

# The politics of food and hospitality

## How Syrians in Belgium create a home in a hostile environment

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# Introduction...

How to understand the importance of food and eating rituals?  
A 'symbolic medium par excellence' (Mintz 1992)

4 sense-making patterns

3 literatures

- The Gift (Mauss 1917; Bourdieu 1977; Indra 1993; Harrell-Bond 1999)
- Hospitality (Derrida 1998; Brun 2010; Rozakou 2012)
- Sociology & anthropology of food (Lupton 1996; Sutton 2001)

# 1. Subverting power relations

## General socio-legal position of dependency as 'asylum seekers'

- Limited formal rights as asylum seekers
- Limited resources to practice these rights

## Dependency to eat as 'guests'

- Reception centres (fixed rules, no autonomy)
- Social benefits (budget control)

# 1. Subverting power relations

Informal expectations of obedience and gratitude

"Asylum seekers are going to protest 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 you are given.

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 sure have to some guts..."



# 1. Subverting power relations

Gifts give rise to debts

Presenting tea and sweets: subverting social roles

**Giving** food and drinks rather than receiving them

**Hosts** rather than guests

# 1. Subverting power relations

## Outside the centres

"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 am 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"

"You need to take care of yourself, without help from the government. It's good for your soul too. 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."



## 2. Restoring a normal home

What one misses about home...

“Being at home with oneself” requires the ability to receive guests, to be a host, rather than being a dependent guest (Derrida 1998)

Matter of dignity and status: being someone

### 3. Regaining autonomy

Restrictions on bringing food or cooking central to their sense of privacy

“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.”

Developed all kinds of strategies to prepare or smuggle food in

E.g. smuggled in kettles, tapped electricity from unreliable networks, conserved dry bread with Zaattar and oil underneath the bed; stored warm meals in a cold, bright place,...



### 3. Regaining autonomy

Budget control: intense experiences of (unjust) dependency if they are forced to adopt particular eating practices

“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?”

Gratitude for independence

“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.**”

## 4. Social identity

Centres and practice of rights: de-subjectivation

While culinary traditions are a source of regional/national pride

A form of “role distancing” (Goffman 1963)

- Cultural qualities and values refuting orientalist assumptions of a backward culture (Said 1977)
- Symbols of affluence and status (Bourdieu 1984)

## 4. Social identity

Sensory access to a lost homeland

- Syrian cigarettes
- Syrian way of “being together”

# Summing up

The politics of food/hospitality

And its symbolic significance...

- Subverting power relations
- Restoring a 'normal home'
- Regaining autonomy
- Social identity