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Table Talk: Building Democracy One Meal at a Time

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BOOK REVIEW

Table Talk: Building Democracy One Meal at a Time, by Janet A. Flammang.
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 260 pp.

I bet that most of us have memories of sitting around a table, sharing a meal and talking about our day, about school, about politics and the news— about work and life. When taken together, these everyday domestic moments might account for more than we realize. But do those instances of dining and eating, those conversations, help to shape our democracy and civic life?

Ms. Flammang's book, *Table Talk: Building Democracy One Meal at a Time* has all of the trappings of what should be a gripping academic read. The title tells us that she is bringing together two very timely topics, food and democracy. With the current changes in political climate around the world, Flammang's book could come at no better time than now, when understanding civility and democracy are even more crucial.

It is interdisciplinary, well researched, and is structured in a way that makes sense, but the rather focused title gives way to a somewhat broad book that sometimes wanders from topic to topic, like one might wander through a Chinese food buffet—getting a little bit of many things. The approach that she takes leaves the reader wanting more in-depth analysis and focus.

Divided into six chapters, Flammang illustrates her main thesis, that “conversations and table activities are likely occasions for developing our civil selves, and that not taking advantage of their civilizing potential is a lost opportunity. Eating is something we do frequently, and most of us prefer table experiences that are civil” (p. 2). Her thesis is based on her own observations, interests, and a lifetime of thinking about food, politics, and democracy, but at times the chapters can feel too crowded or repetitive.

Take, for example, in Chapter 1, where she discusses setting the table, language socialization, American mealtimes, overworked Americans, and common tables, as well as stories and food—these topics are related, but their relationship doesn't find as much common ground as you would expect. She gives us some details about what should happen at tables and what actually does happen through some rich observations of real family meals—these are excellent. But, even she admits that combining so many topics is a “tricky business” (p. 4), and indeed the chapter feels muddled.

Chapter 2 is much more succinct in discussing conversations and narratives. Given the breadth of her research, which is evident throughout the book, this chapter is perhaps the most insightful and, if expanded, could be an entire book in itself. Table narratives in all forms are fodder for a number of disciplines and give us a rich description of lives lived at home.

From there, Chapters 3 and 4 provide insight into tables and home and tables away from home, two concepts that sound simple but are in fact very complex. Numerous social scientists have studied meal times, not just in the US but abroad (I think about Carole Counihan and David Sutton), and what she brings to the conversation is a round up of what this means in terms of civil society and democracy. I found these chapters to be heavy on referencing outside sources and research while trying to bring them together in a cohesive way. It's a difficult task with such big topics like family meals, different generations, kids cooking, dinner parties, personal expression, table manners, and transition tables—there is a lot to cover. Tables away from home is no less varied, covering friends' homes, schools, camps,

colleges, religious institutions, firehouses, addiction-recovery programs, gang-prevention, and the military. My own interests are in eating away from home, in institutions, at work, and elsewhere, and I found this section to give some great depth to this overlooked area of dining. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review* a few years ago, Fedele Bauccio, the CEO of Bon Appetit (the catering company, not the magazine) was already thinking about how to turn mealtimes at work into a moment of “community, inspiration or connection” (p. 2). Flammang brings this into the discussion but also builds upon it by bringing in something that is lacking in other articles, and that is the discussion of etiquette. Etiquette is perhaps thought about in a historical perspective, but in fact the etiquette that is being shaped now around dinner tables is adapting to the increased use of technology at the table.

From there, we move on to Chapter 5, concerning tables and conflict. With her own interests in democracy and civility, this section covers “difficult conversations, where conflict is profound” (p. 5). Again, a long list of topics are covered including same-sex marriages and at-risk youth—and again she manages to bring these back to her core thesis, albeit rapidly. I wish that this chapter gave more insight into her own work and research. Like many of the other chapters, I continually wanted the examples to be more specific.

It seems to me that this book could have used more pages and fewer topics. There is a lot of information and pages of sources, but it all leaves me wanting a bit more: more of her personal analysis, more theorizing, or more depth in general. The final chapter on civic engagement and diplomacy brings back themes that feel more current than others, including civic clubs and religious groups, as well as using meal times as a way of building democracy by the government. This chapter reminds me of Robert Ludlow’s book *Bowling Alone*, where he discusses the loss of civic participation in American society and, indeed, echoes some of what he has talked about.

One aspect that I feel is missing is any mention or discussion the civilizing process and more talk about etiquette. Without mentioning Elias or Simmel, this topic seems to have been completely overlooked, but surely civil society and a civil table have something to do with the age in which we live?

Overall, Flammang’s book would be excellent reading in an entry-level course for undergraduates, as it introduces the reader to a broad range of topics and ideas related to eating together, food, and politics. Food studies itself is interdisciplinary and has taken some slack for that, but this book shows what can be successfully achieved when you take into account these different yet overlapping academic areas.

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