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The politics of food and hospitality : how Syrian refugees in Belgium create a home in hostile environments

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Title: The politics of food and hospitality: how Syrian refugees in Belgium create a home in a hostile environment.

Abstract

While eating practices fulfil a central role in expressing collective identities, they potentially turn into sites of contention when individuals are forced to migrate. By drawing upon semi-structured interviews and informal observations with Syrian refugees in Belgium, this article describes the politics of food and hospitality through which wider socio-political subjectivities are renegotiated. More precisely, I argue that three sets of meanings are crucial to understand the symbolic importance of food and hospitality, and the conditions under which it feeds into a series of micro-political struggles: a) the power-infused relations between hosting and being hosted or between giving and receiving; b) a sense of individual autonomy and dignity; and c) the revitalisation of collective selves. By putting these three sets of meanings into practice, Syrian refugees create intimate bubbles of homeliness that are often subversive to the hostile environment in which they find themselves.

Keywords

Forced migration; sociology of the senses; hospitality; Syrian refugees; anthropology of food; sociology of morality.

Word count: 7,798 (excluding front page)

Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral

Bertolt Brecht

Them belly full but we hungry

Bob Marley

Introduction

It was not the first time Syrian refugees offered me tea and sweets, but the place they did so on this occasion surprised me nonetheless. Scarcely a month ago, this building was still an abandoned military barrack, before the Belgian government turned it into an emergency reception centre to host more than 600 asylum seekers. Like most of these pop-up shelters, the barracks were entirely surrounded by green fences and barbed wire, interrupted only by an entrance where a Red Cross guard triple-checked the identity of everyone entering or leaving the premises. Up to twelve residents slept in improvised rooms, separated by nothing more than dusty rugs hung up on round metal bars. Seated on some camp beds, I was talking with three Syrian men and an informant as the subject suddenly shifted to the food that was served in the centre. Dreadful they found it: it was unhealthy for children and pregnant women, the time between the warm meals was unreasonably long and, judging by its smells and cardboard-like texture, the rice they were served surely must have been several days old. What frustrated them most of all, were the restrictions on taking any foods or drinks to their rooms: no fruits, no bread, no prepacked cookies, nothing. 'But he's saying it didn't stop them', my informant said when one man tugged at my sleeve and took me to a metal locker in the corner of the room. 'Look: bread! From Syria!' he whispered in my ear, while his mates were chuckling in the background. Before I realised what was going on, they took out five long small glasses. No matter how hard I tried, I could no longer escape what was bound to happen: me and my informant were going to get tea as befitted any guest. Before I was able to decline two times, the toughest guy of the gang pressed a little piece of candy in my hands, wrapped in a pink foil with Barbie's face on top of it. 'Good, good!' he exclaimed, moving his fingertips to his loudly smacking lips.

Until that very moment I had never fully realised that, to many (Syrian) refugees, eating and drinking are far from trivial, unavoidable biological processes. Instead, they are endowed with psychological, social and political meanings that make them into 'symbolic medium[s] par excellence' (Morse 1994).

In this article I try to do two things. On the one hand, I seek to unpack the symbolic significance of these eating practices by describing three interrelated sets of meanings: the power-infused relations between hosts and guests, experiences of autonomy and dignity, and the re-establishment of a

collective sense of self. By putting these meanings to practice, Syrian refugees created intimate bubbles of homeliness that were often subversive to the hostile environment in which they found themselves. On the other hand, I hope to put forward some scarcely-drawn yet indispensable connections between the large body of work on how forced migrants deal with the stigma of receiving care and asylum (Darling 2011b; Harrell-Bond 1986; Rozakou 2012; Brun 2010), and the anthropological and sociological study of food (Holtzman 2006; Lupton 1996; Sutton 2001). It is precisely because of the strong, sensorial associations eating and drinking practices evoke, I argue here, that they are of crucial importance to create a sense of home, even in the most unlikely of environments.

Methods

But first let me sketch the context in which these findings emerged. As part of an individual research, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with 39 Syrians who had applied for asylum in Belgium, after the summer of 2011. The respondents were recruited through a variety of channels,ⁱ and they were selected so as to maximise variation in terms of legal position, socio-economic background, ethnic-religious affiliation and, to a lesser extent, gender.ⁱⁱ While all interviews were conducted by the author between March 2015 and February 2016, 3 key informants with different social-ethnic profilesⁱⁱⁱ played a crucial role in the research, both by translating conversations with 23 out of 39 persons, and by continuously challenging my thoughts and reflections in informal discussions.

The most important thing to note about these interviews, is that they were as open as possible: people joined and left throughout the conversations, and I maintained regular informal contacts with about a dozen of respondents. The encounters took place where and when it suited the respondents best, which ranged from the interviewer's home to that of the respondents, reception centres, public coffee and tea houses, parks, university buildings and the offices of civil organisations. After a brief introduction conversations began with a general sketch of the research,^{iv} after which respondents were simply asked how things were going at that particular point in time. About one third of the respondents then immediately engaged in quite elaborate talks and discussions, on whatever topic that came up, complemented with issues I brought up because they had emerged in earlier talks with other respondents.

Respondents who did *not* spontaneously engage in elaborate discourses, were asked to discuss a limited part of their 'life histories', starting from the moment they left their homes in Syria up until the here and now (Ghorashi 2008; Hamblin & Al Sarraf 2010). Usually the following topics emerged more or less naturally from the conversation: their residence period in a particular reception centre, their first social contacts with Belgians, and their personal and professional aspirations at different points in time. Both the conversation and the analysis mostly focused on respondents' *experiences* in Belgium (e.g. how they had felt, what they had expected before, or what they thought should be done differently) and whether and how they had been able to develop a *social network*. After a first analysis, their experiences and the role of these networks were then related to the assumptions of Belgian and European policies, as well as those of Belgian citizens and civil society.

This article, however, presents a number of key issues that kept cropping up at unexpected times and places. Although in hindsight these topics emerged from the very first interview, I initially considered them to be of rather trivial importance – Belgians too usually serve snacks and beverages to visitors, even though the portions are smaller and the drinks more beery. It was only in the anecdote this essay began with – which emerged in the thirteenth interview, to be more precise – that it occurred me that eating and drinking really play a central role in these Syrians' life-worlds. Because of the more implicit, latent nature of the matter, most of the data this article draws upon did not arise from explicit questions, but from a wider range of small, subtle practices and remarks emerging before, during or after the interviews. From the fourteenth interview onwards, however, I brought up the topic of food and drinks systematically, to which most responded with considerable enthusiasm.

From guests to hosts

Reversing power relations

While many scholars have described how asylum seekers and refugees are often made dependent upon their hosts (Agier 2008; Harrell-Bond 1986; Morris 2010), only scant attention has been devoted to the particular role of eating practices therein. In Belgium, for instance, most asylum seekers are accommodated in collective reception centres, where strict rules apply on when, where, what and how much residents can eat or drink. Fixed menus are served at designated times and places, and most (emergency) reception centres do not have communal kitchens for residents to use, nor is it allowed to take food and drinks to one's room. While asylum seekers are thus entitled to accommodation and food, the practical organisation of these rights also produces a practical state of dependency.

In return for these services, members of the hosting state often expect recipients to display some form of gratitude, modesty and compliance (Harrell-Bond 1999; Indra 1993; Moulin 2012). In Belgium, this became particularly evident in the autumn of 2015, when several groups of residents protested against the quality of the food in the centres by organising petitions, mini-manifestations or one-day collective hunger strikes – actions that indeed represent 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2008). Among the numerous public and political reactions, one received particular appraisal from the public. Theo Franken, the State Secretary of asylum and migration expressed his indignation in the following comment:

Asylum seekers are going to protest/manifest because the food is bad and the reception is not what they want!? Oh boy, where will this end? I have spent six years on boarding-school and only one rule applied there: you eat what they give you. If the food and the reception in Belgium is not as they like, they can always go to another European and perfectly safe country such as Rumania, Bulgaria or Greece. You have to have some guts (to act like that)...^v

In other words, quite some Belgians expected their state's hospitality to be reciprocated with a silent gratitude befitting a victim receiving help. In this sense, asylum seekers' rights were construed as 'gifts', which ultimately fed into 'debts' (Indra 1993; Mauss 2002). Or as Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 8) put it:

Until he has given in return, the receiver is 'obliged', expected to show his gratitude towards his benefactor, or, at least, to have regard for him, to refrain from using against him all the weapons he otherwise might, to pull his punches, lest he be accused of ingratitude and stand condemned by 'what people say', which is what gives his actions their social meaning.

Precisely by being granted protection, asylum seekers are thus put into a weaker, subordinate position, where they are implicitly reduced to either passive, voiceless victims, or to ungrateful bogus refugees in search of easily acquired wealth (Agier 2008; Harrell-Bond 1986; Rozakou 2012; Mulvey

2010). In both cases, the hosting state manoeuvres itself into a superior position where it claims the right to determine the concrete conditions of the right to hospitality:

The family despot, the father, husband and boss, the master of the house determines the laws of hospitality. He gives form to them and subjects himself to it so that he can also subject others to the forcing power of hospitality (Derrida 1998, 104; see also Brun 2010).

What Syrians did by offering me sugared tea and candy, can therefore be read as a subversive act through which they created a temporary microsphere in which all apparent social roles were reversed: in that particular situation, they were *giving* food and drinks, rather than *receiving* them; they were *hosting* me, a Belgian guest, thereby subjecting me to their eating and drinking routines.^{vi} In this sense they were engaging in the power struggle springing forth from any such a 'gift', by trying to shift and change their position vis-à-vis the giver (Mauss 2002; Bourdieu 1977; Cabot 2013).

These temporary subversions of the social order also recurred in encounters with recognised refugees living outside the centres. Even in the first interview, for instance, I was naively surprised by the Syrian breakfast that was waiting for me: yoghurt, sliced raw tomato, cucumber, Syrian bread, humus, Zaattar and a pot of strong Arabic coffee. The same rationale seemed to underlie this eating ritual: from being a guest depending on his hosting state's benevolence, this young man transformed himself into a worthy host. Even before I could thank him to receive me at his place – something he had insisted upon when we agreed to meet over the phone – he immediately introduced himself by means of a counter-discourse refuting his inferior status of aid-recipient :

I am strong one, I am here, okay, I am professional, I have my experience. You have mind I have mind, you have eyes I have eyes okay. We are the same, you are feeling I am feeling. You are professional in your job and your study and I have professional on my own. So, we have to respect each other, I don't have to beg you, if you are even a god, I don't beg you, I don't need anything from you, because I know myself.

And it didn't take long before he countered the prevailing stereotype of refugees as benefit-seekers:

You need to take care of yourself, without help from the government. It's good for your soul to. You need to do things yourself, don't rely on others... Don't hang on the backs of others, or you will never stand on your own legs.

Even though his actions may seem less spectacular compared to those of the centre residents, it is in no way less subversive. By simultaneously enacting hospitability and producing a meritocratic discourse he refutes first, his socio-legal status as a refugee in need of protection by a powerful host and second, the negative socio-economic stereotypes surrounding that status. As in many of the other informal encounters I had with Syrian refugees, this young man created a 'home' in which the structural positions of host and guest were turned upside down (cf. Rozakou 2012). He made it clear

to me, in his own words, that he was a 'genuine person', who deserved to be invested in through services and benefits, as he would repay them as soon as possible. In Rancière's (1999) conception: at the very moment he invites me to his house and serves me a Syrian breakfast, this man changes the subject-definition that was imposed upon him from the outside: rather than a dependent, needy refugee, he presents himself here as an equal, 'genuine' person with a respectable social identity.

Restoring normality

There is more to these home-making processes, however, than the mere subversion of power relations between host and guest. As Derrida (1998) noted, 'being at home with oneself' often requires the ability to receive guests. Put differently, acting as hosts also serves to restore a sense of social normality. This resonated strongly with the response a middle-aged man gave to the question what he missed most about Syria, apart from the people of course:

Yes sometimes too much, difficult questions why? I built it, and I make, the ehm, communal, like this, like this, apart, this is bedroom, this is bathroom. And they agree, I make great room for guests. You come, visit me, for guests, and when you, come to visit me, you don't need anything. I make for you a bedroom apart, a kitchen apart and, if you come to visit me, you don't need to say to me X (his name), I need to go to bathroom, no no no no! All here in your home, if you want to just erm, in the kitchen, not big kitchen just to make coffee and tea, the food no, you are my guest, I cooked for you, but you need in the middle of night you would like coffee, not X! I need sugar! X! I need this. Make yourself as your home.

At first this seemed a peculiar response that did not really answer the question. But what he wanted to convey becomes a bit clearer if one takes into consideration his earlier migration trajectory: in two of Syria's neighbouring countries it was precisely his injured sense of responsibility to provide for his family, as he became dependent on extended family members abroad, that led him to the decision to migrate. In the first country he and his family had become dependent upon his parents in law, and in the second they depended solely upon the man's sister. When it became clear that those two places would not offer him any prospects of autonomy in the near and middle-term future, he decided to risk the trip to Europa before completely running out of cash. In other words, crucial in his experience of being home, was the ability to be a host – and, by definition, not being the 'guest'.

There is thus something more to these eating and drinking practices than merely a reversal of power relations: at least as important is the creation of an intimate, protective microsphere where everything appears reassuringly normal (Author 2016; Sloterdijk 2009). In the process of making a home, spaces are turned into places endowed with meaning, affect and, in some cases, a wider sense of belonging^{vii} (Hammond 2004). As scholars on creating a sense of home have argued, the presence of everyday objects, sensory impressions and familiar routines are crucial to experience a sense of homeliness (Easthope 2004; Mallett 2004). Perhaps this helps explain why food may acquire such central

importance to people who (were forced to) migrate(d): as most of the anchors that once provided ontological security to their lives were left behind against their will (objects, sensory impressions, routines), eating and drinking seemed almost bound to acquire a more significant role in *restoring a sense of intimacy, safety and normality* (Seremetakis 1994).

What makes such practices nonetheless *subversive* in particular cases, is their relation to the environment in which they take place. The Syrians participating in this research refuted two subjectivities that were imposed upon them: the socio-legal position of asylum seekers and refugees, and the informal moral expectations they gave rise to. These subversions were reflected in the concrete settings where these encounters took place: outside residents were waiting in the cold rain, amid barbed wire and security guards, whilst inside we were cosily chatting around an improvised coffee table with a glass of sugared tea in our hands. Outside that room there was no sense of privacy, whilst inside pictures are shown of better times and loved ones that were left behind. It was thus precisely by hosting others that these Syrians created intimate bubbles of homeliness amidst a hostile environment. In the following two sections, I further unpack what these islands of stability are constituted by. I first demonstrate the relevance of a sense of autonomy and dignity, before delving into the relation between food and social identity.

Autonomy and dignity

As I briefly noted in the introduction, centre residents sincerely worried about the food they were served, even when they were facing all kinds of issues which, to me as an outsider, appeared to be more pertinent, such as the absence of proper and timely medical care, the lack of adequate social and legal advice, or the insecurity experienced by many of the women living in these centres. A quite common response to my opening question 'how is life here?' entailed an elaboration on the centre's eating rules:

It's too bad, especially the food system: breakfast, noon, then 17.30 in the evening. We used to get warm food during lunch as well, but now we have to wait until we get warm food, and at lunch it's just like in the morning, it's just cheese. Just cheese!

One of the elements leading to such grievances, was the perceived nutritional value of the meals they were served, especially for the children and pregnant women. As two parents explained to me:

This is especially a problem for little children, and there are 40 or 50 in the centre. And for pregnant women. It's just not healthy not, ehm, nutritious enough.

There is warm meal, 17.30, the problem with kids is that, kids don't eat butter and cheese every day, because, one thing that, it's not healthy for them, they need protein and the need ehm, some, vegetable or meat or rice. And something else, they stop eating it, they don't like it anymore so they, only they have to wait from the morning until half past 5, it's too long, so, mothers started to cook.

Yet on a more fundamental level, the quality of the food only emerged as particularly relevant when residents were not allowed to cook or even bring in any food themselves, which made them entirely dependent upon what they were given. The assistants and managers of several centres had installed strict rules on preparing food or even bringing food to the rooms, in order to guard standards of hygiene and security – both of which could be threatened by the use of old kettles on an improvised electricity network. At the same time however, these measures annulled residents' freedom to decide what to eat, when and with whom they would do so:

We feel forced to break the rules. We are not getting proper food but we are not allowed to cook for ourselves. It's as if they want us to lie to them.

And as another family noted through a translator:

He buy too much food here, but he don't eat it, let let people make food for them, there is [another] camp [where] they can make their own food. If they make it like this it's better for them, because they fight for this food too much.

To relieve themselves of their status of dependent guests, many residents developed all kinds of strategies to prepare food nonetheless, often in the most surprising ways. They smuggled in kettles, tapped electricity from unreliable networks, conserved dry bread with Zaattar and oil underneath the bed, or stored warm meals on a cold, bright place in the room to heat them up between the meals – precisely how they managed to heat it up never got clear to me. In these cases, the ability to provide food and drinks was less a matter of subverting the power relations with their hosts, and more about a positive sense of power: the ability to do something, and to be more or less independent from direct interventions or actions by others (Lukes 2004). In other words, zero-sum power struggles to obtain higher positions than one's opponents are, in these cases, less relevant than the capacity to escape at least temporarily from the host-guest relation by providing food for oneself.

In fact, a crucial factor for asylum seekers' well-being seemed to be precisely the ability to have some degree of privacy and socio-mental space for oneself, something that was regularly embodied by the availability of a (communal) kitchen. Respondents residing in reception centres where they had a shared kitchen at their disposal (including, for instance, a refrigerator to store food) seemed to be more at ease with their overall living conditions in Belgium. Similarly, asylum seekers and refugees living in social houses almost as a rule claimed to be more or less pleased with the help they received, even though they would often be spatially and socially isolated, both from general infrastructures (e.g. schools, work), as well as from Arabic-Syrian communities and Belgian locals. In fact, one of the larger problems they claimed to experience, was the time it took them to travel to an Arabic shop in urban areas, which sometimes required travelling up to one and a half hour per single journey. Both the respondents that were living in social houses, and those that resided in a kitchen-equipped reception centre struggled to understand why other Syrian asylum seekers were facing difficulties with the food they were served – although they were also surprised to hear that some were disallowed to store foods themselves. In a typical reaction, one of the respondents shrugged his shoulders when I told him that some Syrians struggled with the food they were given:

Well, but they can't expect that they will cook Syrian food for you. They're in Belgium, the food is just different here, but they have to eat it.

Concerns for independence and autonomy did not remain limited to asylum seekers that were accommodated by reception centres and social houses though. As soon as they are granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in Belgium, individuals are entitled to a minimal social benefit of 833 euro per person, which can be more if they are responsible for minors, or less if they are living together with other adults. While benefits are paid for by the Federal state, they are distributed by municipal social services across the country, which are entitled and required to examine the 'social needs' of recipients and, in some cases, coach recipients in managing their limited budgets.^{viii} In the

cases where these street-level-bureaucrats endorsed a more strict, controlling stance, Syrian refugees felt these assistants were robbing them of some of their elementary liberties. They were expected, for instance, to deal 'responsibly' with the limited amount of money they received, and to adapt their consumption and eating practices accordingly:

Translator: They wanted something new, the mother wanted a new bed, and she want to eat the food she want, she'd like to, but like the (local social services) said okay, eat macaroni, and potatoes, eat whatever, it's cheaper.

Interviewer: like, you *can* eat macaroni and pasta

Translator: Exactly, you don't have to eat the, to use the money for food or. And they're like, they are used to eat this (other) kind of food, they cannot just, like, survive with ehm, spaghetti, and, things like this, it should be something like this. They say they will get fat from eating spaghetti every day, it's not healthy.

I did not need translation to understand references to 'Bashar' and the Muharabat (the dictatorial Assad-regime and its plethora of intelligence services) as this family tried to describe how assistants' controlling practices were invading their private lives. My translator cautiously kept himself to a more restrained account:

She is saying that in Syria we were even more free than here. At least they didn't control us, saying oh are you smoking cigarettes again, why are you buying this and this and this? And why are you not eating cheaper?

The lack of independency they experienced as such a large problem often seemed to intensify when the topic of food came up. The central importance of such a culinary autonomy became clear, for instance, when I encountered an elderly couple who did not speak English, French or Dutch. I had not yet found the time to introduce myself, as the man said to me and my translator:

I pray for Belgium, for its people, for its citizens. To protect it from harm. And to protect it from terrorists. We are eating their food, from the first day people were so kind, helping us. Very respectful. Now we can make our own food.

This very last sentence, it should be clear by now, is unlikely to be just an accidental turn of phrase: food has a crucial symbolic place in the realisation of autonomy and individual dignity. This man's gratitude is situated here not so much in the domain of giving and taking, or hosting and being hosted, but rather in granting his family a space for themselves, so as to repair their and his dignity. He is grateful to be free from others that can impose their rules through concrete conditions and rules. In a sense, this freedom from such little rules and criteria is precisely what distinguishes Derrida's (1998) absolute, unconditional hospitality from its power-infused variant. Abandoning these conditions and

rules allows guests to retain a sense of selfhood that is distinct from the one spilling over from their master-host.

Food and social identity

Let us return to the comment state secretary Theo Francken posted in reaction to the asylum seekers protesting against, amongst other things, the quality of the food they were served. It's main message was straightforward enough: guests ought to eat what they are served, especially if they are given a number of social rights without having ever contributing anything in return to the hosting state's welfare. Besides the stratifying nature of these remarks – distinguishing partial from full citizens - there is an equalising tendency operating within both this statement and how most of these reception centres work, as everybody there is expected to eat the same food (cf. Agamben 1998; Agier 2008; Harrell-Bond 1986). In reception centres there is usually little room to express one's individual or collective subjectivities: residents' primary identity is, at least from the hosting state's perspective, often reduced to that of either the lucky, grateful victim that has been allowed access to the territory by grace of a powerful, benevolent host, or that of the belligerent bogus asylum seeker who tries to get his or her hands on as much wealth as possible. This is reflected not only in the discourses of Theo Francken and his supporters, but also in the daily practices of the centres, where there are usually no infrastructures for deviant eating practices. In the Red Cross centres – which account for more than half of Belgium's reception centres – these practices are even ingrained in the principle of 'neutrality': they cannot favour any particular identities over others, which means they cannot provide too much public room to live out one's identities, or negotiate on diverging food preferences.

In spite of these de-subjectivising rationales, the simple ability to drink and serve Arabic tea or coffee in such places appeared to be a crucial way for residents to express who they are and thereby to establish what they consider to be 'normal' social relations – in this sense, sitting outside together drinking tea is something that can be read both as a 'normal' social situation and as an expression of an Arab identity. More precisely, the Syrians I talked to were particularly proud of their national culinary traditions, irrespective of their ethnicity, political beliefs or age. As soon as the conversation shifted to food – which it always did sooner or later – their eyes caught fire, and they would overwhelm me with descriptions of koublah, kebab with warm cherries, or makloubeh. And of course, whenever I was offered a small or bigger snack, they anxiously emphasised that it was something *typically Syrian*, from Aleppo or from the mountains near Saraqeb. As one respondent assured me of the superior quality of Syrian food:

Respondent: ehm, in Syria, I work in restaurant

Interviewer: you worked in a restaurant?

R: Ja, I was a cook.

I: Ah okay that's good, Syrian food is really good

R: oh! Number, sorry, number one in Arabic, in Syria, Aleppo, in Syria, number one!

As several scholars noted (Holtzman 2006; Sutton 2001), particular foods and drinks are often experienced as 'central to individuals' subjectivity and their sense of distinction from others' (Lupton 1996). In the case of Syrian refugees in Belgium, this pride was related to two broader sets of

meanings. First, it served to demonstrate that their society has something valuable to offer, something that is of a particularly high quality that cannot be found elsewhere in the world. By emphasising these qualities, Syrians sometimes seemed to critique or subvert orientalist assumptions and prejudices on Arab refugees (Said 1994). On the whole, most respondents eagerly showed me pictures on their smartphone, not only of family members and friends, but at least as often of their cars, their gardens, brightly coloured sofas in the living room, or in some cases, holiday-excursions to beautiful waterfalls in the mountains of Latakia. By showing me such symbols of affluence (Bourdieu 1984), these Syrians communicated to me not only their individual status, but also, although usually rather implicitly, the value and merits of their national culture and economy. One young woman told me about the regular stereotypical replies she got on looking 'so different' from how Belgians imagined Syrians. She rolled her eyes as she said that 'they are underestimating us, a lot of Belgians. We don't all ride camels and wear headscarves you know'. From this perspective it makes sense to interpret at least part of their proud expressions on the quality of Syrian food as a way to refute an implicit, negative subjectivity imposed upon them: that of orientalist victims of the umpteenth barbarous war in the Middle East. The Syrian kitchen, so they seem to suggest, is something from which you Europeans have a lot to learn. Second, for many Syrians their culinary traditions were related to a greater loss than their social status: that of the homeland as a whole and its unique tastes, scents and colours. Within food a 'historical consciousness' lies buried, only to be accessed by revoking these sensual experiences (Seremetakis 1994, p4). At one point, I was just standing outside chatting with some young Syrian volunteers helping other refugees, when one of my key informants surprised me by suddenly taking a pack of Syrian cigarettes from his jacket. Before I was well aware of what was happening, three of the young men around me started shouting and laughing ecstatically. While lighting each other's cigarettes, confiding to me that 'they taste awful, actually. You know, they taste like earth'. The quality of the taste was not that relevant however: 'it really tastes like Syria, this'. After which my informant handed out two peppermint chewing gums to everyone, presumably to soften the taste at least a little bit.

What these experiences of Syrian tastes and scents have in common, I argue, is that they help create a specifically Syrian home that produces an ontologically secure microsphere in the here and now, whilst nourishing bonds with a life that was left behind. Home is not so much a place, but a situation where people, objects, scents and tastes feel familiar, safe and warm. Reviving those sensory experiences is crucial to create a home even, or perhaps especially, in a hostile environment. Eating and drinking serves as an anchor for a socio-structural situation in which all 'ontological securities' seem to have turned into quicksand. In these conditions, culinary rituals can be some of those rare moments 'when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen.' They are islands in time and place where displaced souls escape the 'historical dust' fallen upon them (Seremetakis 1994, 12).

This seemed to be the case in particular for a young single woman, who told me that she not only missed 'the Syrian sun', but especially what she referred to as 'the Syrian way of being together': gathering around a food-filled table for hours, with some of the guests taking up an instrument to play music every now and then, whilst others dance or engage in endless talks about the past and the

present. These 'memories of Gemeinschaft' (Sutton 2001) were more than merely nostalgic though, as they emerged particularly with individuals, like this young single woman, who felt socially and spatially isolated in Belgium, despite repeated efforts to re-build a social life from scratch. And a very similar course of affairs took place in one of the evenings I spend with my key informants. After eating some typical Syrian dish, they would use the first silence to text their sister, brother or friend asking how they were doing back home, or in whatever place they had landed.

Besides these positive re-subjectivations however, communicating and performing a specific social identity also marks Syrians' distinction from others. As scholars have repeatedly argued, a crucial aspect of eating rituals embodying collective identities, is their function 'to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, lifecycle stages, religions and occupations' (Lupton 1996). The potentially exclusionary effects of such boundary-drawing became painfully clear in the further course of the anecdote this chapter began with. In the improvised room of the emergency reception centre, two young Afghan men were present as well, although they were practically excluded from the conversation – something to which I definitely contributed by doing the interview. Precisely at the moment where the Syrian men began preparing tea and distributing sweets, one of them made amok with the two young Afghans. Angrily he told them that they were smelling badly, that they had to go wash themselves, and that they needed to do something else besides just simply lying there all the time – my translator stoically continued to translate. It was presumably my own presence as a guest which led the fault lines between their collective identities to erupt at that particular point in time. In other words, just when these Syrian men created a home in an unwelcome environment, they also tried to expel the hostile elements that were present. In this case, these hostile elements consisted of the non-Syrian ones, the Afghan men, who impeded the microsphere from growing into a successful micro-home where privacy, familiarity and hospitality rule the sceptre. As Derrida (1998, 58) aptly wrote:

In my home I want to be lord and master... so that I can receive anyone I want. And everyone who intrudes my 'home', my 'selfness', my ability to provide hospitality, my sovereignty as host, is conceived of as an unwanted stranger and a virtual enemy. The other becomes a hostile subject whose hostage I threaten to become.

Concluding remarks: home-making as sphere-formations

The main argument this article put forward, is that eating practices are crucial in Syrian refugees' attempts to create a home, perhaps particularly in a hostile environment. In the data that was analysed for this research, they did so by enacting three sets of meanings. First, within these homely micro-spheres Syrians rearranged the subject-definitions that were imposed upon them through relations of giving and receiving, of hosting and being hosted. On the one hand, these re-subjectivations were power-infused strategies that were subversive in relation to wider interactional and socio-legal environment that reduced them to needy asylum seekers that can be either grateful or bogus, and which could not, at least for the time being, express an identity of their own. In this sense, Syrians engaged in a form of 'domopolitics' (Walters 2004; Darling 2011a) in the strictest sense of the term: a struggle between antagonistic perspectives on how to arrange a series of social situations according to a logic that mirrors the private home. On the other hand, however, receiving guests was about something else than mere power-relations: at their very core, they enabled 'good' or 'normal' social intercourses, in which the participants are implicitly recognised as decent human beings, irrespective of their position in any configuration of power.

Second, through these eating practices Syrians experienced and regained a sense of autonomy. This can be seen a *positive* form of power, as it entails being free of the host's rules and conditions infringing upon their ways of life. Being able to eat how, when and how much they want thereby serves as a crucial indication of the 'space' refugees are allowed for their individual 'selves', and perhaps more importantly, the dignity and esteem that emerges from such independence. Third, while refugee camps across the globe have often been characterised as de-subjectivising and de-humanising (Agamben 1998; Agier 2008; Harrell-Bond 1986), social identities are often crucial for (Syrian) refugees. And these social identities are partly embodied by eating rituals: these endow them with both pride and self-esteem in the here and now, and they make it possible to re-live the past (a yearning for remembrances of long-passed sociality). At the same, however, reviving social subjectivities can also have immediate exclusionary effects spilling over from the domain of collective identities into the micro-situations in which homes are being made anew. No spheres can be called to life without expelling some elements to a muted Outside.

Further research is needed, of course, to examine whether and to what extent these empirical analyses hold for other social groups. But the available evidence suggests that the interwoven meanings of food, hospitality and home are comparatively universal among displaced persons at the very least (Rozakou 2012; Korac 2009; Fernandez 1986; Sutton 2001). It seems it is the process of leaving behind the objects, routines and persons that once provided a sense of ontological security to one's lives, turns eating and drinking into a more significant, multi-layered symbolic practice. At the same time, however, it seems hardly a coincidence that the importance of food emerged from a study on *Syrian* refugees: I would argue that it was indeed due to the central place of culinary pride in Syrians' collective identities, that the significance of food came to the fore so explicitly in the encounters I shared with them.

Be that as it may, the modest contributions this article has sought to make are twofold. First, I have attempted to provide an empirical contribution to the small but, as I hope to have demonstrated here, crucial field of studies unpacking the relation between displacement, hospitality, home-making and eating practices. Second, the main theoretical aim was to shed a different light on these sense-making practices, by focusing on the situational functions of hospitality and food for displaced persons. More precisely, through a variety of eating and hosting rituals, the Syrian refugees participating in this research sought to create a micro-sphere in which the ruling subject-definitions were altered, leading them to gain a more highly esteemed place in both a specific interaction and in society more broadly. By developing such a potentially subversive microsphere, however, Syrians simultaneously protect themselves from the environment in which they find themselves, even though this environment does not need to be univocally hostile or negative. Beyond this subversive relation lies the quasi-instinctive urge to create a sense of self, of normality, of place, of being accounted for, and of being included into what they consider the most elementary manifestation of normal sociality. By serving me Arabic tea and Barbie-sweets those three Syrian men managed to create an intimate bubble of homeliness protecting them from the ungraspable stimuli flying over their heads like bad omen. If only for a brief lapse in time, the tea, the sweets and the guests made them at home with themselves again.

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ⁱ Respondents were contacted through civil organisations (12), personal contacts in civil society (12) and respondents themselves (15).

ⁱⁱ In terms of legal status, 11 had not yet received a decision on their application, 17 were recognized as political refugees, 4 were granted subsidiary protection and 7 were resettled. 24 respondents were of Sunni background, 5 Shia, 4 Druze, 4 Christian and 2 Kurdish. Seventeen respondents had received some form of higher education. Thirty men and 9 women participated, although 3 additional interviews were conducted with individuals working in civil organisations' women-centred projects.

ⁱⁱⁱ Their profiles were: a young male Druze, a young male Sunni and a young female Christian.

^{iv} This included, of course, any basic information on the purposes and proceedings of the research, including the guarantee to anonymity and access to the final texts, as well as the assurance that they could at all time refrain from talking about sensitive topics, or request that they would not be included in the final analysis.

^v <https://m.facebook.com/franckentheo/posts/659587480846955>., last accessed 27.4.2016.

^{vi} Similar events took place during several of my visits to such centres, although always outside their own rooms instead of inside. In centres where residents were for instance allowed to have plastic cups, and had access to warm water, they would then quickly fetch some tea and sugar from their room, or in case of an emergency, they would take a bag of already opened peanuts out of their pockets – whilst apologizing afterwards for not being able to be really hospitable to me.

^{vii} See also the useful metaphors of 'producing locality' (Appadurai 1996; Turton 2003) and 'emplacement' (Hammond 2004; Korac 2009) to which these interpretations are indebted.

^{viii} As in other European welfare states, these examinations and restrictions have become more prominent in recent years, in neo-liberal attempts to protect welfare provisions from fraud (Verhoeven and Tonkens 2013; Keskinen et al 2016) – although the social assistants working in these local social services of course do have a relative degree of discretionary space (Lipsky 1980).