer" ((Roosen 1980 464) for political relationships and as a two way "mirror" (Morgenthau 1985 87) to the political sphere; with actions in either reflecting the political sphere's power struggles. If a nation is treated in a diplomatic ceremony better or worse than it believes it should be, this will cause power relationships to change.

Upon publication in 1985, the diplomatic ceremonial version of prestige did not fully gel with parts of the hard power focused sections of Morgenthau's realist text. However, I propose that in hindsight we can now observe that Morgenthau was trying to convey in his writings the diplomatic ceremonial power of prestige, parts of what we recognise contemporarily as soft power and cultural diplomacy.

The soft power aspects of prestige are viewable via the non military/non force driven nature of the diplomatic ceremonial. The classic aim of soft power - changing behaviour through perception, symbolism and culture (Nye 2004 11-15; Vuving 2009 4) - describes adequately the operational outcomes of the diplomatic ceremonial.

### **Prestige - Food as a Power Indicator**

In most studies of an actor's power, the success of application and the relative size is judged post hoc on the observed outcomes in situations where the political power was utilised (Nye

2008 95). Typically food's political power is no different from other sorts of power (Reynolds 2010), with its ability to be used as a form of hard power, via application of embargos and providing food (in trade or as aid); and as soft power, through foods cultural and social significance. However, there are instances where the medium of food acts as a tangible indicator of both an actor's present and aspired level of power.

The power of prestige is unlike the other embodiments of food power. Modern conceptualisations of soft and hard food-power utilise food as an issue to attract or coerce actors to change their actions through both cultural-symbolic and political-economic conceptualisations of food (Reynolds 2010). The power of prestige utilises food (and the act of dining) as a medium in which interactions can communicate and display power. This paper's understanding of prestige centres on the use of diplomatic ceremony to observe and illustrate power relationships in the political sphere. Food and diplomatic ceremony have much common ground with the diplomatic and convivial act of formal dinners and parties displaying the workings and effects of prestige and cultural diplomacy in a unique way (Morgenthau 1985 90-91; Morgan 2008 3-6,19-20).

Diplomatic ceremony - especially its pomp and circumstance - is a useful diplomatic tool. Both bilateral and multilateral diplomatic ceremonies provide a means of communicating ideas and information (Goldstein 2008 154-155), a situation to prove the host's power and a method to enable diplomats to access society and bureaucracy outside the usual political channels (Roosen 1980 453; Morgenthau 1985 86-89). Under the framework of the power of prestige, diplomatic ceremony also serves both as a "barometer" (Roosen 1980 464) for political relationships and as a two way "mirror" (Morgenthau 1985 87) to the political sphere; with actions in either reflecting the political sphere's power struggles.

This representation of the political sphere through diplomatic ceremony is possible due to the long-held norm that diplomats are "the embodiment of the sovereign power" that they represent<sup>1</sup> (Roosen 1980 462), making ceremonial acts (that give political and social recognition) become political acts through their very existence (Roosen 1980 462; Urbach

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporarily this extends to all actors (corporations, interest groups etc) with their agents also becoming their "face" during the diplomatic ceremony.

2003 992). This offers scholars an opportunity to observe how ‘host’ actors view the power relationships of their guests (and how guests view each other’s power status), by how and what sort of diplomatic ceremony is held<sup>2</sup> (Morgenthau 1985 87-89).

One rationale for the meeting of agents and the use of diplomatic ceremony is provided through the medium of food. When heads of state gather in bilateral or multilateral contexts a core feature of most diplomatic events is the diplomatic banquet (Goldstein 2008 159). At these events heads of state and diplomats have to follow strict protocols on precedence, with digressions signalling shifts of power (Morgenthau 1985 88-91; Urbach 2003 992). Morgan (2008) in her thesis *Diplomatic Gastronomy: Style and Power at the Table* examined the power symbolism of diplomatic meals, creating the term “diplomatic gastronomy” to describe the prestige based power interactions that use food as a medium for interaction.

Furthermore, I propose that the power of prestige can now be seen as both a practical demonstration of soft power and cultural diplomacy at work, and a method for assessing how nations assess and view the power of other nations and organisations.

### **Diplomatic gastronomy**

*“Meals have become the means of government”*

*(Brillat-Savarin 1970 55)*

The act of formal dinners has long been associated with political aristocracy and power (Brillat-Savarin 1970 55; Morgenthau 1985 86-92; Visser 1992 121-136). Morgan (2008) analysed four bilateral diplomatic meals of the Kennedy administration in the 1960s found a number of power determinants at play. Each of these determinants broadcast to actors at the event and outside observers (e.g. those not invited) messages of power and symbolism. This paper will now explore how diplomatic meals-events mirror the political sphere as shown through the pursuit of prestige.

### **Determinants of prestige via diplomatic gastronomy**

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<sup>2</sup> With different diplomatic events giving different levels of political and social recognition to agents

Who is and who is not at the meal-event is an important power indicator. Who was invited signals who the host thought was worthy to attend, as well as those the host wishes to belittle by not inviting. Not attending can also signal that the guest wishes to snub the host, making a clear political signal: if agents of actors cannot break bread together then their relationship is certainly a terse one. Contemporary examples of attendance reflecting power signalling include, the absence of China from a 2008, G8 dinner (White 2008) demonstrating the lack of progress made in Chinese relations by the G8. While the Obama administration's open invitation to Iranian diplomats to share the United States 4<sup>th</sup> of July Independence day celebrations (Barry 2009 ; Landler 2009), reflected the United States agenda to peacefully engage with Iran. However, Iran's refusal to attend (FOXNews.com 2009) left the US administration embarrassed and demonstrated the tense relationship and power situation between the two nations.

The number of agents present can also indicate how the host actor views power relationships at diplomatic meal-events. Bilateral and multilateral meals symbolise different power relationships to those attending and to those observing from outside the meal-event. Morgan (2008) illustrates this symbolism citing individual bilateral dinners between US, President Kennedy, the Indian Prime Minister Nehru and the Pakistani President Khan. These meal events were created in part to symbolise the close relationship that India and Pakistan wished to have with the US during the 1960s.

What (and how much) is eaten is also another symbol that is highly significant when considering prestige. The food served at the meal-event can promote a national agenda or message. Goldstein (2008 159) eloquently describing how

*“the French President ... on a state visit to Great Britain, was served Scottish Beef ... in the wake of the European Union's ban on British beef caused by the BSE crisis.”*

The desire to impress or dominate can also be expressed by the food served, with host nations serving either local or guest cuisine, to illustrate both the level of geniality and the power relationship at the meal-event. At a recent G20 meeting putting “British” cuisine on the menu demonstrated the aim of the United Kingdom to be taken as a “proud” cultural and economic power (Addley 2009). Not eating food can also lead to alarm, in 2009 at G8

and NATO summits, the decision by the wife of the then British Prime Minister, Sarah Brown, not to eat Italian or French national dishes, become a media event (Abraham 2009 ; Press Association 2009). Finally, the amount of food served can signal how much dedication and understanding nations have to certain issues. An 18 course meal at a 2008, G8 summit on African poverty (Whitbread 2008 ; Wintour 2008) signalled a clear disconnection on the G8's part (Editorial 2008).<sup>3</sup>

At diplomatic banquets a *faux pas* can lead to power shifts and unwanted symbolisms. An illustration of this would be an incident during the 1992 US visit to Japan, President Bush (senior) vomited into the lap of the then Prime Minister of Japan, Kiichi Miyazawa, which created diplomatic tension between Japan and the US (as well as mockery from the global media) (Wines 1992).

The seating of the diners (both at the table and venue), is another long standing power signalling device. From feudal times the placement of diners has been a contentious issue, with matters of rank and precedence always on the minds of the host and guests (Brillat-Savarin 1970 55; Visser 1992 121-136; Urbach 2003 992). The table itself can be an issue of contention with certain table shapes not appropriate to certain circumstances. Morgenthau (1985 90), discussed how peace negotiations and dinners between the Viet Cong and the US could not go ahead until a mutually agreeable table shape and placement was settled. Table placement and seating arrangements still hold great political symbolism, the title of Addley's (2009) Guardian article *The G20 seating plan: Never mind the stimulus, who sat next to the president?*, illustrates exactly how much importance and symbolism is given to the seating plan of where agents sit at meal-events. Addley's article continues to further stress this point divulging that both the UK and Italian prime ministers threatened to walk out of the G20 dinner if not assigned seats closer to the newly inaugurated president Obama (Addley 2009). The choice of venue also symbolises the host nation's ideas about the power of the guests attending. Morgan (2008 29) illustrates this with the case of President Khan of Pakistan dining with US President Kennedy not at the White House but at "George Washington's eighteenth century home, Mount Vernon." This change of venue was

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the fault must be placed with the event organisers, rather than the diplomats in this case.

unprecedented (Morgan 2008 31-32) giving importance and honour to President Khan as it symbolised him as a contemporary version of Washington.

Finally, the amount of formality that is present at the meal-event illustrates the power relationship between the agents. Lack of formality can appear to imply to some actors the appearance of equal rank amongst diners while meaning nothing of the sort to the host (Morgenthau 1985 89-90). In other situations, lack of formality can imply closer diplomatic bonds (Visser 1992 121-136), or as Morgan (2008 36-37) relates, a change of power and control. Indian Prime Minister Nehru's 1961 US visit came with a caveat that he wished for "simplicity" and a lack of ceremony. Morgan explains that this request changed the power relationship:

*Nehru took the symbol of power normally found in the ceremonial structure of a formal dinner and transformed it with his request for simplicity. In doing this he turned the power dynamic on its head and created an entirely new platform that he controlled. ... Nehru, not his host, maintained the control.(Morgan 2008 37)*

This alteration of diplomatic ceremony changed not only the diplomatic meal but the power balance and the rest of the political negotiations on Nehru's trip.

Thus, simple changes can alter both the power relationship at the dinner and the political sphere. Factors such as who dines, what (and how much) is eaten, where the diners are seated (both at the table and venue) and even the formality of the event, all tie into the symbolic-cultural definition of food, radiating a message about the power relationships between the actors which can be observed from outside the meal event (Morgenthau 1985 86-92; Morgan 2008 4-6).

### **Effective use of prestige and diplomatic gastronomy**

In the post-September 11 world, the tense situation in the political sphere has led to diplomatic ceremony that is fraught with misunderstandings and symbolic slights (both real and imagined) give rise to changes in the political sphere (Morgan 2008 56). Competent control of diplomatic gastronomy's determinants is needed in order to enable actors to utilise prestige as a form of power and insure long term stability in the political sphere.

Morgenthau's model of prestige indicates that there are two views of the efficient use of prestige and diplomatic ceremony (Morgenthau 1985 94). Utilising prestige to keep the *status quo* - ensuring that diplomatic ceremony is an accurate reflection of power in the political sphere - or utilising prestige and diplomatic ceremony to promote an actor's own power and political agenda.

Efficient diplomatic gastronomy via the *status quo* option seeks to keep the power levels stable, bringing an accurate representation of political standings to the dining experience. This is achieved by controlling the determinants of prestige (who, what, where etc) in order not to provoke agents. Multilateral meal-events such as G8 and G20 dinners are excellent examples of this *status quo* option, and are usually quite proficient at keeping all agents happy and correctly represented - though as seen above even at these there can be blunders.

To efficiently use meal-events to advance a host's own prestige, hosts must utilise the determinants of prestige to their advantage, belittling other agents through symbolic acts and slights - putting them "below the salt" (Visser 1992 122) - yet not as to cause actual confrontation. The diplomatic gastronomy customs of pre-revolution China (Rockhill 1897), illustrates this degrading of others by impressing them with the host's power through the use of the Kowtow and the imperial banquet.

Of course these two understandings of how to efficiently utilise diplomatic gastronomy as prestige are two ends of a scale, not true dichotomies. As long as the meal event is used as a method of expressing the (flux of) power relationships in the political sphere then this paper holds the belief that the power prestige is being used correctly as a method of communication and an observational tool both for practicing agents, diplomats and academics.

## **Conclusions**

This new conceptualisation of Morgenthau's prestige power as part of the soft power and cultural diplomacy frame work is an exciting prospect. Food is the perfect power vehicle to further explore the ramifications of this proposition. Utilising foods innate nature to bring

people together but also express ideology, culture and symbolism, this paper has cited various examples of where the food power of prestige via diplomatic ceremony has enabled political power to be assessed or political decisions made.

Further research will hopefully bring to light more instances and methods in which both prestige and food can be used to assess power. However, for now it is certain that from the dinner tables of the Kennedy administration through to contemporary meetings of the G8 or G20, food and prestige have a role to play. Prestige with the addition of cultural diplomacy and soft power give us a variety of lenses with which to analyse these impacts and events enabling us to have a greater understanding of the power at play over the dinner table.

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