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The anachronistic economy:

Performance and image in another modern age

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Introduction: Naming

The assignment of names to epochs, generations and economies has turned into a major industry. Ever since Gertrude Stein ribbed Hemingway by calling his generation "lost", every generation had to get a name. We, the post-Gen-X-generation got stuck with "ironic" as our sobriquet. I don't even know the correct term for the current generation of with-it executives-to-be, but have to some extent reconciled myself with being out of the loop. Still, this annoyance of having to keep up with the currents of naming does not end with the realization that one no longer can keep up with the pop-culture avant-garde (though, as the real leaders obviously are Japanese schoolgirls, not keeping up might be a good thing, reputation-wise). It extends into academia, and I reckon it ain't stoppin' anytime soon. But exactly why there is such a pressing need to call a perfectly fine form of capitalist exploitation the old economy or the new economy or the innovation economy or even the experience economy is somewhat of a mystery to me.

There are a number of aspects that are routinely brought forth when discussing the various versions of "new economy"-ness. One of these is an emphasis on image and performance, another is "innovation". A third, general enough to get an "economy" assignment of its very own, is the way in which experiences are viewed as a legitimate avenue of value-production. Such characterizations interact with another aspect. This is the tendency to demarcate economies as eras, where the new/innovation/experience/

whatnot economy takes its rightful place in a chronology that extends from rural through feudal and bourgeois to industrial and new. Combined, these tendencies, both one through which special characteristics are assigned to an economic "figuration"[i], and one where such theoretical constructs are positioned in a relation of connections and ruptures to a perceived chronology of economic eras, effectively create edifices of economic reason that become highly immobile and autonomous – if image belongs to this version of economy, it cannot belong to that. Picking a characteristic is, by logical necessity, a way to posit this same aspect as non-characteristic for other phenomena – at least if one wants to claim analytical interest in said characteristic. The result: fixed illustrations. Claims of having isolated specific aspects as distinctive for a particular brand of economy, one that can be referred to in abstract terms, disconnected from specific examples, presents us with icons of an age. This, to me, hampers thinking. Consequently *(sic)*, this paper will discuss a counterpoint to the dichotomy between old economies and new ones, *an anachronistic reading* of innovative economic activity, a sketch of "chronologically hybrid" economies.

By talking about anachronistic economies I want to highlight the ways in which behaviors and phenomena that often gain praise as specifically "new economy"-characteristics can be found in earlier era, and vice versa. In a way reminiscent of how Michel Serres[ii] has discussed knowledge-production as taking place in the passages between disciplines, and the ways in which he has mixed and remixed insights from varying historical eras in writing about science, I wish to argue that economic activity should not be studied in the fixed forms of eras or -isms. This is also to an extent a way to approach the issue of hybrid forms in economy, as J.K. Gibson Graham has explicated it[iii], a way to discuss how different modes and tropes of economic behavior intertwine into helices of uncertain lineage. But this is not meant as one more layer of

theoretical complexity, added on to the quilt that is management and organization theory, quite the opposite. By discussing the problems of clear eras or epochs in economy, I wish to point to the necessity to approach such issues empirically, rather than through attempts to build overarching theoretical structures – and naming them.

So, the following will consist of a brief sketch of a business event, a case where economic moves often perceived as belonging to different epochs congeal into a coherent and historical whole, followed by a brief note on economic hybrids and the study of economies as eras.

Antonin Carême – the imagineer

A statement that is often bandied about in discussing the switch from an industrial to a post-industrial economy is the claim that value-production has changed from things to images, from commodities to symbols. Implicitly, such a claim would have us believe that images simply wasn't an issue in earlier epochs, that we can ascertain an economic development from the concrete to the ephemeral – branding, for instance, is seen as a wholly contemporary phenomenon. Still this notion, though pleasing in the way it allows sweeping generalizations, might in fact be too crude to grasp the complexities of economy through the ages.

Although a number of chefs obviously have been called "the cook of kings and the king of cooks" (among the Taillevent and Auguste Escoffier), and a number of individuals have been described as the most important gastronomical thinker in history (Claude Brillat-Savarin among them), no-one can deny the importance of Antonin Carême (1783-1833) in the development of *haute cuisine*. With a fervor that seems to have bordered on mania, he erupts on the scene in 1815 with two books, *Le Patîssier royal* and *Le Patîssier*

pittoresque. He then goes on to attempt a total overthrow of the culinary tradition. It is this revolution, the Revolution which is omnipresent in the age of Carême, that marks his work, the strive to *change cuisine*. Contemporary thinking on organizations and management has tended to afford change a position that resembles Hegel's notion of the Absolute – all-encompassing on a cosmic scale – and often with the same kind of obscurantism. We are accustomed to think of change in economic endeavors as a necessary state, as the way economy and organization *is*. The change introduced by the writings and culinary politics of the *nouvelle cuisine* of Carême might therefore seem as natural progression to us. But Carême didn't present change, he presented a revolution. A revolution of the mind, one that showed the world the right and true way of great cuisine, the endpoint of which was culinary truth. Whereas all kinds of changes before this momentous occasion had been mere fiddling, now came the dawn of reason in the kitchen.

Originally trained as a *patîssier,* a pastrycook, Antonin Carême became the most celebrated *cuisinier* of his era. More notably, he became so by championing a new form of cooking he called the *nouvelle cuisine* (a term that will repeat through history), in stark contrast to the *cuisine ancienne* he so avidly despised. Having been schooled in the craft of creating *pièces montées*, in an age when such decorative centerpieces where architectonical works of art, he developed a highly regimented way of viewing *cuisine*. Subsequently, he developed an even more dogmatic system of cooking, presented in e.g. *L'Art du cuisinier, Le Maître d'hôtel français* and *L'Art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle*. This system was built on a notion of perfecting original tastes, scientific exactitude (most notable in his structured use of sauces), and an aesthetics of presentation that emphasized clarity. It also emphasized Antonin Carême.

Although much could be written about the change this particular brand of *nouvelle cuisine/cuisine moderne* presented[iv], what is interesting within the scope of this text is the way in which Carême sold his "new cooking". But before I get to this, there is one noteworthy aspect to the business he was engaged in. Implicitly and to a great extent unconsciously, the experience industries, or post-industrial value-production in general, is presented as something that has came into being in the 20th century, and that came into its own at the end of the millennium. However, if we look at the business of *haute cuisine,* we will in it find a business and a production of value that corresponds well with e.g. the notions of symbolic consumption as Jean Baudrillard has discussed them[v]. Cooking, even in its mundane guises, is of course a highly symbolic act, but the extreme forms thereof show us an economy of ostentation and symbolic (and sometimes material) excess that does not gel well with the trivial view of pre-industrialized economies. Whereas contemporary analyses of branding often present this as a modern phenomenon, *cuisine* can be shown to have built on similar strategies since at least the 14th century, with e.g. a number of cookery books being attributed to the master chef Taillevent (and Taillevent presenting cooking he "borrowed" from other sources under his own name). Similarly, while cooking in one perspective can be reduced to the simple biomechanical process of making foodstuffs simpler to digest and utilize, in another it is a cultural form and has distinct cultural values.

Cuisine is seldom seen as a business. Food might, but not *cuisine.* Still, from the very beginning of civilization, significant amounts have been spent on extravagant eating, and at the apex of this form of expenditure – which may represent the original form of conspicuous consumption[vi] – we find the chef. Taking just one specific trope of cooking, namely presentation/plating, we can note that this is a form of value-production that cannot be reduced to the common algorithms of utility that economy so casually tends

to be presented as. Earlier epochs of *cuisine* manifested the value of fine dining through ostentatious table displays – from Taillevent (1312-1395) we learn the art of presenting peacock as if it was still alive, from the *Satyricon* we hear how to present a fine second course:

> *We were still at a loss what to expect when a tremendous shout was raised outside the doors, and lo and behold! a pack of Laconian dogs came careering round and round the very table. These were soon succeeded by a huge tray, on which lay a wild boar of the largest size, with a cap on its head, while from the tushes hung two little baskets of woven palm leaves, one full of Syrian dates, the other of Theban. Round it were little piglets of baked sweetmeat, as if at suck, to show it was a sow we had before us; and these were gifts to be taken home with them by the guests.*

The act of presenting food is by no means a marginal affair in the economic figuration *cuisine* presents. On the contrary, a great deal of the chef's skill, even very early on[vii], consisted of visual skills. Even the cutting up of meat, a mechanical task that may seem to carry little significance, was an act that in the houses of the mighty turned into a spectacle that required detailed manuals, such as *The Boke of Kervynge*[viii]. Likewise, the way a serving table was set required of a chef an astute eye for both detail and the body politic. A chef had to simultaneously make sure that people were fed, i.e. that the mundane aspect of eating was not ignored, and show off his patrons' wealth through the strategic use of exotic foods, expensive seasonings and lavish displays. Put another way, a chef had to master two opposite dimensions of the economic system – the logic of efficacy and the cultural logic of style. Pre- and post-modern tangled together, the chef dealt with a hybrid that traversed time according to its own logic.

The culinary logic was always a *mélange* of tastes, sights and the digestion of foodstuffs. But it was also always a business. In feudal times this simply meant that feasts were a

major expense for a lord[ix], but as we move further into the 17th century, chefs become more entrepreneurial, and by the 18th century the top chefs are like rock stars. Antonin Carême was the Miles Davis or 2Pac of his age, all blinding technique and attitude – and wealthy as a result of this. And what is particular about them all was they way in which they built their image.

For Carême, the critical issue that had to be addressed in order for him to push his wares of culinary refinement and revolution, was the notion of novelty. The lure of the new, a central aspect of image as value-production, has been central to *cuisine* as fashion through the ages. Consequently, the chef as businessman had to be able to manipulate his image as being avant-garde. When Carême expounds on his approach to the art he is not unsure of his role as innovator:

> *My colleagues can now see undisputed proof of the advances in nineteenth century French cooking for which I have been responsible. I do not claim that this new work should bring an end to further progress in the culinary art: craftsmen who are imbued with the true spirit of science will no doubt produce innovations; but it is my work that will have inspired them.*
> From *L'Art de la cuisine française*[x]

We could perhaps take this as mere bluster. What Philip Hyman shows in his analysis[xi] of Carême's rhetoric regarding *les anciennes* is that instead, this was a clear and well thought-out strategy through which Carême could manifest his position as a culinary revolutionary. Rather than placing himself as part of an unbroken chain of culinary tradition, he sets forth on a mission of innovation management that involves a heavy dose of branding and badmouthing. So even though much of his *nouvelle cuisine* was, in fact, derived from earlier efforts to change cooking and a subtle shift in tradition, he *presented* it as a monumental shift, a completely new paradigm.

As previously noted, Carême starts his career as a maker of confectionaries, at a time when sugar-craft dealt with creating ornamented centerpieces that often seemed to defy the laws of gravity. Related to the medieval *entremets,* spectacles that punctuated major feasts, these creations were manifestations of the performance-aspect in grand eating. Arguably more visual entertainment than edibles, the *pièces montées* were show-off pieces, and their importance was such that the prestige of a major *pâtissier* could eclipse that of a *cuisinier*. We can gather how the act of making food visually grandiose was, in this era, seen as equally important to the creation of tastes and olfactory refinement. The creation of presentation was thus the primary schooling of the young Carême. His first books, *Le Patîssier royal* and *Le Patîssier pittoresque,* are little more than collections of designs, lavishly detailed. Schooled in drawing, a craft in which he also excelled, at the *Cabinet des Gravures,* he thus knew both how to create and how to represent *cuisine*.

Consequently, he was well aware of the importance of image in his endeavors. He was always to be fascinated by the place of presentation, and e.g. favored the mounting of central dishes on socles of decorated lard. For instance, he discusses a galantine of turkey, and elaborates how this is to be placed on a socle carved with classical ornaments, garnished with *hâtelets,* and positioned strategically at the center of a table arrangement. Further, he did a lot of work on table arrangements, including designing his own serving platters, emphasizing a presentation that was easily inspected and grasped – though obviously with elaborate centerpieces. In much if not most of his practice of *cuisine,* he thus kept to the ideal of the spectacle that characterized earlier grand eating. All the while he steadfastly kept to another ideal, the image of himself as the harbinger of *cuisine moderne,* the very standard of modernity in the kitchen.

What is interesting is that there is a very specific harmony between the image-creation that Carême engages in within the confines of his kitchen, and the image-creation he executes within the confines of the written word. Where the design of a feast was marked by the clear demarcation of central and marginal dishes, and flourishes that were meant to establish the centrality of certain specific items, his writing aims at separating Antonin Carême and the *cuisine moderne* from the earlier forms of cooking. This traditional cooking is dissected with a vehemence that can only be described as hostile, and no amount of venom is spared in discussing the archaic ways of earlier cooks. As Amy Trubek among others notes[xii], much of Carêmes *Le Cuisinier Parisien, ou L'Art de la Cuisine Française au Dix-Neuvième Siècle* can be read as an argument regarding how the new style of cooking is immensely superior to the old ways, and Carême lays forth a continuous comparing of menus and recipes to prove this.

By juxtaposing almost every single aspect of his own, "modern" style with that of bygone days, he strives to make abundantly clear that there exists a very real and objective paradigmatic change between the old and the new economy *(sic)*. The old one represented irrationality, unnecessary excess and hidebound ways. The modern forms of cooking were based on science, technique and style, and no mistake could be made between them. Another way to say this is that he fashioned a socle of his own, one that made him the centerpiece of culinary advance. However, this was to a great extent just that, a construct. Philip Hyman[xiii] refers to Carême's work as "Culina Mutata", and shows that the Ancients Carême berates were in fact a creation of the specific rhetoric he used. Many of his innovations were already established techniques, and many of the excesses in e.g. seasoning that he puts down were not in fashionable use any longer at the time Carême writes his screeds. He turns up his nose at the practice of weighing down tables with an excessive amount of dishes, proclaiming his style of presentation as the new and

rational way, oblivious to the fact that such a move had already been underway for some time. Hyman refers to a text by Menon published in 1774, before Carême was even born:

> *During the last century food was served up in pyramids. Diminutive, yet ten times costlier dishes were not yet known. Only in the last fifty years have we introduced discrimination into eating.*

The image-creation that started Antonin Carême's career thus returns at the highpoints thereof. It is indubitable that Carême was a major innovator in the culinary art. What is also clear is that he was a major figure in innovation management, the art of making his innovations accepted as such. His craft, his business, thus had a fundamentally dual nature. On one hand, Carême worked diligently at the creation of tastes and textures, the creation of tasty dishes. On the other, at the core of this production of value was the image of both dish and creator, and the creation of evermore elaborate (re)presentations. In this way, he is an early "imagineer", carefully crafting follies out of sugar, lard, and texts about sugar and lard. The last great chef to work in private service, he engages in Customer Relationship Management by appropriating an old tradition of naming dishes after "great men" – but not kings, but the new *bourgeoisie.* And if the possibility arises, he'll gladly make himself a romantic hero: " Charcoal kills us [chefs], but what does it matter? The shorter the life, the greater the glory." To reduce the art of the chef, the business of cuisine, merely to the handling of food is both analytically vapid and would by the master himself be taken as an insult:

> *The fine arts are five in number – painting, sculpture, poetry, music, architecture – whose main branch is confectionery.*

Economy through the ages – and back

What, then, can analytically be had from the case of Antonin Carême? Mainly the realization that many of those strategies that are now hailed as contemporary and modern – the place of image, performances, branding – can be found in earlier epochs than our present one. The notion of a post-industrial production of value, the very name thereof, lures us to believe that we are by necessity studying contemporary economic forms. Still, many of the techniques that management consultants (and academics) are now selling as novel ways to approach business, were well known and deftly handled by, for instance, an 18th century chef – who'd learned and drew upon the traditions of a craft almost as old as civilization itself. For a chef, any chef, image is a central part of the job – but this does not make their craft post-industrial, if we by this mean something chronologically placeable. *Cuisine* is magic, the transformation of base foodstuffs to glorious experiences. But it is not, by any means, "new".

We could of course draw the conclusion that the much-touted post-industrial production of value is less an era than it is a streak in the weave of time, something that has continuously existed in economic history – from the origins of the global economy in the trade in exotic spices and even more exotic stories to the madcap antics of those renegades at boo.com. The image of Man the Manufacturer becomes that of a Hermes, a traveler in time and tropes, an oscillating thread of an economic reason quite unlike that identified by Adam Smith and Karl Marx. In the Antonin Carême this figure becomes one that can bend and twist times, weaving the origins of meat-eating and the elaborate performances of the experience economy into a coherent (and slightly manic) whole. Talk of new and old become perverted, ways to enhance and berate, and in the end, little more than rhetorical flourishes – for Carême and scholars both.

The frivolous nature of refining food into something as sophisticated as the creations of a chef at the top of his game might seem as a mere footnote to the history of economy. Still, it is a form of value-production that is both ancient and current, and economically important too boot. What Carême did was not marginal, for he presided over majestic expenditures and set the standard for a cultural form that had far-reaching consequences, and in its own way served to solidify both national and professional identity. What he did was not a straightforward development, but a convoluted helix of a story, where the construction of an imaginary (and horrid) past, the elevation of the individual chef and the art of design all played a part in the creation of the oldest commodity we know, the portion of food.

What, then, is the new economy? A name, nothing more. A name for certain kinds of excellence, but never the name for an era. Economy, as a form of life and logic, is far too complex to be reduced to now's and then's. Rather, it is a case of now-and-again – flows and mixes, the way we create histories and historiographies. Much like the food Carême fawned over, it is a mix, a tentative concoction presented as scientific unanimity. Both scholars and Carême wish to create the fixed truth of an era: **Shazam!** And Marx laughed…

NOTES

[i] Here I use the term figuration in the sense brought forth by Norbert Elias in e.g. *The Symbol Theory* (London: Sage, 1991), as a set of interdependencies that have solidified into a graspable whole of unplanned but nevertheless "true" ways of viewing the world.

[ii] See, for instance, Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) and Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

[iii] J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* (London: Blackwell, 1996).

[iv] I am presently working on a manuscript on haute cuisine with the working title *The Culinary Logic of Late Capitalism,* and have there discussed the case of Antonin Carême at length. This manuscript addresses how questions of value, symbolic consumption and the logic of economy can be illuminated through observing how we eat.

[v] See for instance Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981) and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993).

[vi] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Penguin, 1899/1994). One can here further note that even certain apes exhibit behavior that can be understood in similar terms. As Craig Stanford shows in *The Hunting Apes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), the meat of the small monkeys that some chimpanzees favor is usually consumed solely by the most powerful males and the females they covet.

[vii] See e.g. Michael Symons, *A History of Cooks and Cooking* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000) and Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food, 2nd ed.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

[viii] Norbert Elias discusses the way in which this art changed in a central chapter of *The Civilizing Process, vol. I: The History of Manners* (London: Blackwell 1978/2000). The gradual move of carving from the high table to the kitchen is further important as it in part coincides with a major transformation in haute cuisine, namely the change from *service à la française* (service where dishes were presented together on a table, in major installments) to *service à la russe* (where individual plates are presented to the diner).

[ix] See Roy Strong's *Feast – A History of Grand Eating* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002).

[x] Quotation and translation from Philip Hyman's "Culina Mutata: Carême and L'Ancienne Cuisine", in Schehr & Weiss (red.), French Food (London: Routledge, 2001).

[xi] Ibid.

[xii] Amy Trubek, *Haute Cuisine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

[xiii] Hyman, ibid.