

‘COME AND DINE’: THE DANGERS OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS, 1789-95

The French Revolution saw the invention of a new kind of politics, one in which the government was subject to the people. It also gave birth to a new kind of man, the professional politician, and to the complex and often fraught relationship that bound him to his electorate. Tensions had surrounded the very notion of political representation since the beginning of the Revolution as legislators struggled to give ‘sense and embodiment to the idea of the nation.’¹ The very nature of the representative system, Paul Friedland has argued, reduced the people to spectators and legislators to ‘political actors’.² Because of this new dynamic, the deputies’ every word and action, both public and private, quickly became subject to intense public scrutiny. How should legislators dress, talk and eat in public? What attitudes and behaviours should they adopt to make their government palatable in the aftermath of the king’s trial and Saint-Just’s pronouncement that ‘no man [could] reign innocently’?³

In order to meet these challenges, revolutionary politicians tended to highlight their capacity for virtue and for sacrificing themselves for the republic. Maximilien Robespierre stressed the importance of politicians’ ‘probity, application to work’ and ‘modest habits’.⁴ Other deputies described gruelling daily schedules and frugal living

¹ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 38.

² See Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 299-300.

³ Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, *Discours sur le jugement de Louis XVI*, National Convention, 13 November 1793, in Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Michèle Duval (Paris: Éditions Ivrea, 1989), 379.

⁴ David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 58.

standards to their electorates.⁵ Even supposedly mundane activities, such as the consumption of food, became suffused with political meaning.⁶ A deputy's approach to eating, and especially to the social activity of dining, not only provoked strong reactions amongst a population that frequently went hungry, but was also used to judge his political authenticity.⁷

Recent historians have done much to reassess attitudes towards food and dining in eighteenth-century politics, and the extent to which ruling élites' privileged access to food became a culturally and politically contested issue. Steven L. Kaplan highlighted the impact of famine plot rumours in reducing public trust in pre-revolutionary French governments.⁸ The research of Rebecca Spang on the birth of the restaurant in eighteenth-century Paris, and of Ambrogio Caiani on the royal household in the early 1790s, has revealed parallel public indignation over accounts of royal gluttony and the negative impact that these stories had on the monarchy's standing in the Revolution.⁹ Until now, however, the question of how far revolutionary politicians, especially after the king's

⁵ Lettres de J.B. Marragon, député de l'Aude à la Convention nationale (1793-1795). B.N. Richelieu NAF 11822 ; *Lettre aux membres du Conseil Général de la commune de Clermont-Ferrand*, No. CVII, Paris, 5 January 1793 and *Lettre aux membres du Conseil Général de la commune de Clermont-Ferrand*, No. CXXVIII, Paris, 28 July 1793, in Francisque Mège (Ed.), *Correspondance de Georges Couthon* (Paris: Aug. Aubry, 1872), 213; 252; Louis-Marie La Revellière-Lépeaux, *Mémoires de Larevellière-Lépeaux, membre du Directoire Exécutif de la République Française et de l'Institut National, publiés par son fils sur le manuscrit autographe de l'auteur et suivis des pièces justificatives et de correspondances inédites* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1895), vol. 1, 214.

⁶ On revolutionary 'transparency', see Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (1971: this edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁷ On the need for deputies' words and demeanour to be seen to be 'authentic', see Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Marisa Linton, 'Robespierre et l'authenticité révolutionnaire', *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 371 (January-March 2013): 153-73.

⁸ See Steven L. Kaplan, 'The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 72, pt. 3 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1982).

⁹ See Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Ambrogio A. Caiani, *Louis XVI and the French Revolution, 1789-1792* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106-110.

execution in 1793, faced similar pressures has been relatively overlooked. Food was a key theme of the Revolution and profoundly shaped the relationship between the urban poor and the deputies. How did a hungry population view its generally better-fed representatives? In what circumstances were deputies criticised for eating in public or private and to what degree did political factions mobilise and manipulate such criticism for their own purposes?¹⁰

Public anxiety over politicians' eating habits was strongly tied to Enlightenment and revolutionary discourses on virtue, frugality and the evils of luxury and 'aristocratic' consumption. But it was not only what the deputies ate that was problematic. Equally significant was where they ate, and, above all, who they ate with. Two kinds of political dining were especially difficult for revolutionary politicians to negotiate – the ostentatiously public and the secretively private. Luxurious public dining recalled the ritual meals of the kings at Versailles.¹¹ This was dining as a spectacle of power. Equally problematic, however, was dining in private, which was perceived as part of a 'behind closed doors' model of power that clashed with the new revolutionary values of political virtue and transparency.¹² Politicians' presence in spaces that bridged the public and the private, such as cafés and coffee houses, also tended to provoke public suspicions, especially as these places came to be increasingly associated with political conspiracies and plots.

¹⁰ William Sewell, 'The Sans-Culotte Rhetoric of Subsistence', in Keith Michael Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 4, *The Terror* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1994), 263.

¹¹ Caiani notes that, as late as 1788, Louis XVI was served as many as 65 courses when he dined publicly on Sundays and principal feast days; though under the pressure of public indignation this dwindled to around 20 courses by 1792. Caiani, *Louis XVI and the French Revolution*, 106-110.

¹² Linton, *Choosing Terror*, chap. 2.

In this article we investigate the impact that the politicised consumption of food had on the relationship between revolutionary politicians and the public. Food rapidly became a source of contention between the people and its representatives as well as a weapon in the Revolution's factional warfare, where conspicuous consumption in cafés and restaurants, but also eating in private, quickly became grounds for suspicion and denunciation.¹³ The pitfalls of indiscreet dining continually dogged revolutionary politicians and rendered them vulnerable to attack. These dangers culminated in the narratives of excessive consumption which played a key part in the 'politicians' terror' that decimated the ranks of the revolutionary leaders, especially deputies of the National Convention, during and after the Terror.¹⁴ In what follows, we investigate the complex relationship between the politics of deputies' culinary consumption and the recourse to revolutionary violence.

I. What to eat? Food, the people, and the deputies – a difficult relationship

Few issues were as iconic for the history of the French Revolution as food and the shortage thereof. From repeated harvest failures contributing to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789, to recurring fears of subsistence crises, hoarding and famine plots, many acts of revolutionary violence were motivated by public anger over the ruling élites' mismanagement and disregard of food shortages. Everyone knows that Marie-

¹³ On the part played by fears of conspiracy in revolutionary politics, see Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser and Marisa Linton (eds), *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); and Timothy Tackett, 'Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792', *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 691-713.

¹⁴ On the 'politicians' terror', see Linton, *Choosing Terror*. On the arrest and execution of deputies of the Convention in the 1790s, see Mette Harder, "Crisis of Representation: The National Convention and the Search for Political Legitimacy, 1792-1795" (PhD diss., University of York, UK, 2010) and her forthcoming article 'A Second Terror – The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators After Thermidor' in *French Historical Studies*.

Antoinette was falsely accused of advising the starving people: ‘Qu’ils mangent de la brioche’. More seriously, the Parisian official Foulon was lynched by a hungry public in July 1789 for having said: ‘If those rascals have no bread, let them eat hay’.¹⁵ The issue of food and shortages drove revolutionary politics – a fact manifest not only in popular violence, but also in the new republican calendar, which replaced ‘saints with fruits, vegetables’ and ‘farming utensils’.¹⁶ The strong connection between food and revolutionary politics was also not lost on foreign observers, especially in Britain, where malnourished revolutionary leaders, *sans-culotte* cannibals, and drinkers of blood populated the caricaturist’s page, contributing much to an increasingly falsified image of revolutionary events in the English public imagination. Since then, the topic of food in French revolutionary politics has drawn historians’ attention and there has been considerable research on the impact of shortages and suspected famine plots on the Revolution.¹⁷ Historians have also investigated the origins of widespread public expectations, both before and after 1789, that governments provide for the people, a trend reflected in the women’s march to Versailles to fetch the royal ‘baker’ in October 1789 and in public murmurs such as ‘at least under Robespierre, there was bread’ in the Thermidorian Reaction.

¹⁵ See Kaplan, ‘The Famine Plot Persuasion’.

¹⁶ Matthew Shaw, *Time and the French Revolution: the Republican Calendar, 1789-year XIV* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Royal Historical Society/The Boydell Press, 2011), 3; 70-71; 161; quotation from Sanja Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 121.

¹⁷ See Richard Cobb, *Les armées révolutionnaires: instrument de la Terreur dans les départements, avril 1793-floréal an II*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1961-1963); his *Terreur et subsistances, 1793-1795* (Paris: Librairie Clavreuil, 1965); and *Death in Paris: the records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795-September 1801, Vendémiaire Year IV-Fructidor Year IX* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). See also Kaplan, *The Famine Plot*, and his work *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade During the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

The language of hunger, of food shortages, and of retribution for the elite's ignorance of the poor's despair was that of the streets and of that problematic category of political activists – the *sans-culotte*.¹⁸ Historians such as Haim Burstin, David Andress and Michael Sonenscher have shone new light on the *sans-culottes'* identity as a group that invented itself politically, rather than as a straightforward economic class.¹⁹ Food and the issue of substance bound political activists from different backgrounds together.²⁰ At the same time, some of the people who identified themselves as leaders of the *sans-culottes* and spokesmen for the poor of Paris, had never themselves gone hungry. Similarly, public protests – such as the October days – while focussed on the real issue of food shortages, could, simultaneously, serve the political purposes of certain revolutionary actors.²¹ Food was a highly politicised issue and no revolutionary was immune from being denounced for eating well whilst the people went hungry. The protagonists who used this rhetoric of hunger and excess tapped into common and real anxieties about food shortages, exploiting them both to assert their own authenticity and

¹⁸ On the language of the streets in eighteenth-century Paris, see Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995). See also David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Conflicts over consumption, categories of necessity and luxury, material culture and the *sans-culottes*, are illuminated in Colin Jones and Rebecca Spang, 'Sans-culottes, *sans café, sans tabac*: Shifting Realms of Necessity and Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France', in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds), *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 37-62.

¹⁹ The term 'sans-culotte' has become much more historically controversial than when it was used by Albert Soboul in *Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II: mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793 – 9 Thermidor an II* (Paris: Librairie Clavreuil, 1958). For contrasting reassessments of the 'invention' of the *sans-culottes*, see Haim Burstin, *L'Invention du sans-culotte: regard sur le Paris révolutionnaire* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005); David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Woodbridge: The Royal Historical Society/The Boydell Press, 2000) and Andress, 'Horrible Plots and Infernal Treasons': Conspiracy and the Urban Landscape in the Early Revolution' in Campbell, Kaiser and Linton, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*; and Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes; an Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁰ See Haim Burstin, *Révolutionnaires: Pour une anthropologie politique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2013), 116.

²¹ See Burstin, *Révolutionnaires*, 269-270.

attack that of opponents. Every word spoken or written about food and dining in a revolutionary context could – and often did – carry an underlying political meaning.

The question of subsistence, as Haim Burstin has argued, was at the forefront of popular concerns throughout the Revolution, uniting citizens from different social backgrounds and across political divides.²² In these circumstances, successive revolutionary governments relied heavily for their survival on their ability to provide for Parisian markets – a responsibility that only increased with the king’s death and the creation of the French republic: ‘Today, if bread is expensive, the *Temple* is to blame’, the *Conventionnel* Vergniaud warned his colleagues at the time of Louis XVI’s trial, ‘tomorrow they will say: it is the Convention’s fault’.²³ Surveillance reports soon confirmed his worries: ‘This morning there were at least 80 women at the doors of almost all bakers, making very seditious proposals, and going as far as to say: we have to go to city hall, to the Convention; it is they who cause this shortage’.²⁴ Throughout the Revolution, successive governments struggled to provide food for the people, their efforts reaching from land redistribution and planting vegetables in the Luxembourg gardens to buying shiploads of grain and planting potatoes.²⁵ In establishing the Maximum, a measure to freeze the prices of certain necessities, the revolutionary government sought not only to stabilise the cost of bread and wine, but also of ‘cheeses, butter, honey, and sausages’.²⁶ After Robespierre’s fall, the Thermidorians’ decision to abandon the

²² Burstin, *Révolutionnaires*, 113-114.

²³ As cited by Eugène Maron, *Histoire littéraire de la Convention Nationale* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1860), 26.

²⁴ Rapports de police sur Paris. 1792-an II. Archives nationales [A.N.] AF/IV/1470.

²⁵ Peter M. Jones, ‘The Agrarian Law’: Schemes for Land Redistribution during the French Revolution’, *Past and Present*, 133 (Nov., 1991): 110-112; Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic 1792-1794* (Cambridge; Paris: Cambridge University Press; Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1983), 100-103.

²⁶ Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant*, 107.

Maximum resulted in two public insurrections in Germinal and Prairial Year III, during which hungry Parisians accused the government of ‘starving’ the people in an ‘inhuman way’.²⁷

In addition to providing subsistence, the nation’s representatives had to be wary of offending the people through their own excessive consumption of food. Outbursts of public anger over food shortages quickly turned into criticism of politicians’ eating habits. The Revolution offered the French people an unprecedented level of direct access to its representatives.²⁸ The political élite in the Revolution did not live apart from the people behind palace doors, but cheek by jowl with them, in a way that Old Regime public figures had never had to endure.²⁹ Politicians could be spotted daily eating at one of the many popular cafés or restaurants, which were becoming more culturally significant in this period. When politicians ate out this could lead to uncomfortable situations; the people could see for themselves that a substantial economic gap separated them from their new legislators.

The endurance of public scrutiny was integral to the new democratic form of politics. One of the principal vehicles for this development was the revolutionary press.³⁰ Revolutionary journalists, some of whom were themselves deputies, played a major part

²⁷ *Insurrection du peuple, pour obtenir du pain et reconquérir ses droits*, Convention Nationale [C.N.] 1 Prairial III, *Réimpression de l’Ancien Moniteur* (Paris: Plon Frères, 1847) [MON] 244, 4 Prairial, III, 497.

²⁸ There is an extensive literature on public opinion in revolutionary politics. It includes: Baker, “Public opinion as political invention”, in Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mona Ozouf, ‘L’Opinion publique’, in K.M. Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Culture*, vol. 1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987); and Farge, *Subversive Words*.

²⁹ Dining in the salons of the Old Regime was supposedly a private activity, though rumours occasionally spread, sometimes circulated by servants acting as ‘spies’. See Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 226-33.

³⁰ Amongst the many studies of journalism during the Revolution see: Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: the Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990); Hugh Gough, *The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1988); Pierre Rétat (ed.), *La Révolution du journal. 1788-1794* (Paris: CNRS, 1998); and Carla Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1810* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

in influencing and shaping public perceptions regarding the integrity – or otherwise – of the nation’s representatives. Revolutionary politicians were supposed to conduct themselves as ‘men of virtue’, including being models of frugality and sobriety.³¹ In the early years of the Revolution a politician was likely to find himself subject to mockery in the press if his eating habits were seen to resemble those of the court. Thus a humorous anecdote targeted the conservative Mirabeau-Tonneau, who, upon arriving at the Tuileries, was mistaken by court lackeys for the king’s brother due to his large bulk and heavy tread. They flung the doors open wide and announced him as such, to which Mirabeau-Tonneau replied ‘I am indeed *Monsieur*, but *Monsieur*, brother of king Mirabeau’.³² The point of the story was satirical to all parties rather than threatening. In the Revolution’s later years, however, the consequences for politicians perceived to have been fattened by their proximity to the court would become more serious.

At times of acute shortages, especially, public frustrations over revolutionary politicians’ real or perceived access to food tended to boil over. As the Revolution intensified, deputies who consumed excessively aroused the suspicions of popular *sans-culotte* militants and pamphleteers. A surveillance report from April 1793 revealed Parisians’ complaints ‘that several deputies at the National Convention often have splendid dinners at famous restaurants at the Palais-Royal, at 50 and 100 livres per person.’ In this case, members of the public believed that ‘the Brissotins (...) treat[ed] themselves to such delicious meals’.³³ Frustrated pamphleteers, such as the author of

³¹ On the need for revolutionary politicians to present themselves as ‘men of virtue’, see Linton, *Choosing Terror*.

³² Condorcet and La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Mémoires de Condorcet, sur la Révolution française: extraits de sa correspondance et de celles de ses amis* (Paris, 1824): 2: 111-112. We thank Bob Blackman for bringing this story to our attention.

³³ Rapports de police sur Paris. 1792-an II. Rapport 29 April 1793. A.N. AF/IV/1470.

Rendez-nous nos dix-huit francs, et foutez-nous le camp bien vite... claimed that ‘the nation exhaust[ed] itself every day to pay and feed the scoundrels who betray it’.³⁴ Interestingly, the Girondins were not alone in coming under pressure over their culinary expenditures in early 1793. On 12 February 1793 a petition from the Paris sections embarrassed the Montagnard *Conventionnel* Saint-Just by singling him out as a *bon viveur*. The deputy, they claimed, lived a life at odds with his public persona: ‘When the people know that in the popular assemblies, the orators who harangue and deliver the finest discourses and the best lessons, dine well every day.... Of this number is the citizen Saint-Just, lift high the odious mask with which he covers himself.’³⁵ The petitioners also suggested that Saint-Just, as a way of regaining the militants’ favour, had encouraged their subsistence-related demands towards the government – additional proof of his perceived hypocrisy.

Another bone of contention between the public and the legislators was that the latter had the right to request supplies subject to inflationary prices from subsistence agencies and commissions.³⁶ Details of what the Committee of Public Safety ate during the Year II are hard to come by, though Saint-Just, who seemed to have taken to heart the lessons learned in early 1793, prided himself on his abstemious eating habits. On one

³⁴ R.F. Lebois, *Brissot, Pétion, Buzot, Louvet, Gensonne, Barbaroux, Gorsas, Guadet, Vergniaud, Lasource, etc...enfin toute la bande du marais, qui voulez que la Convention nationale aille tenir ses séances à Versailles, rendez-nous nos dix-huit francs, et foutez-nous le camp bien vite... ou Gare le tribunal criminel révolutionnaire, et l'aimable guillotine* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de Dufour, 1793).

³⁵ Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, 408-9; *Archives Parlementaires*, 58: 480.

³⁶ James M. Anderson, *Daily Life during the French Revolution* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 112; see also Igor Moullier, ‘Une recomposition administrative: le bureau des subsistances, de l’Ancien Régime à la fin du Premier Empire’, *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*, 352 (April-June 2008): 29-51. One concrete example: in the Year III, the Agence des Subsistances générales delivered a substantial order of olive oil to the *Conventionnel* Tallien. Pièce signée de l'Agence des Subsistance générales, le 20 septembre 1795, autorisant ‘le citoyen Séjourné commissaire à la vente des denrées et marchandises au compte de la République, à délivrer au citoyen Tallien représentant du peuple la quantité de douze livres d'huile d'olive (...)’. MS currently in the possession of the Librairie Historique Clavreuil, Paris.

occasion he sent Lamarre, an employee of the Committee, to bring him a sausage, some bread and a bottle of wine. He ate these whilst pacing ‘round, deep in thought. Suddenly he stopped, and asked a group of startled officials: “What would Pitt say if he heard that the President of the Convention was dining on just a sausage?””³⁷ In his private notebooks, in which he sketched out his ideas for institutions that he hoped might secure the republic, Saint-Just used principles of simple eating as a means by which virtue might be instilled in the populace as a whole. Adults, he maintained, should eat meat no more than six days out of ten. Children under 16 should not eat meat at all; instead they would follow a simple diet of bread, vegetables, dairy produce and water.³⁸ Eating should be a communal activity, rather than an opportunity for people to make a display of their wealth and social status. Citizens should regularly eat together; servants would sit down at the same table to eat with their employers; sumptuary tables, including the use of gold and silver utensils and cutlery, should be forbidden.³⁹

After the fall of Robespierre and Saint-Just, this vision of culinary simplicity as a means to virtue was relaxed somewhat. In 1795, the Thermidorian Committee of Public Safety regularly enjoyed ‘a good *pot-au-feu* and excellent bread and excellent wine’ at the republic’s cost – ‘three things that could not be found anywhere in Paris’ at that time. As one Committee member admitted, he and his colleagues would appear at lunchtime to eat bouillon, beef and ‘good white bread’, which they washed down with ‘excellent *Bourgogne*. Members of the Thermidorean Committee had their culinary needs supplied by caterers, including Méot, the most famed restaurateur of his day. Some surviving

³⁷ De Proussinalle [pseudo. of Pierre-Joseph-Alexis Roussel], *Histoire secrète du Tribunal révolutionnaire*, 2 vols (Paris: Lerouge, 1815): 2: 150. Roussel claimed that some former employees of the Committee of Public Safety still lived, and could testify to the veracity of this strange tale.

³⁸ Saint-Just, ‘Fragments d’institutions républicaines’, *Oeuvres complètes*, 981, 998.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 986-7.

receipts and inventories show that the Committee members particularly relished ham, veal, innumerable red partridges, syrups, cheese, fruit, bread, pastries, and biscuits.⁴⁰ There is evidence – though much of it anecdotal and by hostile witnesses – that even before Thermidor some members of the Committee, most notably Barère, regularly met *chez Méot*, who kept what was reputedly the most expensive restaurant in Paris, where they enjoyed his excellent foods and wines. They used an isolated room, enabling them to combine the pleasures of the table with frank political discussion and decision-making.⁴¹

At a time of war and revolution, when frugality was the order of the day, some politicians' culinary indulgence and the use of special access to food supplies contradicted the ideal of the virtuous, selfless legislator who sacrificed his personal interests for the republic. The sheer presence, in fact, of the members of the National Representation came to be associated with food-related privilege. In April 1793, rumours circulated in the areas surrounding the capital 'that the National Convention grants millions so that the Parisians eat cheap bread (...).' Members of the provincial public demanded that 'the representatives of the people (...) move to the departments, so that people there can enjoy in turn the privileges that seem attached to the presence of the nation's delegates'.⁴²

Food-related tensions between the public and revolutionary politicians erupted not only in the capital, but also in the provinces. When on mission with the armies, deputies purchased provisions at prices above the Maximum and in cash, rather than inflationary

⁴⁰ See the evidence on the Committee's food orders unearthed in Ben Kafka, 'Power Hungry', *Cabinet*, 32 (Winter 2008-9).

⁴¹ Roussel covered in considerable detail evidence for private dinners enjoyed by the revolutionary leaders. De Proussinalle, *Histoire secrète du Tribunal révolutionnaire*, 2 : 148-69.

⁴² Rapports de police sur Paris. 1792-an II. Rapport 18 avril l'an deuxième. A.N. AF/IV/1470.

Assignats.⁴³ They were also allowed to buy food for themselves at state expense. Some made modest use of their allowances. The *Conventionnel* Levasseur, for example, recollected in his memoirs the many privations he experienced whilst a deputy on mission with the Army of the North in 1794. On one occasion he dined on just ‘an egg cooked under ashes and an ounce of munitions bread’.⁴⁴ While many of Levasseur’s meals with the army were abstemious, some of his fellow representatives’ consumption levels were high. The *Conventionnel* Merlin (de Thionville), dispatched to the armies of the Rhine and Moselle in the Year II, invested heavily in liquor and sweets with state funds. Such actions rarely went unnoticed, and angry citizens soon complained that Merlin was indulging in luxury foodstuffs while republican soldiers, fighting in the revolutionary wars, had little or nothing to eat: ‘it is impossible that a good army has gone hungry and eaten dogs and rats while you return with coaches filled with ham’.⁴⁵

Deputies sent on mission were offered particular opportunities to indulge their appetites publicly – occasions that they would have been wise to avoid. The eating habits of the representatives Tallien and Ysabeau, on mission at Bordeaux in the Year II, drew dangerous negative attention. A letter sent by the government agent Jullien to Saint-Just on 25 Prairial Year II sharply criticised the two representatives for attending lavish dinners given by the rich merchants of Bordeaux, where ‘an Asiatic luxury’ was evident, with meats, fish, bread, and ‘even patisseries’ being served. Jullien contrasted such meals with the miserable diet of agricultural labourers and pointed out that ‘while Ysabeau has superb white bread at his table, the poor man struggles to find broad beans or a bad piece

⁴³ Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic*, 106.

⁴⁴ René Levasseur, *Mémoires de R. Levasseur (de la Sarthe) Ex-Conventionnel* (1829-31: this edition, Paris, MESSIDOR/Éditions Sociales, 1989), 370.

⁴⁵ For a detailed account of Merlin’s expenses while on mission see Jean E. Reynaud, *Merlin de Thionville – Vie et correspondance* (2 vols, Paris: Furne et Cie, 1860), vol.1, 207-216.

of black bread'.⁴⁶ The bread the legislators consumed while the city's inhabitants were forced to 'live off roots' was bitterly referred to as '*pain de représentant*'.⁴⁷

Similar complaints as those regarding Tallien and Ysabeau were also made against many other representatives on mission in the Years II and III. In 1795, the *Conventionnel* Albitte, for example, stood accused of consuming 1500 *livres* worth of meat and 50 *livres* worth of butter at his dinner table *per decade*. In addition, entire wine cellars were said to have been emptied so as to procure the 'most exquisite wines' for the deputy on mission.⁴⁸ This and other food-related denunciations against legislators should, of course, always be taken with a pinch of salt as they were, in many cases, based more on widespread hunger in the area or on the malice of a denunciator than on reality. The very fact that such denunciations were taken seriously shows, however, the importance of food in the volatile relationship between the revolutionary government and the public.

Differences in economic standing and access to food played a significant part in shaping the relationship between legislators and the general population in the Revolution. Many – though not all – legislators enjoyed, in Danton's words, 'fine houses and food', and had never gone hungry.⁴⁹ This did not stop some from becoming involved in schemes to reduce shortages, understanding that they had to, in Jeanbon Saint-André's words,

⁴⁶ *Papiers inédits trouvés chez Robespierre, Saint-Just, Payan, etc., supprimés ou omis par Courtois*, (3 vols. (Paris: Baudouin Frères, 1828; republished Geneva, 1978), 3: 37-43.

⁴⁷ Denunciations against Tallien and Ysabeau (Bordeaux), 12 Nivôse II and 4 Fructidor III. A.N. DIII 356-357.

⁴⁸ *Extrait de la Lettre du Représentant du peuple Garnier (de l'Aube) en mission dans les départements du Doubs, du Jura et Environnante* [sic], datée d'Annecy le 17 Thermidor an III, au Comité de Salut Public. A.N. D/III/343.

⁴⁹ An alleged quotation by Danton, reported by the son of the *Conventionnel* Cavaignac and cited in Norman Hampson, *Danton* (London: Duckworth, 1978), 59. For the land owned by Danton, see pages 62 and 137.

‘enable the poor to live, if we want him to help us complete the Revolution’.⁵⁰ Many Jacobins, especially, were concerned with frugality, questions of social justice and ‘fair shares for all’, as Jean-Pierre Gross has argued. Others were curiously unable to empathise with the public during supply crises and failed to rein in their own conspicuous consumption of luxury foodstuffs. Misunderstandings between the ‘petit peuple’ and its representatives over food were frequent: for instance when Jacobin leaders failed to grasp the importance of sugared coffee – which they regarded as a luxury and an unnecessary ‘bonbon’ – as a daily staple for people who could not afford any other nourishment until the late afternoon.⁵¹ Even radical politicians such as Marat took a dim view of food-shortage protestors who tried to pressure the government.⁵² Others, such as the left-leaning *Conventionnel* Sergent complained that subsistence shortages were a mere ‘pretext’ for popular insurrections.⁵³ After the insurrection of 1 Prairial Year III, Sergent’s colleague Bourdon (de l’Oise) similarly fumed that the rebels had ‘(...) not wanted bread, but the blood of the National Representation’,⁵⁴ while the *Conventionnel* Larevellière lamented that he had been unable to eat the provisions sent him by his wife while surrounded by invaders ‘who cried hunger’.⁵⁵ Many politicians also believed that food and wine was used by some to bribe members of the public into participating in revolutionary *journées*.

⁵⁰ Jeanbon Saint-André in a letter to Barère, Moissac, 26 March 1793, as cited in Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair shares for all: Jacobin egalitarianism in practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25-26.

⁵¹ See Sophie Wahnich, *La longue patience du peuple: 1792 naissance de la République* (Paris: Payot, 2008), 177.

⁵² See Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair shares for all*, 201-202. See Marat’s interventions when Saint-Just’s dining habits were criticised in a *sans-culotte* petition (see note 36 above), and Marat’s attribution of the petition to ‘aristocratic intrigue’, *Archives Parlementaires*, 58: 476, 479-80.

⁵³ A.-F. Sergent, C.N. 12 Germinal III, 195, MON 15 Germinal III, 117.

⁵⁴ F.-L. Bourdon (de l’Oise), C.N. 2 Prairial III, MON 247, 7 Prairial III, 517.

⁵⁵ *Mémoires de Larevellière-Lépeaux Membre du Directoire Exécutif de la République Française et de l’Institut National publiés par son fils sur le manuscrit autographe de l’auteur et suivis des pièces justificatives et de correspondances inédites*, (3 vols. (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1895), 1: 219-221.

Members of the public frequently accused the deputies of knowing little or nothing about ordinary people's problems of obtaining food. Frustration over this issue sometimes resulted in strong emotions and assaults on individual politicians. In Floréal Year III a Parisian woman standing outside a *traiteur* and carrying a young child approached the representative Isnard with the words: 'Look at that scoundrel Isnard, one should give him a quarter of bread to see if he could live on it, that arrogant scoundrel!'⁵⁶ In another subsistence-related case, 800 or 900 angry citizens, frustrated by bread shortages in their region, seized the representative Blaux, (...) maltreated him, ripped off his entire uniform and 'a third of [his] hair' and set fire to his clothes.⁵⁷ These and similar disputes illustrate the tensions that could arise over food between the people and their representatives.

II. Where to eat? Private dinners as sites of revolutionary politics

Food was intrinsically connected to revolutionary politics and sociability; so were the occasions and places when and where its consumption took place. Fraternal banquets and communal meals played a significant role in the Revolution's burgeoning political culture whilst restaurants offered a more exclusive venue for revolutionary politics and sociability.⁵⁸ Lower down the social scale, the Parisian café became the central stage for political agitation, debate and gossip, haunted as it was by activists and government spies alike. Popular cafés and *restaurateurs* such as the Café de Foy (where Camille

⁵⁶ Commission administrative de la police de Paris. Rapports de surveillance. 4 Floréal III. A.N. F/1cIII/SEINE/16.

⁵⁷ *Rapport fait à la Convention Nationale, par Blaux, l'un de ses membres, des outrages faits à la représentation nationale, sur sa personne, lors de sa mission dans le département de la Somme* (Paris: de l'Imprimerie Nationale, Messidor an III).

⁵⁸ Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant*, 103.

Desmoulins rallied Parisians to the storming of the Bastille in 1789), the Café de Chartres and the Café Corrazza, located in the Palais-Royal, became important places for political deal-making and breaking. Perhaps precisely because of their ambiguous nature as public and private spaces, cafés, especially, were also regarded as hotbeds of political plotting.⁵⁹ The famous Café Corrazza, for example, was believed to have been instrumental in the planning of the anti-Girondin insurrection of 2 June 1793 by radical revolutionary politicians.⁶⁰ Cafés were also notorious for the popular rumours that tended to circulate in and between them and as the sites of high-profile political assassinations such as that of the regicide deputy Michel Lepelletier at the Café Février in January 1793.

As the Revolution radicalised, increasingly negative interpretations were also placed on politicians who saw one another privately to consume food, particularly dinner, at their homes. In the early years of the Revolution, politics took place in two cultural *milieus*, one associated with transparent revolutionary practices that could be publicly acknowledged, the other associated with the closed world of the Old Regime, that could not. In private rooms, political actors were relatively free to discuss tactics and strike deals. Here the business of politics was conducted, not through ideological rhetoric (that was for the Assembly, the clubs and popular societies) but through personal connections. It was here that an ambitious young revolutionary could make contacts, establish political friendships, and strike deals. It was a *milieu* that, at first, was still dominated by the nobility, with their wealth, self-assurance, connections, and knowledge of the appropriate

⁵⁹ See John Barrell, 'Coffee-House Politicians,' in *Journal of British Studies* 43, No. 2 (April 2004): 210-214.

⁶⁰ See Danou's notes on this incident. *Correspondance et papiers de Pierre-Claude-François Daunou (1761-1840). Notes sur l'histoire de la Révolution*. B.N. Richelieu. NAF 21907.

codes of behaviour. This culture was still very present during the Constituent Assembly, and to some extent even up to the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792.

Yet there were risks for revolutionary politicians in being seen to engage in politics ‘behind closed doors’. There were implications involved in visiting someone’s home, and especially in dining there. To accept such an invitation was to accept the hand of friendship.⁶¹ According to Old Regime codes of political friendship, such an acceptance signalled the opening of mutual obligation. This could be to the advantage of an ambitious political actor: it might lead to the establishment of connections that would benefit his career. It could also, however, be a disadvantage. A Third Estate politician who crossed the threshold of a nobleman’s home in the early Revolution might be deemed to have compromised his independence, and let himself be co-opted by the old élites. In the early months of the Revolution, the journalist Camille Desmoulins experienced this dilemma at first-hand when Mirabeau, wanting to enlist Desmoulins’ services, invited Desmoulins to stay and eat with him in Versailles. Desmoulins gave his father an account of the visit:

For the last eight days I have been staying with Mirabeau, at Versailles. We have become great friends; at least, he calls me his dear friend. At each moment he takes my hand, he punches me playfully on the back; then he goes to the assembly, resumes his dignity as he gets to the vestibule, and achieves marvels; after which, he returns to dine with excellent company, and sometimes his mistress, and we drink excellent wines. I fear that his table, too laden with delicacies, is corrupting me. His Bordeaux wines and his maraschino come at a price which I try in vain to hide from myself, and I have all the difficulty in the world in resuming afterwards my republican austerity and to detest the aristocrats, whose crime is to give such excellent dinners.⁶²

⁶¹ On the problematic nature of friendship in Jacobin politics, see Marisa Linton, ‘Fatal Friendships: The Politics of Jacobin Friendship’, *French Historical Studies* 31, 1 (Winter 2008): 51-76.

⁶² Letter from Desmoulins to his father, 29 September 1789, Camille Desmoulins, *Correspondance inédite de Camille Desmoulins* (Paris: Ébrard, 1836), 40-1. In a pamphlet in 1793 Desmoulins gave a much more

Not the least of the temptations offered by Mirabeau was that of high quality alcohol: his maraschino and Bordeaux were all too delicious, but came at a price. This was partly because they were luxury items, hence seen as ‘aristocratic’. But it was also that alcohol was notorious for its loosening effect on the tongue. A man who, like Desmoulins, drank to excess in dubious company was letting his guard down. He might let secrets slip and be compromised.

Excessive alcohol consumption posed its own risks. Red wine was the drink of choice for Jacobins and *sans-culottes*, in the cafés and in sectional meetings: champagne and even white wine were seen as aristocratic luxury items.⁶³ The man of virtue was well advised to moderate his consumption, even of red wine, and to keep a clear head. Alcohol, inevitably, contributed to private dinner conversations amongst revolutionaries becoming heated, which could, in turn, become politically dangerous. In the tense winter of 1794, the *Conventionnel* Legendre had a ‘rather heated encounter’ with Vincent, the then secretary general of the War Ministry, at a dinner party held by Pache, the Mayor of Paris.⁶⁴ Vincent, somewhat the worse for wear, started an argument with Legendre over the privileged status of elected representatives, which rapidly escalated until Legendre,

mutated and careful account of this visit in which he made no mention of offers of maraschino or gestures of friendship from the now disgraced and dead Mirabeau, see Desmoulins, *Fragment de l’histoire secrète de la Révolution*, in Camille Desmoulins, *Oeuvres de Camille Desmoulins*, ed. J. Claretie, 2 vols (Paris: Charpentier et cie, 1874), 1: 308.

⁶³ Gilbert Garrier, *Histoire sociale et culturelle du vin* (Paris: Labrousse-Bordas, 1998), 198; K. Guy, *When Champagne Became French: Wine and the Making of National Identity* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 10-11; and W. Scott Haine, ‘Drink, Sociability, and Social Class in France, 1789-1945: The Emergence of a Proletarian Public Sphere’, in Mack P. Holt (ed.), *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 121-44. We are very grateful to Noelle Plack for drawing our attention to this subject and these references.

⁶⁴ Déclaration de Mathias Halm, âgé de 48 ans, né à Coblentz, maître de dessin à la ci-devant Ecole militaire, présentement chef du 3^e bataillon dans l’armée révolutionnaire, demeurant rue des Saints-Pères, reçue par François-Joseph Denizot, l’un des juges du Tribunal révolutionnaire, en présence de Royer, substitut de l’accusateur public, 28 Ventôse II (10 heures du matin), Original signé, A.N. W/76, no 7, as transcribed in A. Tuetey, *Répertoire Général des Sources Manuscrites de l’Histoire de Paris pendant la Révolution Française*, 11 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nouvelle; Ville de Paris, 1890-1914), 10: 538.

after assuring the secretary general of his fraternal affection, threatened to break both of Vincent's arms.⁶⁵ Later, Vincent's drunken comments over dinner were used as evidence of treason at the political trial of the Hébertists, which ended in a death sentence against him.

Revolutionary newspapers and pamphlets abounded in allegations about political leaders having private, friendly relations and sealing deals over dinner and wine. These are revealing, on the one hand, of the impact of the culture of calumny, identified by Charles Walton, in fuelling uncontrollable and damaging allegations, rumours, and suspicions in regard to politicians' dining habits.⁶⁶ On the other hand, they also say something about codes of friendship in the Revolution, and at what point genuine, rather than formal intimacy might be said to have been established. To have visited the house of a man later designated 'counter-revolutionary', or to have had a private dinner with him, was seen as politically suspect. This was evidenced, for example, by Fouquier-Tinville's strained efforts to disassociate himself from Saint-Just and Robespierre in the aftermath of 9 Thermidor by claiming that 'he had never been to the home of the first' and did not even know where he lived.⁶⁷ Having been to someone's home and dined there could be used as evidence of political collaboration and conspiracy, fears of which continued to simmer in the undercurrents of revolutionary politics even after Thermidor.

⁶⁵ *Procès des conspirateurs Hébert, Ronsin, Vincent et complices, condamnés à la peine de mort par le Tribunal révolutionnaire, le 4 germinal, l'an II de la République, et exécutés le même jour* (Paris: Caillot, an II), 32. See also *Acte d'accusation contre Hébert, Momoro, Vincent, Laumur, Mazuel, etc. et leurs complices*, in MON 183, 3 Germinal II, 19.

⁶⁶ Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 227-228.

⁶⁷ Mémoire justificatif de Fouquier-Tinville [sic], 16 Thermidor II, A.N. W/500.

In the early Revolution, the link between dining and the Old Regime style of ‘behind closed doors’ politics was epitomised by Mirabeau.⁶⁸ As his reputation for corruption grew, so anyone who was known to have dined with him was at risk of being compromised. By 1791 some of his former friends amongst the Jacobins hastened to disassociate themselves from the taint of having accepted Mirabeau’s friendship. Attacking Mirabeau’s morality was a good way of establishing one’s own integrity. Desmoulins, conscious that he had once all too willingly succumbed to the temptations of Mirabeau’s maraschino, was merciless in his journal, *Les Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, in holding Mirabeau’s dining habits up to public mockery.⁶⁹ For Desmoulins, Mirabeau’s willingness to dine with different political groups was a sign of his duplicity and double-dealing: ‘Breakfasting with the Jacobins, dining with 89, and supping with La Marck and the Monarchists. Where he slept it is not for me to tell.’ Desmoulins recounted how, after Mirabeau’s speech on the king’s right to declare peace and war, he himself reproached Mirabeau for his corruption: ‘You have sold yourself for a hundred thousand crowns’. Mirabeau merely smiled ironically and replied: ‘Come and dine.’⁷⁰

Even Robespierre had to exercise caution about where he dined. Years of continual engagement in revolutionary politics increased his caution about the risks of socialising in a way that could be construed against him. After the split with the Girondins over the course of 1792 Robespierre became increasingly wary about

⁶⁸ On fears of conspiracy during the Constituent Assembly, see Timothy Tackett, ‘Collective Panics in the Early French Revolution, 1789-1791: A Comparative Perspective’, *French History* 17 (2003): 149-171; and Tackett, ‘Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution’. See also Barry Shapiro, ‘Conspiratorial Thinking in the Constituent Assembly: Mirabeau and the Exclusion of Deputies from the Ministry’, and John Hardman, ‘The Real and Imagined Conspiracies of Louis XVI’, both in Campbell, Kaiser and Linton, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*.

⁶⁹ Desmoulins, *Les Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, no. 8, 362.

⁷⁰ Claretie, *Camille Desmoulins*, 103-5.

accepting dinner invitations with political activists or anyone who had the taint of the Old Regime élite about them. For the most part he limited himself to attending a few sedate dinners, organised by women who sympathised with his politics, but did not themselves take an active part in political discussion. One of these hostesses was Madame de Chalabre, another was Madame Jullien. The latter described Robespierre's habits as 'all openness and simplicity'.⁷¹ But even such temperate outings declined: during Robespierre's time on the Committee of Public Safety he rarely went out into society or ate with fellow revolutionaries as he had done in the early Revolution.

While increasingly suspect during the Terror, the culture of private dining experienced a notable revival in the Thermidorian Reaction, which saw the return of a hybrid political culture based on both Old Regime and revolutionary practices. During this time, public and private dinners became once more sites for political influencing and deal-making. The *Conventionnel* Larevellière, for instance, recalled receiving repeated invitations by Mme de Staël, her husband and their 'coterie' during this time. He refused these invitations as he had set a rule for himself that he would stay independent and 'not go for dinner at anybody's, excepting my friends'. Larevellière was also pressured to accept dinner invitations by Madame de Sémonville and Madame de Nort, which he similarly refused.⁷² During the same period, the *Conventionnel* Tallien skilfully manipulated the occasion of a private dinner with moderate, ex-Girondin politicians to break his temporary alliance with them. After several glasses of wine and an argument

⁷¹ Robespierre accepted invitations to dinner from Madame de Chalabre, his political admirer, who became his friend. They seem to have been simple meals. Her letters to him are in *Papiers inédits*, 1: 171-8. Madame Jullien's account of a dinner she had with Robespierre and his sister in February 1793 is cited in R.R. Palmer, *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Jullien, 1775-1848* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 28.

⁷² *Mémoires de Larevellière-Lépeaux*, vol.1, 215-218.

over recent political events, he loudly accused his allies of treason and declared that his disgust of them was so strong that he wished no longer to dine with them. The incident was reported in all the major newspapers and even discussed at the Convention the next day, illustrating to what extent revolutionary politics still revolved around private dinner tables.

III. Dinner as conspiracy: deputies' dining and the 'politicians' terror'

In the early Revolution, a deputy who chose his dinner companions unwisely and ate with 'suspect' characters, or people who later became so, ran a great risk of being subjected to ridicule or disgrace. As illustrated above, stories of conspiratorial dinners circulated widely. Many deputies and other political activists were the worst offenders in concocting this kind of narrative; engaging in mutual character assassinations by referring to one another's suspicious eating habits. As the Revolution radicalised, politicians accused of suspect dining saw not just their reputations and careers threatened but even their lives endangered, as the following cases from the Year II illustrate.

When in the summer of 1793 Madame Roland was in prison, accused of conspiracy with other members of the Girondin faction, the weekly dinners that she had given in her capacity as the wife of the Minister of the Interior, became part of the case against her. The memoirs that she wrote in secret showed that she was very conscious of the mechanics of this kind of hostile interpretation, and eager to counter it, even if that denial was only for her own satisfaction or that of the 'impartial posterity' to whom she dedicated her secret memoirs. In her defence she described the regular dinners she had given during Roland's second ministry, and which she organised with care:

Good taste and neatness reigned at my table, without profusion, and luxurious ornaments were never seen there; people were relaxed there, without consecrating a lot of time to the meal, because I served only one course and I never let anyone but myself do the honours. Fifteen was the usual number of guests, on rare occasions eighteen and once only twenty.⁷³

Madame Roland was careful to represent her dinners as models of frugality and political virtue. Both she and Brissot prided themselves on keeping a ‘dinner table fit for a Spartan’ as a sign of their virtue.⁷⁴ Madame Roland was disgusted at the way that the pro-Jacobin journalists depicted her dinners as scenes of aristocratic opulence and conspiratorial politics:

Such were the dinners that the popular orators at the Jacobins transformed into sumptuous feasts where I, a new Circe, corrupted all those who had the misfortune to attend. After the dinner we would talk for a while in the salon, and afterwards everyone would return to their own business. We sat down to dinner at around five o’clock, by nine everyone had left; such was the court of which they say I was the queen, this nest of conspiracy...⁷⁵

Testimony regarding political dinners began to be used as part of factional warfare in the year II. Denunciations based on evidence regarding deputies’ dining became an integral part of the ‘politicians’ terror’. The Girondins’ private dinners and other social gatherings were used to incriminate them at their trial in October 1793. Under interrogation, Brissot was asked about his social relations with Lafayette. He replied that he had eaten at Lafayette’s house on two occasions at most, and that at a time when Lafayette had seemed to be ‘a friend of Liberty’. In his much longer written

⁷³ Marie-Jeanne Roland, *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. Paul de Roux (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966), 168; see also 66, 72.

⁷⁴ On Brissot’s ‘Spartan’ dinner table, see Étienne Dumont, *Souvenirs sur Mirabeau et sur les deux premières Assemblées Législatives, par Étienne Dumont*, ed. Jean Bénétruy (1832: this edition, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952), 202-4.

⁷⁵ Roland, *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, 168.

defence, he claimed that he had seen Lafayette continually in the course of their official responsibilities but maintained that, 'I rarely went to his house, and I never ate there'.⁷⁶ Vergniaud admitted to having 'dined five or six times' at the Rolands' home, but denied that this constituted a 'coalition'.⁷⁷ The *Conventionnel* Fabre testified at the trial of the Girondins to a dinner that he and Danton had attended chez Pétion at which 'a great number of the accused were present' and where the guests showed a hostile attitude to the revolution of 10 August. He was asked to name who was present at the dinner, and recalled that Brissot was not there at the start 'but when he arrived we judged by the reception he received the influence that he had over this reunion'.⁷⁸

Over the winter and early spring of 1793 to 1794, the revolutionary government, now dominated by the Committee of Public Safety, came under challenge by two new factions; the Dantonists and the Hébertists. Both factions were fiercely opposed to one another, agreeing only in their desire to challenge governmental power. In the spring of 1794, the Committee of Public Safety, acting along with the Committee of General Security, decided to destroy both factions. By this time both private and public dining had become a key element of the conspiracy narrative, which had now reached its most complex and devastating form, that of the 'foreign plot' whereby many revolutionary leaders were identified as 'the enemy within'. Jacques-René Hébert, the Hébertiste journalist whose newspaper, *Le Père Duchesne*, had given savage portrayals of Madame Roland and her political dinners as occasions for vice and corruption, now became

⁷⁶ Brissot's interrogation on the 15th October, in Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Correspondance et Papiers*, ed. Claude Perroud (Paris, 1911), 384, 379. Brissot, 'Défense devant le Tribunal révolutionnaire', in Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Mémoires*, ed. Claude Perroud, 2 vols (Paris, 1912), 2: 280.

⁷⁷ Gérard Walter (ed.), *Actes du Tribunal révolutionnaire, recueillis et commentés par Gérard Walter* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1968), 273-4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 311-2.

himself a target. On 23 Ventôse Year II (13 March 1794), Saint-Just delivered a report denouncing the Hébertists and employing the narrative of secret dinners to depict them as corrupt and hypocritical. He claimed that the Hébertists had been ‘bought’ by Pitt’s agents over extravagant dinners in restaurants. He spoke of ‘conspirators [who] have signs whereby they recognise one another (...) in the places where they go to eat’. In a time of dearth and war shortages, Hébertists could be seen consuming meals in restaurants at ‘100 écus’ a head.⁷⁹ Saint-Just’s report went beyond the Hébertists to attack the whole class of bureaucrats who were getting fat – metaphorically and literally – from the gains of a Revolution. He satirised the wife of a civil servant complaining that it was simply impossible to obtain delicacies like pheasants. He contrasted this self-indulgence with the eating habits of the people who lived modestly off simple local fare that they produced themselves, such as ‘chestnuts ... bread and vegetables cooked in oil’.⁸⁰

Within days of the fall of the Hébertists, the revolutionary government turned on the Dantonists. Once again, private meetings, including dinners, were enlisted as evidence for the conspiracy. This was reflected in Robespierre’s and Saint-Just’s notes for the report against Danton, in which they referenced a number of ‘behind closed doors’ incidents. In the summer of 1793, Saint-Just said, there had been a plot to make the little Capet, son of Louis XVI, king. ‘At that time Danton often dined in the rue Grange-Batelière, with some English people; he dined with Guzman, the Spaniard, three times a week, and with the infamous Sainte-Amaranthe, the son of Sartine, and Lacroix. It’s on these occasions that some people partook of dinners that cost a hundred écus a head,’

⁷⁹ Saint-Just, ‘Rapport sur les factions de l’étranger’, *Oeuvres complètes*, 724.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 731.

Saint-Just added, using the same extravagant figure he had previously fixed on the Hébertists' conspiratorial dinners.⁸¹

Robespierre's notes for Saint-Just's accusation against Danton referred only in passing to this particular point.⁸² Robespierre, however, also recounted how Danton's friend, Fabre (then under arrest for fraud) had continued to take both lunch and dinner with the Austrian, Proli, even though he had secretly denounced the latter as an Austrian agent. Robespierre recalled other social gatherings involving 'known' conspirators where food and drink were used to win over deputies of the Mountain: 'One must not forget Robert's tea parties, where d'Orléans himself made the punch, and Fabre, Danton and Wimpffen were in attendance. It was there that attempts were made to attract the largest possible number of deputies of the Mountain, either to seduce or to compromise them.'⁸³ In his notes Robespierre even used Danton's well-fed look ('embonpoint') against him, saying that Danton and his friends used it to justify his inaction at key revolutionary moments. Vadier, another member of the government, was also fixated on Danton's weight, calling him a 'fat stuffed turbot' whom he intended to gut.⁸⁴ Danton's 'embonpoint' did not, however, feature in the final version of Saint-Just's report, possibly because it was thought too petty an accusation.⁸⁵

The Dantonists' trial has been seen as an exercise in lies and fabrication, a foreshadowing of the show trials of the twentieth century. The evidence, however, seems

⁸¹ Saint-Just, 'Rapport contre Danton', *Oeuvres complètes*, 776-7. To situate this accusation within the wider context of the development of the restaurant as a 'public/private' space where secrets might be discussed, see Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant*.

⁸² Robespierre, 'Les Notes contre les Dantonistes', published in Albert Mathiez, *Études sur Robespierre (1758-1794)* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1958) 134. 131.

⁸³ Robespierre, 'Les Notes contre les Dantonistes', 138 and 151. Saint-Just referred to these 'confabulations' briefly in the final report, 'Rapport contre Danton', 770.

⁸⁴ See, for example, David Andress, *The Terror : The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 271-272.

⁸⁵ Robespierre, 'Les Notes contre les Dantonistes', 143.

to shows something more complex. Rather than devise outright lies, Robespierre and Saint-Just stretched the meagre evidence, and placed the worst interpretation on actual events, including dinners. Revelations of the secret places where people dined were not only – or even primarily – a deliberate fabrication; they were also an indication of a genuine fear on the part of the revolutionary leaders in the Year II that they were surrounded by conspirators who met in secret.⁸⁶ After all, Robespierre himself was said to have attended a private dinner with Danton to try to effect a reconciliation shortly before the latter's arrest.⁸⁷ After Danton's death, Robespierre continued to puzzle over the latter's 'conspiratorial dinners' and their possible significance. In his private notes, he, for example, suspected the Conventionnel Thuriot of having also attended the dinners with Danton, Guzman and Lacroix.⁸⁸

At the height of the Year II even the 'repas fraternels' (communal meals eaten on the streets) came under suspicion. Following speeches by both Robespierre and Barère, casting doubt on the revolutionary character of these meals, a very nervous Garnier-Launay, a judge on the Revolutionary Tribunal, wrote to Robespierre to excuse himself from having encouraged one such communal meal to take place. He knew better now: these 'pretended fraternal meals' had been populated by a 'preponderance of aristocrats',

⁸⁶ On the genuine fears on the part of the Jacobin leaders, see Marisa Linton, "Do You Believe That We're Conspirators?" *Conspiracies Real and Imagined in Jacobin Politics, 1793-94*, in Campbell, Kaiser and Linton, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*. On the revolutionaries' fear of masks and disguise, see James H. Johnson, 'Versailles, Meet Les Halles: Masks, Carnival, and the French Revolution', *Representations* 73 (2001): 89-116.

⁸⁷ On the evidence for a final private meeting between Robespierre and Danton to try to patch up their differences, see Hampson, *Danton*, 150-60.

⁸⁸ On Thuriot, see *Papiers inédits*, 2: 18-19.

whose true identity was revealed by the ‘sumptuous’ nature of their repasts, which contrasted with ‘the frugality of those of the free republicans’.⁸⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both Robespierre and Saint-Just became themselves the victims of food-related smear campaigns after their own fall from power in July 1794. Robespierre, generally known for his restrained eating habits,⁹⁰ now stood accused of having overindulged in expensive fruit, supposedly procured for him at great cost by his hosts, the Duplays: ‘... at the Duplays’ home, he had always set before him a pyramid of oranges by way of dessert, which Robespierre devoured avidly. He was insatiable for them; no one dared touch this sacred fruit ... One could always see where he had been seated at table by the pieces of orange peel that covered his plate...’.⁹¹ This anecdote came from the pen of the *Conventionnel* Fréron, himself no stranger to culinary indulgence. Fréron went on to allege that Robespierre had also ‘partaken immoderately of wine and liqueurs’ until driven to stop in the last months of his life by the fear that he might ‘disclose secrets’.⁹² Together with Danton, Robespierre and Saint-Just were also alleged to have enjoyed ‘des grands repas’, followed by orgies and acts of vandalism at Choisy, Meudon and other localities around Paris.⁹³ Those who had hosted the Incorruptible and his friends at their homes became equally suspect: one Madame Laviron was arrested, together with her entire family, because of a ‘ridiculous rumour’ claiming that she had expected Robespierre at her dinner table in the evening of 10

⁸⁹ Garnier-Launay, juge au tribunal révolutionnaire, au républicain Robespierre, représentant du peuple, Paris, 29 messidor, l’an II, *Papiers inédits*, 1: 231-4.

⁹⁰ Peter McPhee, *Robespierre – a Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 33 and 187.

⁹¹ Fréron, ‘Notes sur Robespierre’, *Papiers inédits*, 1: 154-9.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 157-8. On the unreliability of Fréron, see J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (1935: this edition, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 9-10; and McPhee, *Robespierre*, 225.

⁹³ *Rapport sur les complices qu’avoit Robespierre dans la Commune de Choisy sur Seine* (pièces transmises par Blache agent du comité de Sûreté générale). A.N. W/79.

Thermidor (an engagement which his own execution would have prevented him from attending).⁹⁴ Another individual, Vaugeois, was similarly detained for having dined with Robespierre shortly before his fall and having boasted that ‘Robespierre only went out with people he knew or who were family’.⁹⁵

The Thermidorians’ efforts to discredit Robespierre with references to his supposed culinary indulgence later rebounded on themselves, as early histories of the Revolution accused some of them, such as the representative Tallien, of gluttony.⁹⁶ Tallien, who was the son of a maitre d’hôtel, was rumoured have been motivated primarily by ‘his palate and stomach’. In the words of Taine: ‘Son of a great nobleman’s cook, he adheres, without doubt, to family traditions: government, to him, is a larder where, just like a maître d’hôtel in *Gil-Blas*, he eats all he can and sells the rest’.⁹⁷

Conclusion

In the satirical *Lettre d’un Ourang-outang à l’auteur des Révolutions de France, de Brabant, etc. etc.*, an anonymous writer addressed the radical revolutionary Camille Desmoulins on an unusual subject: ‘My friend, I will tell you something about potatoes. I have the right to speak about them; I am more of a farmer than one is in Paris’, he wrote, implying that Desmoulins, for all his journalism on hoarding and subsistence, knew very

⁹⁴ *Laviron détenue à la maison d’arrêt du Luxembourg depuis le 20 thermidor*. A.N. W/79.

⁹⁵ Denunciation against Vaugeois fils by Ramoger, agent national de Choisy sur Seine, 18 Thermidor II, A.N. W/79.

⁹⁶ On Tallien’s political image and the many negative references to his culinary consumption, see Mette Harder, ‘Reacting to Revolution: the political career(s) of J.-L. Tallien’, in David Andress (ed.), *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Oxford: SVEC, 2013).

⁹⁷ Hippolyte A. Taine, *Les Origines de la France contemporaine: La Révolution – Le gouvernement révolutionnaire* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1885), 3: 279.

little about the realities of food production.⁹⁸ Similar accusations, as this article has shown, were made against leading revolutionaries when it came to the issue of food more generally: the Revolution's legislators, despite their efforts to solve the problem of shortages, were far removed from the people when it came to daily eating habits. Mutual accusations between the people and their deputies over the issue of food (the lack thereof or its excessive consumption) thus serve to highlight the extent of political tensions and misunderstandings between revolutionary politicians and the public.

The topic of food dominated revolutionary politics, and its conspicuous consumption by politicians became a key issue in the nascent democracy. Revolutionary politicians were public agents, responsible directly to the people. Their eating habits and the company they kept at the dinner table were therefore also subject to public scrutiny. Many deputies across the political spectrum made themselves unpopular by being insensitive in regard to shortages and by consuming luxury foods in public and (sometimes) at state expense. Fears of conspiracy, but also of corruption and undue influence, also surrounded the eating habits and dining culture of politicians in the Revolution. While cafés and restaurants played a key role in revolutionary politics – especially, perhaps, those of the Palais-Royal – accusations over private dining were equally frequent. Political dinners offer an example of the culture of politics ‘behind closed doors’ that came under increasing suspicion during the Revolution. While seen as contrary to republican virtue, they were a necessary part of the way in which actual politics was conducted in the Revolution. The politics of private dining thus became part of the lived contradiction experienced by the revolutionary leaders between what

⁹⁸ *Lettre d'un Ourang-outang à l'auteur des Révolutions de France, de Brabant, etc. etc.*, BHVP, Rés Camille Desmoulins.

democratic politics was meant to be about, and what it actually entailed. This had dangerous consequences; during the ‘politicians’ terror’ of the Year II accusations regarding political dining played a key part in the eliminations of successive factions: the Girondins, the Hébertists and the Dantonists. Similar allegations were also used to tarnish the memory of the Robespierrists in the Thermidorian Reaction.

The issue of food was key to revolutionary politics and the relationship between the people and its representatives. Tensions surrounding food shortages on the one hand, and excessive consumption on the other, highlight deep-seated problems at the heart of the revolutionary democracy: a lack of mutual understanding and communication between electorate and elected, crushingly high expectations towards the new political élite, politicians’ misuse of privilege and public funds, and economic inequalities between the people and their representatives. The paranoia surrounding political plotting in cafés, restaurants and, especially, at politicians’ private dinner tables, reveals the tensions arising from the political culture of the Revolution that was supposedly based on entirely new habits and values, but which was in certain ways still deeply steeped in the Old Regime combination of politics and food.