

## The Fat Man and the Quail: The Discreet Harm of the Bourgeoisie

A fat man eating quails while children are begging for bread is a disgusting sight, but you are less likely to see it when you are within sound of the guns. – George Orwell

It has long been said that no dinner party can exceed for richness of conversation the one where all guests have read, and are eager to discuss, Proust's Remembrances of Things Past. This is the dinner party I want never to attend. Proust's masterwork is a testament to a civilization grown so brittle from overbreeding it is a wonder it ever survived. It is also interminable, as would be any dinner party where everyone arrived with a bottle of claret and a need to romanticize Paris vanished. In the time it took Proust to indict his youth's vanished world of dinner parties and costume balls, the revolution to which his work pointed had come and gone several times and Marcel hadn't even managed to crack open a window.

As a standard of good taste in dinner party conversation, Proust remains illustrative. To engage competently one requires the leisure hours of a privileged class, a passing familiarity with literary history and the willingness to be excruciatingly bored for the sake of civilization. Imperviously non-controversial, discussing Proustian topics allows for the flexing of well-toned intellectual muscle in ways that will neither provoke fellow dinner guests to upset a decanter of shiraz, or the new world order. It's everything dinner party conversation should be: intellectually stimulating, morally ambiguous, posing no threat to the enjoyment of the excellent food to which it exists as backdrop. The irony of the dinner party's institutionalization as pleasant, staid and non-revolutionary is significant when one considers that the bourgeois ritualization of the

public consumption of food arose from revolution – the French one in particular. As Harvard historian Rebecca Spang documents, the restaurant was invented not, as received wisdom has it, simply because itinerant and unemployed post-revolution chefs were wandering about the city looking to cook for new masters, preferably ones not so prone to losing their heads. Spang’s research suggests the French invented the restaurant because of a national perception that good food eaten amongst one peers in a public setting was a good and fraternal idea. Dinner parties occur in private spaces but as public spectacles conducted for the benefit of one’s fellow guests. As such, they share the same historic roots as the restaurant.

The spectacle of public consumption of food was not new. For centuries the French aristocracy had insisted that their social inferiors witness them dining before tables so sumptuous none of them could ever aspire to eat so well. The meals observed formalities so laborious that three men were assigned for the filling of the King’s wine glass. It is less fantastic that the gallery went away envious than that Europe was once ruled by a class of people that thought obliging hungry men from lower social castes to witness their gluttony could lead to any good. By the 1780s, the ancient custom of the King’s meal – the *grand couvert* – had “become to many an empty formality; no longer inspiring awe, it instead provoked slight embarrassment.” The problem of how the many might come to enjoy the luxurious repast of the few perplexed French thinkers. Of the three defining virtues of the new French republic, says Spang “fraternity,” more than equality and liberty, served as the impetus to preserve from the grand couvert, the aspect of consumption that the French people admired – its communality. The French also liked the publicity of a good spread. Excellent food was no longer to be enjoyed by the few and

observed by the many. It was now to be enjoyed by the many, to be observed by the many. And oh, how it was enjoyed.

As Spang points out, though, the ability of the French people to enjoy approximations of aristocratic indolence and gluttony did not make the nation a more fraternal and equal society. On the contrary, it tended to make them indolent and gluttonous. That any Parisian with 15 or 20 Francs could eat like a King was decried by many contemporary observers, including the French writer Louis Sébastien Mercier who wrote: “Fine food made him [the worker] insolent, lazy, libertine, greedy and gluttonous.” William Makepeace Thackeray would not have disagreed, even if his mouth was not stuffed with food. Which, whenever he was in Paris, it seemed inevitably to be.

In “Memorials of Gormandizing,” an 1841 article on the joys of the Parisian restaurant, Thackeray describes food so succulent the dinner conversation was reduced to the following:

Gustavus: ‘Chop, chop, chop.’

Michael Angelo. ‘Globlobloblob.’

G. ‘Gobble.’

M.A. ‘Obble.’

In the novel Tremor Intent, Anthony Burgess describes a meal aboard a luxury liner that devolves into an eating contest in which these many beautiful dishes – roast lamb persillee, onion and gruyere casserole, filet mignon a la romana, avocado halves with caviar and a cold chiffon sauce, roast potato with sausage stuffing – are served to satisfy the appetite of two men killing time. As their bellies fill, their minds vacate with the perspiration dripping from their brow. In due course, the ocean receives most of this

bounty. Is it impossible not to want to kill a good thing by loving it too much? The attempt to democratize a ritual that is based on the aristocratic desire to shock common people, by displaying to them the quantity of its culinary riches – and to amaze them at the infinite ways of preparing food – continually runs afoul of the same shoals. Like a dog to its master, public ceremonies and institutions based around the consumption of food, seem always to find their way back to extravagance, the excess of quality if not necessarily outright gluttony.

The bourgeois dinner party exists to counterbalance this excess. The ritual seems designed to prove that intellectual activity can occur simultaneously with the indulgence of the senses. Eager to avoid the appearance of sensory overload, European bourgeois seem determined to punish themselves with dullness masquerading as refinement. In Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972), the interminable and endlessly prolonged dinner party of well-dressed professionals around a nicely appointed dining room table, becomes the metaphor for the vacuity and cruelty of a class. Why do European men work so hard driving an economic system that impoverishes all those who lack capital, so that they may rush home to emerge in the evening with bored spouses to accompany them to the well-appointed tables of people they don't necessarily like? Why do successful couples define their success by wearing evening clothes they do not find comfortable, by the display of table manners too refined, to allow for the enjoyment of food too evolved to nourish, all the while being socially edified with stories designed to show the cultural and intellectual advancement their participation in such lives categorically refutes no matter how often they discuss Proust, or whatever is the Proust of the moment (Jonathan Safran-Foer, you're wanted on Line One)? Why would anyone

want to emulate this? Perhaps no one does. Few dress – not really – for contemporary dinner parties. Using one’s fork as a spoon is no longer gauche, nor is setting the knife on the left hand side of the plate. Conversation need not be stilted nor stifled by some inherited sense of propriety. Religion and politics at the dinner table? Pass the controversy please. Dinner parties are hosted and attended largely by those who scorn the bourgeois even as they attempt the subversion or rehabilitation of their rituals.

The contemporary appropriation of the term bourgeois is ironic. A knowing wink maintains the former aristocratic pronunciation of the word, even as it invests usage of the word with a blunted and inverted proletarian critique. Bourgeois has become synonymous with boring at a time when being boring isn’t considered half bad and when boring doesn’t really mean boring. When you admit to liking good whiskey and artisanal infused vinegars you will shake your head at yourself and say, “I’m so bourgeois.” So *bourgeois*. The final syllable dribbles out like an anaesthetized Tsa Tsa Gabor drooling through desiccated lips, the result of minor cosmetic surgery. In intellectual circles where everyone is, at least, a former vegan and punk rocker, being bourgeois is naughty in the way Rod Stewart once was. Few aspire to Rod Stewartization anymore, but, human nature being what it is, bad behaviour continues to beckon.

The term bourgeois has become a self-applied epithet, a categorical admission of gourmandry. It remains in usage as a reflective acknowledgement that there remains something unsavoury about public rituals based around the fetishization of matter intended to satisfy a basic human want, hunger. The irony of its use masks what its users are educated enough to know: Karl Marx hated his own class and that of Engels, the Manchester factory owner, because they ground down their workers – humiliated them

through poverty and perpetual, gnawing hunger – to appease that which enslaved them, greed and their need for material comfort and economic security. The proletarian hatred of the bourgeois springs from the natural contempt we all feel when someone has been bought, has sold his principles or his people for his own material well-being. The European bourgeois was bought with shops and the semblance of civility. The Marxist contempt for the bourgeois is grounded in this betrayal.

The institutions of liberal Europe were shaped by aristocratic men who defined good in defiance of their own betrayal of it. By allowing a portion of the people to imagine themselves better than the rest of the people, they secured their own survival, were spared much of their own dirty work, and achieved legal sanction for their continued positions of dominance. Revolution not for revolution sake. Revolution because well-appointed apartments and vacation cottages come equipped with an endless and endlessly renewable supply of rationalization. Where reason is malleable and no metaphysical category is absolute, there is never a reason to cast oneself and one's class in the role of villain. There is nothing difficult in Marx: People who have figured out a way to justify taking more than their share will do just that. People putting in the time deserve as good as those with the capital and the shares. Spread the money around. Dole it out, not just within national borders, but to everyone in this global economy doing the work, or from lands coughing up with the raw resources. 12-year-old girls make 12 cents a day making us shoes, because we do not know how to get angry enough about it to make our governments make the companies that do it stop. Surely, refusing to eat well couldn't change anything, could it?

We have a long tradition of mocking the notion that self-abnegation can be a force for change. Western audiences laughed at Greta Garbo's Ninotchka (1939) for the austerity of her life. How ridiculous for a beautiful communist women to come to Paris and refuse to indulge in all the wonderful civilization – the clothes, the liquor, the dinners and the company of urbane bourgeois Parisian men – that the wonderful West had to offer. What cause could be worth such self-denial? And what will all of our collective self-denial of excellent sauces achieve anyway? Since we have to eat, why not eat together and why not eat well? Can we not discuss change over a well-appointed table?

Even George Orwell liked a good spread. In Homage to Catalonia, the book with which Orwell finally succeeding in portraying his version of The Spanish Civil War to the reading public, he acknowledges that as soon as he returned from the Aragon front, he and his wife indulged in the very best luxury items Barcelona hotels could provide: “God forbid that I should pretend to any personal superiority. After several months of discomfort I had a ravenous desire for decent food and wine, cocktails, American cigarettes, and so forth, and I admit to having wallowed in every luxury that I had money to buy.” I like to think of Orwell stuffing his famished face with serrano ham. Of all life's small pleasures, few are as savoury or melt as wonderfully on the tongue as good Serrano, served at room temperature. Let he, who on a summer's day has not cheered his tonic with gin, throw the first scone.

Orwell returned from Spain with a bullet hole through his neck. If he wanted to spend the rest of his life bathing in béchamel, hadn't he earned the right? Of course, he did no such bathing. He returned from Spain determined to tell Britain what was really going down. No one wanted to know. Who wants to learn that by financing communism

in Spain, they'd been directly financing and supporting anti-revolutionary and fascistic aims? Book and journal editors alike, previously happy to consider Orwell's contributions, suddenly found themselves unable to consider his work. Past a certain point, it is always much easier to cover one's ears than to change one's actions. There was an orthodox position – the communists were right. Orwell was outside it. Orwell was wrong, bullet hole or not.

In a 1938 letter to Raymond Mortimer, then the literary editor of The New Statesman and Nation, Orwell claimed he had proof of rejection on such political grounds, but that the incriminating material was then in the possession of Stephen Spender. Not surprising that Orwell might have turned to Spender for support. A poet associated with the Auden group whose members, like Orwell, came of age after The Great War, Spender was critical of The Bloomsbury Group, the literary group which preceded his own on the grounds that its members – Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West – did themselves and their readers a disservice by retreating into the traditional *art pour l'art* defense. In World Within World, Spender's precocious autobiography – written as it was at the age of 40 – he wrote that, for an epitaph, he wanted the same words he used to critique Bloomsbury apoliticism: “Sensibility is Not Enough.”

The similarity of Orwell's and Spender's upbringings did not prevent them from drawing very different conclusions on how best to combat political systems designed to protect and grow the privileges of the few at the expense of the many. Spender, as with Auden, Christopher Isherwood and many others – was an outspoken supporter of pacifism. To Orwell, this was nonsense. Orwell believed that failure to meet with violence those who use violence is the same as saying it is ok for rich people to kill poor

people but not the other way around. In a 1942 essay called “Pacifism and the War” he wrote, “The idea that you can somehow remain aloof from and superior to the struggle, while living on food which British sailors have to risk their lives to bring you, is a bourgeois illusion bred of money and security.” Living on British sailors is one thing. Living on food which, even the poorer of the West, enjoys in an almost limitless abundance, because of a grotesque maldistribution of global wealth, is something else altogether. When we are seen to live largely, if not exclusively, for comfort and the society of our friends how can we pretend to want to help anyone? Governments desist when they fear the power of their opponents. Who has ever feared those too afraid to sacrifice material comfort to succour strangers in need?

It remains thus: eat we must. Why not well and amongst friends? That Ninotchka was too uptight to get room service doesn't make her a hero of the people; it makes her hungry. Hungry people aren't happy. What made the socialists who came of age between the wars angry, was their sense that for the first time in human history there existed enough material wealth and technology to eradicate hunger globally. Food is a good thing. If dinner parties serve to remind us of how good it is to break bread in the company of friends, they ought also remind us how terrible it is that the same conditions that allow us to live lives of such comfort and abundance prevent the majority of people on the planet from breaking any bread at all, and seldom in conditions that might be described as a party. As with sensibility, good food with good friends is not enough.

The immediate cessation of dinner parties will not change this. I don't know if the immediate cessation of Safran-Foer's career will change anything either, but I advocate it nonetheless. Life at the cottage in France just sounds so *rough*. But these are some of the

things we can be fairly certain will change nothing either: protesting in designated protest areas while the people we protest laugh at our obedience and the police wonder when they'll actually meet opponents with spines; the publication of indie zines; infighting over identity politics at academic conferences. Our appropriation of the term bourgeois, initiated with irony, has become authentic. We are the new sell-outs. We come from that portion of the bourgeois class which aspires not so much to the accumulation of economic capital, but what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed cultural capital. Our complacency, like our compliance, is bought not with anything so crude as currency. We are bought out with public funds that allow us to practice our art and stage our indie shows and speak at our conferences and imagine that these meager government-sanctioned activities will achieve something, even though we know full well they will not. This is our new orthodoxy: doing nothing is doing something; talking amongst ourselves absolves us of any other responsibility.

The world around us burns. We might not accompany Nero on his fiddle, but we do glance anxiously at the calendar, determined to make the culinary most of a tragically short season of fiddleheads. The fire rages not because of flints of our own provision, but perhaps its incandescence intensifies in the reflection of the steely flint in our eyes that do not blink. We watch and we hope but our hope, like the theories we espouse for the necessity, inevitability and logistics of change, remains abstract even as we understand the misery of most is no such abstraction. As though distant people and their lives were fireworks, we watch our world burn, so amazed and inured at our own helplessness to quench it, that from such terrible visions we do not flinch and we do not flee. All our lives the world around us has burned. The men to whom we have trusted the fire brigade

have always returned in suits of soot to explain anew why the flames burned too strong. And since flames burn anyway, we prefer the contemplation of the flames from the elements of our gas stove that prepare for us sauces which will accompany the roasted meats we will share with friends.

When the revolution comes, all of us will be on the right side of the struggle. But the revolution will never come. How can it? We have all retreated to dinner tables of bounty where truffles and terrines shield us from the contemplation that the proposals and plans of our artists and our academies and our democracy and our NGOs will fail because they are not backed with the only force that has ever obliged men in the halls of power to move their fat asses. The only thing that will achieve change is the only thing that ever has. That is the one thing from which we shy, since it is the one course that cannot be followed with a palate cleanser of sorbet. Every good thing we good people enjoy is allowed to exist because better people than us were prepared, if it came to it, to give and receive bullet wounds to throats. The principal preparations for each dinner party we enjoy were accomplished long ago by men and women prepared to do things that would outrage us, even more than does ketchup as a tabletop condiment. We have no freedom that was not bought with blood or the threat of its spillage. We honour the sacrifices made by others for our freedoms by making none of our own graver than the refusal to consume foie gras. That would be cruel.

Natural enemies of the people, that's what the bourgeois are. Bought by those above, to remain passive about what's done to those below. It's an odd category with which to flirt so casually. With the pleasures to which we have access, comes great responsibility. The rest of a long distance runner is sweeter at the finish and the sleep of

the good is deep. Imagine how good béarnaise might taste, how pleasant the conversation, in some imagined future where the world is no longer asked to bear the wont of our wantonness. Good food with good friends is a wonderful thing. Too often we're caught looking like the fat man with the quail.