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Modern European Political Food Culture: in Search of the Optimal Balance of Food and Political Factors

Meetings with other politicians, business people and NGO representatives, and the discussion of ideas on how to formulate new policies constitute a major part of politicians' work in Europe today. Many meetings take place during meals; which may be ceremonial, but are often informal. The food served during these meals is commonly carefully selected to support the political strategy of the meeting. The day-to-day political meal, with its strong functional element, has until now been of little interest to the ethnological research tradition. The aim of this study is to analyse how a group of politicians in contemporary Sweden use meals in their daily work, how they choose food in relation to the purpose of the meeting, and what role they give the meal in political discussions and negotiations. The method used is semi-structured interviews with ten Swedish politicians; ministers and permanent secretaries (both politically appointed in Sweden). The politicians explained how they select topics that should be discussed during the formal meeting, and which topics might better be discussed during the meal following the meeting. The analysis showed that several ministers and permanent secretaries use the meal as a political tool, and that there is a perceived benefit for those who use the meal in a strategic way. The politicians' interest in food can be seen as a reflection of post-modern society's interest in food and meal culture.

Key words: political meals, political food, ministers, permanent secretaries, Sweden

Introduction

The study of food and meal culture is an essential and well-established field within ethnology. New aspects on the topic have arisen the last decades, such as body, gender, ethnicity, tourism, etc (Lysaght, 1998).

However, the political meal, both the food that is served and the meal as a symbol of status, is a field where little research has been conducted. Ethnological research has been directed downwards and outward to the periphery, towards farmers or sub-groups, and seldom upwards to the centre or towards politicians and their use and construction of culture. The study of politicians is normally confined to the field of political science. Within this area meal research is limited, but can be found in the study of political meetings disguised as political meals (Baughman, 1959).

Within the study of classical antiquity there is some research on the importance of the dining room as political arena (Malmberg, 2003) and the decoration of political festive tables during the European baroque period (di Shino, 2003). There has also been study of ethnocentric aspects of national food (Attar, 1985, Billig 1995), and on the use of food and meals as a political tool in dictatorships (Binns, 1978: Gronow, 2003). Political satires based on research, such as Klaus Steffen's book (1999) on banquets under the regime of the former DDR in east Germany, show that politicised food can be a subject with many aspects.

Aim, research methods and empirics

This article will attempt to highlight some ethnological aspects of the political meal's function and how politicians as a group use meals in their daily work.

The aim is to discuss how ministers and permanent secretaries in Sweden today use the meal strategically and how it is chosen as an arena for political meetings.

The research methods used were qualitative in-depth interviews. The empirical material comprises ten interviews with ministers and permanent secretaries. The interviewees chosen were Swedish government ministers or permanent secretaries from the last 10 years who responded positively to an e-mail request to participate in this study. Six were currently incumbent, four were in office in the mid 1990s. They are all hereafter called politicians. The request to participate was e-mailed to 57 politicians, and most declined due to lack of time. The interviews took place between April 2003 and May 2004 using an interview guide with nine semi-structured and thematic questions (Kvale, 1997:121) on how politicians use food in their work. Interviews were between 15-30 minutes long, tape recorded, and later transcribed. Two interviews were conducted via e-mail.

The answers in the transcribed interviews were systematically coded using the scheme of chosen categories, focusing on the concepts and methods underlying how politicians use food and the meal situation in their day-to-day work (Polit & Hungler, 1995:520-1).

Background

Within the field of *political meal culture* there are studies of associations between food and ascribed national qualities (Appadurai, 1988; Verlegh, 2000). Food and the meal is an expression of the identity the individual identifies with or wants to be identified with, something that can be noticed today in actions performed by animal liberation groups, and also in political demands for boycotts of certain countries' products. Examples include boycotts of South African products in the 1980s against apartheid, or of French wines in the mid 90s during the atomic bomb tests in the south Pacific. Food which can be connected with regional or local places is proven to have a higher economic value than other food (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Hall & Sharples, 2003). Governments and authorities, especially within the EU, have been attentive to the economic potential in developing a special local or regional food culture (Cederman, 2001:17, Salomonsson 2001:24, 43, Jones & Jenkins 2002:115). Sweden chose to profile its regional food culture during its 6 month tenure as chair of the EU in spring 2001, the same process having been noticeable during Finland's tenure in autumn 1999 (Tellström, et al. 2003). A varied mix of food, raw products and dishes is an important part of the new European political project since it is regarded as a signal of prosperous economic development within the region, an important EU goal (EC Culture, 2000; Delanty, 1998). Politicians' personal interest in food, revealed by their publishing cookery or gastronomic travel books, is also a sign of the importance of food culture today (e.g. Kohl, 1996).

A political meal is a meal where several persons meet to discuss political issues, and is also an arena where political status can be expressed, often in a ritualised form where the meal is a necessary part of the ritual's expression (Moore, 1984:100).

Results

Planned political meal conversations

The character of a political meal is that it has a political purpose. The political discussion is always of superior importance to the food, however, the meal can be a key to reaching a desired political goal. At political meals the guests are never present as private individuals, but they can have personal conversations. As one of the politi-

cians interviewed said: *“You eat for a political purpose, not to enjoy yourself as you do with friends, and you are always on duty.”*

The interviewees used meals in different ways in their work, from the very well-planned meal to the less structured. They all agreed that the meal makes another type of conversation possible than that during a traditional political meeting. The meal creates an informal atmosphere where it is possible to have assumed discussions without preconceptions; it's easier to sound out opinion. The meal can function as an “ice-breaker” a way to approach difficult topics: *“The meal can be a good ‘starter’, a conversation piece to begin with before you start the political discussion”*. During a meal anything from horses to architecture or flowers to travel can be discussed and through informal conversation a mutual understanding is created and a personal relationship can be built: *“At a meal you can get signals on what is possible, and what isn't”*. During the meal the individual person is observable; personal manners are displayed (not putting elbows on the table etc), and how much at ease someone is with eating in public: *“This gives important information on what your guest's background is”*. The interviewees most appreciated those meals with as few formalities as possible, because at that type of meal the political agenda can be best addressed: *“It's good to talk one-to-one with a political colleague or business representative, because that provides an opportunity to really talk things through”*.

One politician said that he often combines meals with short one or half hour meetings with his international colleagues, and that the meeting continues during a lunch of the same duration. Both periods are filled with political discussion on different topics, and *“as host I choose when to discuss which question, the one suited best to the formal part, and the one more profitably discussed during the informal lunch”*. Another said that the formal part is more focused on political standpoints and questions of a technical nature, and during the meal the discussions follow a wider range, e.g. relations between Europe and the US. Sometimes when the formal meeting runs short of time, less controversial questions can be carried over from the official agenda to the informal meal: *“In the lunch talks more people can participate in the discussion without necessarily having formal knowledge of the issues discussed, and therefore unexpected or unorthodox remarks are made”*.

The meal can be an opportunity to introduce a completely new issue that is to be formally negotiated in the future, or provide room for further informal discussion of a question that isn't totally settled: *“During the meal it is possible to test issues or standpoints you may want to take on the political agenda in the future”*.

Different meals are used in different ways: *“Lunches are more for keeping in contact in relation to upcoming matters, dinners for the more long term outlook.... If the issues to be discussed are of a philosophical nature, the evening is best, since an evening meal has a better ambience than daytime meals, and this atmosphere can help in political negotiation”*.

The meal can also be an opportunity to get away from notetaking and: *“your thoughts are then allowed to be more free”*. During a meal it's also possible to take more time to think before answering a question, e.g. if you take a mouthful of food just as you are asked

a question, you must chew it properly before you can answer. This extra time can be very valuable, according to one interviewee, although at the same time, you have to be vigilant as to which questions arise at table, even though the guest usually more often than the host can afford the luxury of enjoying the food. During a meal it is also possible to say things that in another situation would have seemed very calculated: *"People should feel that they are among friends, and food and drink are of course something that can be used in this situation"*.

A meal is also a good place to get acquainted:

"Offering well-prepared food, presented on a beautifully laid table is an international and deeply rooted gesture of friendship. And a shared meal is also a symbol of respect that you can use to signal that, despite having opposite opinions, you would like to continue to discuss mutual problems".

The meal as a meeting place for making contact - extramural and intramural

The dinner table creates an intimacy where not only are facial expressions more easily observed, but also levels of interest for the topic discussed more easily judged, and thereby the will to solve a political problem. Lunches at which EU-ministers meet are meals where documents are beside the plates, working papers are by the napkin, and headsets for interpretation and: *"microphones are in the soup"*. At large EU-meetings it can be difficult to make eye contact with the others around the table. A round table with 8-10 places makes for good conversation, and gives room for more private talk, and a round table creates more lively and vital conversation than a long table.

Another important occasion for making contact is the political cocktail party or embassy reception. A little food and drink creates an arena for informal discussion. One interviewee said that: *"there are some political issues that are too small to arrange a special meeting for, but too big to be put aside. It can be suitable to just mention these questions during a cocktail party"*.

One of the interviewees called these events "strategic" rather than "political" and emphasised that he had a purpose in arranging them. The planning of the guest list, the food to be served and the subjects to be discussed are all of great importance. One interviewee said that he makes a list of 10-15 topics that he wants to discuss in advance of every political meal, and then chooses topics to suit the occasion during the meal. Politicians also use meals to thank other politicians, civil servants or business contracts for efforts made on their behalf, the meal being designed to reflect the amount of effort expended.

The equality and availability of employment across genders in Sweden often results in an absence of anyone to do housework or look after children in the daytime. Also,

since maids are seen as a politically incorrect luxury in Sweden, politicians often have to collect their children from day care themselves. As a consequence, the private home is not used as an arena for official or work-related entertaining. It has to a large extent been replaced by the lunch meeting.

The political meal can also take place on the political organisation's home ground, when it becomes an important indicator of how the political agenda should be handled. In an informal dinner speech a politician can underline which matters are important and which can be seen as unimportant. These meals can also act as a safety valve during a politically tense moment, when difficult political issues can be joked about, and points can be made in a low-key way. Internal political meals can also mark the start of projects, to encourage the staff, or to thank everybody for their efforts: *"But I can think that in Sweden we are too puritan, and that we don't allow ourselves to enjoy a meal; it shouldn't be too good, and it's not appropriate if it's too generous"*.

The Swedish government has a shared lunch four days a week. Every minister is not present on every day, but the meal creates a possibility to meet. One interviewee said that it is very good to have a standing occasion every day where both small and larger questions can be discussed. On the fifth day, ministers usually have lunch in their own ministries.

The meal as break in negotiations

Leaving the political negotiating table for a lunch table or a meal break can create room for testing new ideas. During EU-minister meetings there is often an informal agenda during the meal where political issues can be discussed in a more tentative way before they come up on the formal agenda. But a meal can be a problem if it comes at a sensitive moment in negotiations. An example is the meal planned during EU negotiations with 10 new member states in Copenhagen in December 2002. The banquet food was ready, but because negotiations were running late the ministers didn't want to be interrupted, and the banquet was therefore cancelled.

Sweden's EU-membership since 1995 has resulted in many more meetings with foreign colleagues compared with the time before the membership. The meetings are also shorter and more effective. The meals during these meetings can also be an occasion to conclude what has been discussed, and an opportunity to comment and reflect in an informal way:

"Before we from Sweden had understood how important the meals were to the commenting part of the EU-meetings, and as an opportunity for post-negotiation, we left right afterwards to get back in Sweden the same day. We took the plane down to Brussels in the morning, held the meeting during the day and then rushed back home in the evening. But we discovered that this wasn't good. It was important to stay during the dinners, not just to comment on what was said during the day and in the meeting, but also to decide what should be discussed during the next meeting. The dinner was also an occasion to resolve bilateral question between different states."

Ceremonial meals as a stage

The political meal can also be an occasion to introduce political guests to the host country's culture. During the Swedish EU-chairmanship in 2001 ministerial meals were used to present different cultural regions of Sweden. "*In this situation it was also important to show that Sweden was a gastronomically and culinarily interesting country*", said one interviewee who also underlined that the meal and its components can be used to give a representation of Sweden.

The ceremonial meal may also refer to political relations, but is not suitable for discussing political topics. The ceremonial meal's formal frame, with ceremonies, music and solemn declarations, in addition to the selection of guests from the upper ranks of the establishment, rather than the most politically influential, creates a situation where significant political discussion is seldom possible.

Many of the interviewees said that ceremonial banquets are exhausting. It is therefore common to limit the ceremonial meals during political two or three day visits as much as possible, and instead have informal meals where political issues can be discussed. A dinner buffet is preferred to a traditional three to five course dinner:

"My experience is that a Swedish 'smorgasbord' on a voyage through a beautiful Swedish archipelago is good start for several days of political negotiations to follow".

Seating at table an important political tool

The advantage of an informal meal is that the guests can be placed at the table according to need for discussion, rather than rank, according to one interviewee. The seating order at table is an important means of extracting maximum political benefit from the meal. It is important to achieve the right arrangement of people involved in solving a political issue. A buffet dinner with a freer choice of seating can affect the outcome of a political meeting: "*I don't host a meal if I can't choose the menu and the seating order. Both parts are important*".

The interest in food and meals varied among the interviewees. Some wanted to be involved in the detail planning in order to be a good host, while others said that they just wanted an overview of the event, and would accept what a catering firm or restaurant suggests. One said that he wanted to know what the menu is so that he can decide if it's equal to the importance of the meeting.

Politically correct and incorrect food

The political importance of the meal can be underlined by the choice of raw products of more or less highly perceived status. This is more common at the more ceremonial meals, with French cooking and French wine being of the highest status. There are aspects of protocol to consider, and the guests expect the meal to conform

to certain expectations, particularly in the case of ceremonial meals: *“It should have the right amount and mix of high-status raw products, techniques of preparation, and wines, because the meal is regarded as an official act”*. In Sweden it is possible to represent the highest political level by the use of some of the regional cuisine’s raw products, such as reindeer and cloudberries. The meal’s political importance can also be emphasised through the care the host gives to his guests, e.g. by serving a guest his favourite dish or beverage.

It is possible for friendships to develop within the political arena. When this happens, the demands of protocol can be set aside with a simple meal in the countryside, on a boat or at an intimate restaurant. But: *“The Swedes have an informal nature and underestimate the importance of formal protocol more commonly obtains in continental Europe, where the menu, how dishes are served and their status are more closely studied.”*

Some food and raw products are more politically delicate than others. Since 2003, neither Dutch veal or foie gras have been served at official Swedish government meals. The production methods of these products are against the Swedish political programme on animal husbandry. One interviewee said that at one dinner the host realised during drinks that Dutch veal was about to be served, and that since this was politically incorrect, the restaurant had to change the menu on the spot and serve Swedish beef instead. During the 1990’s when France conducted nuclear tests in the Pacific one politician boycotted French wines at official ministerial meals. A raw product can have an improper origin, come from an improper country or region, or have been improperly manufactured.

Some food can be appropriate for one guest but inappropriate for another: *“Lobster could be an excellent choice when meeting business executives to develop business connections, but totally incorrect when you meet representatives of abused women or refugees”*.

The consumption of alcoholic beverages during the political meal is moderate, and many of the interviewee said that the political agenda is too arduous, with too much to discuss: *“Alcohol is not used as a means to get approval for a political suggestion”*.

Political breakfast meetings: a new trend

Breakfast is less frequently used in political contact making, although some politicians with a full diary do meet contacts at breakfast meetings. Breakfast meetings are more used for politicians to meet the press, with the journalists being served coffee and an open sandwich. Political breakfast meetings with the press are also a way of signalling that the subjects presented are ideas being floated, rather than government policies of high importance. *“Breakfast also catches people when they’re a little more awake”*.

The political meal in a new millennium

European political development has increased the speed of meals, and less time is used to analyse problems than was common during the longer meals of the past:

“When you meet today you don’t start from scratch as you did 30 years ago. You have already got political drafts on telephone, telefax and e-mail, and you only meet person-to-person when it’s really necessary”. A faster tempo can also be noted in the more frequent practice of serving food onto the plate directly in the kitchen. The meals are also lighter, have fewer dishes and more frequently feature fish, chicken and vegetables. It is not unusual for a three course lunch to be eaten in 45 minutes, and a ceremonial five course dinner in two and half hours.

The political meal’s venue has moved away from banqueting halls to new sites such as museums or art galleries, and even sometimes alpine lodges or mines.

The meal is today more important than it used to be, and is an important way of making political contacts, one of the interviewees said, and: *“In New York you could never be an effective UN-ambassador if you did not go to or arrange luncheons. It is there where the important discussions take place in an informal and explicit way, compared with what is said in the formal meetings before or after the lunch”.*

Discussions and conclusions

The meal is an important part of political life and is used in different ways. Its function is often seen as more important than its content. The meal functions as an arena for displaying relations and the importance the host places on those relations. The host can show regard for his guests and express gestures of friendship through his choice of food and, compared to the formal political meeting, where standpoints are more precise, during a meal a politician can more easily present ideas and probe what possibilities an issue may hold.

During a meal a politician can highlight questions too unimportant to merit a formal meeting, but are nonetheless too important to be passed over. Political lunches, dinners and cocktail parties are a way to make informal contacts and build alliances. The meal can also be a means to use all available working hours more effectively; it is often possible to squeeze in an extra meeting over lunch or dinner. During a meal two political factions who haven’t previously met personally can get acquainted, and get to know each other’s ways of expressing their thoughts. Less fraught topics than those scheduled for the formal political meeting can be discussed. The meal can act as a “warm up exercise” for the political meeting. The courses and the food culture they represent can be a conversation piece and introduction for the political discussions that follow the meal.

The meal can render conflicts less dramatic and decrease tensions; since a meal is something shared with a friend. Even though two politicians may disagree over an issue, through a shared meal they can show mutual respect and a willingness to continue negotiations. Difficult topics can be transferred from the meeting to the meal

that follows to continue discussion in a new environment and a less tense situation. The meal can also act as a seal to conclude a political discussion or treaty.

The food and dishes' value in a political meal can be central, or of less importance. Dishes can be chosen to represent regions in the country or values important to the host's country. Including dishes of a too low a status can disturb a political relation. The interviewees said that the political workload during the last decades has become more intense, especially since Sweden joined the EU in 1995. Shortage of time has meant that lunches and dinners are more often used for formal political negotiations and discussions. This has decreased the meal's representational function. Previously, it was not unusual to have politically representational dinners in the politicians' homes, but the "professionalisation" of politics has created a sharper border between home and work in Sweden.

The political meal is an arena where cultural values can be expressed and discussed, where new political directions can be chosen, but also a situation where current values that are of undisputable importance can be shown. Through the choosing of raw products and dishes, the meal's political importance can be signalled, and the importance of the alliance between the host and guest made clear.

The political meal in itself creates a different arena for the traditional political meeting. The liquids in the glasses, food on the plate and the atmosphere in the room can support a creative discussion and put old negotiating positions in a new light. Unusual food or food from an unknown food culture can stimulate uncontroversial conversation to lead onto the difficult and core political questions to be discussed. The food and dishes chosen mark the importance of the political relation (Douglas, 1984:177), and when two politicians first become acquainted they can step aside from the political protocol, and a host can convey high esteem for his guests through high-value food culture.

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