1 Six meters apart: Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron meet in the Kremlin, 7 February 2022.

Tables are easy to overlook. Not only do we gaze down on them, but their ubiquity in modern life means that we focus attention not on tables themselves, but on objects and faces on top of and around them. Yet it was impossible to overlook the table which featured in images of the hurried and unsuccessful negotiations that took place prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. These images showed Western dignitaries like the French president Emmanuel Macron, who had pledged to secure promises of non-aggression from Vladimir Putin, sitting across from his Russian counterpart in a sterile take on stately baroque diplomatic swagger (fig. 1). Cream-colored walls, heavy drapes with gold tassels, a marquetry floor and a giant rosy floral carpet set the darkly clad men into relief. These decorations were all familiar elements of the traditional *mise-en-scène* of diplomacy: the table on a carpet generally signifies a supposedly neutral space in which opposing parties can meet in the literal and metaphorical middle. Yet the world was not prepared for the colossal expanse of table that both separated and connected the two heads of states: six meters of white wooden surface, supported by three trunk-like columns and topped by a puny bouquet of blossoms. These images had a jarring effect. The height of the table was scaled appropriately to seat the men, but its horizontal dimension was wildly disproportionate for a *tête-à-tête.* It appeared so distorted that one wondered if someone had stretched the tabletop in photoshop for comedic effect. New images of the

same scenario at the same table appeared in the press repeatedly, each time featuring a new international guest seated in the same awkward configuration.

The star of these photographs (which quickly went viral) was not the political leaders but the oval table itself. Its form underscored two inter-related points: 1) the political distance between Russia and Europe was vast (although perhaps not entirely unbridgeable) and 2) Putin was not afraid to wield scale in order to cow his perceived adversaries (subscribing to the notion that ‹size matters›). The table thus appeared not simply as an accessory to diplomacy but as an apt metaphor for Putin's absurdly self-aggrandizing political machinations.

Putin's table also made him seem quite literally out of touch, for even though the table joined the heads of state, the rationale behind it was, from a Western point of view, opaque. The object suggested that peace-talks were futile, since it rendered diplomatic communication so physically attenuated. So why bother with the charade? What were the reasons behind this obstreperous choice? Rumors circulated that it was being used to protect Putin from the Corona virus, or perhaps the disease of Western liberalism. Some wondered if the table was a figuration of his paranoid despotism. Soon other nearly parodic – but nevertheless authentic – images appeared depicting Putin sitting at a bizarrely extended desk-like table that tenuously connected him to a group of advisors huddled at the other end. Clearly, Putin did not want to hear what they, or the West, had to say. These images of a giant table were, at any rate, disturbing due to their subversion of the deeply rooted link in western iconography and consciousness between tables and peace-making.

Ring Around the Rosie: A Diplomatic Icon

In American English, ‹to table› means to postpone a discussion. In the rest of the Anglophone world, ‹to table› means the opposite; it signifies initiating a discussion. Putin's table manifested this ambiguity in massive, nearly grotesque, form: a table so large as to grandly embody political impasse and render the possibility of mutual agreement exceedingly minute, like the floral centerpiece in its middle. Normally, however, diplomatic tables – especially round – tables gather allies and enemies together as instruments designed to facilitate problem-resolution. This guise of the table as an icon of peace agreements has a long history, rooting itself indelibly in collective memory in the West through Dutch artist Gerard Ter Borch's 1648 painting *The Swearing of the Oath of Ratification of the Treaty of Münster, 15 May 1648.* This image depicted the Spanish and Dutch delegations ratifying the agreement that ended their 80-year war during the unprecedented multi-lateral Westphalian peace talks. The painting presented an image of ideal equilibrium: the two warring sides perfectly balanced, acting together. The modest round table at the image's center embodied this cooperative parity because at a round table there is no head: Each person sits equidistant from the center and one another, mitigating issues of hierarchy and competing authority (see Rigotti 1995 and Werber 2005). The baroque peace table also conveniently banished the lower, ‹passionate› parts of the body so maligned by early modern Europeans and created a surface over which the head and the hands of diplomats could negotiate with purported rationality. Ter Borch's image of peace with a table at its center – painted at the conclusion of a peace conference – thus presented a fiction of the table as both a means to build peace and a symbol of a successful peace. A round table was not actually used to hash out this treaty, but clearly, the representational fiction was convincing (Croxton 2013,

p. 167). Ter Borch's painting was designed to be reproduced in print and within a short period of time it had become a matrix for a cascade of new images depicting peace through the heuristic of the table. The convention continues through the present day. Ter Borch's painted fiction also coincided with tables taking actual center-stage at all European peace conferences, leading Jean-Jacques Rousseau to eventually complain about «congresses […] where we assemble to say nothing […] and deliberate together if the table should be round or rectangular […] and one thousand other questions of similar importance, uselessly hashed over for three centuries» (Rousseau 1839, p. 612).

Yet tables were apparently too important to disappear. In more recent times, several quite special tables have featured in diplomatic affairs. In 1988, the Polish carpenter Andrej Ślesik made a 9-meter round table for the meetings between the communist regime and Solidarność, which paved the way to political change at the end of the Cold War. Some joked at the time that the scale was necessary because the world record for spitting was eight meters (see Goll 2015). More recently during Brexit negotiations, Macron perhaps mischievously invited Boris Johnson to put his feet up on the small table separating them. Images of Johnson's purported transgression of table etiquette rained upon the world, corroborating the former PM's reputation for boorishness, English arrogance, and an unwillingness to compromise to the point of absurdity.

We All Fall Down

Putin's staging of peace negotiations at his giant table, however, exerts a much more sinister effect than Johnson's defilement of Macron's little round table, which indeed did resemble a footrest. The Kremlin's colossal prop twists the iconographic legacy and physical power of the table to a new realm of perversity. The peace-making table has become more like an absurd materialization of improbably conjoined echo chambers: two sides unable to speak or even physically see each other without binoculars. The table emerges as a despotic weapon rather than an agent of consensus and peace. An oval is, to be fair, not a circle. It combines the curved edges of the legendary round table with the rectangular table that pits one side against another. In Ter Borch's famous painting, the table appeared after the fact as both the (fictional) instrument that led to peace and a representation of peace itself. Putin's table, on the other hand, appeared as an eerie harbinger of war. Its oval edges bespoke peace, but its forceful rectangular thrust highlighted a decidedly agonistic relationship.

The bourgeois propriety of this table's décor ironically highlighted these conceptual discrepancies: the colored accents on the feet of the columnar legs find a tasteful echo in the florid border encircling the table's top and its centerpiece. These ‹charms› should evoke warmth, but exude no comfort. On the shiny white surface, these details seem like not-so-distant echoes of Stalinist aesthetics, which often paired petit-bourgeois conservatism with a domineering scale. As Svetlana Boym has written, «the relationship between the Soviet people and their monuments is intimate but often inversely proportional; if monuments appear when people disappear, their gigantism coincides with the shrinkage of human rights» (Boym 2001, p. 88). Does the scale of the table, like the scale of Putin's geopolitical and historical ambitions, render individual lives meaningless? It is monumental. And its baroque flair is reminiscent of the ornamental detailing of massive Soviet

concrete buildings from the 40s and early 50s, like the seven white *Stalinskie Vysotki* (highrises) looming over Moscow, which include the Hotel Ukraina as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Where does one obtain a table like this, designed to mark history in this manner? The Italian company OAK furniture has claimed responsibility for its production, although the makers might not have considered the possibility that it would be used for peace negotiations back in 1995 when they delivered the commission to the Kremlin. They probably thought it would just be used for large gatherings of people to stage Russia's might. On the other hand, OAK's client roster also included Muammar al-Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein (see *Al Jazeera* 2022). They seem to have had a corner on the niche market of authoritarian status furniture. If we follow Bruno Latour's idea that a person's profession and identity depend on objects, then perhaps we should sanction Putin's table. And that Italian company too.

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