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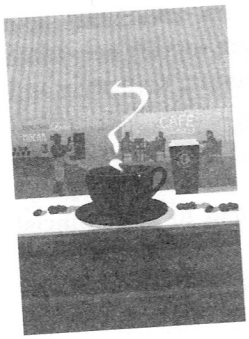
CHAPTER 7

THE COFFEEHOUSE AS A PUBLIC SPHERE

Brewing Social Change



Lately, as I sit and sip my cup of coffee in one of the chain coffee shops, I look around and think to myself: people come into a coffeehouse these days for one of two reasons. They're either looking for a restroom (if they're tourists), or WiFi (if they're not). How did this come about? After all, coffeehouses started out a few hundred years ago as subversive sites of political resistance. It is there that the rebels from the Boston Tea Party told the royal British government to wake up and smell the coffee. The coffeehouses were centers of intellectual critique, nests of insurgency and lively conversation.

Coffeehouses were central to what we call "the public sphere," the place in which people come together to discuss and to act as a community. Philosophers have long argued that the nature and structure of any society's public spheres are an indication of the nature and values of society itself. And so, it is timely to question the place of the coffeehouse in our midst. Can we reclaim our public sphere in the coffeehouse? Can we be the baristas of our unique social blend?

Coffee – Philosophy for Everyone: Grounds for Debate, First Edition. Edited by Scott F. Parker and Michael W. Austin, series editor Fritz Allhoff.

The Golden Age of the Coffeehouses

From the perspective of today's coffeehouses, with their elevator music and laptop congregations, it is hard to imagine that coffeehouses were the ground zero of the profoundest social revolutions. Pieces of this remarkable history have been highlighted (and consequently debated and contested) in the early work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

The first coffeehouse in Europe is said to have debuted in London in 1652, with the first in Paris opening twenty years later. These first buds anticipated what Habermas called the "golden age of the coffeehouses" in France and Great Britain between 1680 and 1730. And indeed, the coffee trend was infectious. By the first decade of the eighteenth century over 3,000 new coffeehouses opened in London. They were the place in which the aristocracy and the emerging bourgeois merchants and professionals began to mingle and interact. They were socially accessible places which embraced the wider middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers, and served as a public place for discussion. The critical debate sparked by works of literature and art quickly extended to include economic and political issues. This phenomenon was so widespread that already in the 1670s the British government had to issue official statements that confronted the dangers "brewed" by the coffeehouse discussions. According to Habermas, the coffeehouses were considered seedbeds of political unrest. He cites one such statement by the British government:

> Men have assumed to themselves the liberty, not only in coffeehouses, but in other places and meetings, both public and private, to censure and defame the proceedings of the State, by speaking evil of things they understand not, and endeavoring to create and nourish an universal jealousy and dissatisfaction in the minds of all his Majestic good subjects.[1]

On December 29, 1675, King Charles II even issued a special "Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee-Houses," claiming that they were places where plots against His Majesty were being concocted.

The public sphere, which before was constituted by the authority of the state, was transformed in the coffeehouses into a public sphere in which *private* people came together to form a *public*. This freshly brewed public sphere compelled public authority to receive its legitimacy from this newly formed coffee-drinking public. To understand the full impact

of the emergence of the coffeehouses, let me mention two of their main characteristics as a social institution. First, Habermas claims that those in attendance in these café discussions disregarded (or "bracketed") social status – economic, political, or other. Mind you, this *bracketing* of status did not mean they presupposed the *equality* of status. But the highest authority in the house was the force of the better argument, and people enjoyed "the parity of common humanity."

The second feature of the coffeehouse discussion was that it uncovered and criticized aspects of society that until then had not been questioned. The coffee consumers back then were concerned not only with how good their latte was, but more so with how just their society was.

The Coffeehouses that Roasted Revolution

Today, over 50 percent of Americans drink coffee daily and another 25 percent drink coffee occasionally. It is estimated that Americans consume 400 million cups of coffee every day, making the United States the leading consumer of coffee in the world. Yes, we are a nation of coffee drinkers. Why?

There is an old saying that Americans lost their taste for tea because they had a strange habit of mixing it in salt water. This of course refers to the famous Boston Tea Party of 1773, during which dozens of anti-British activists dumped hundreds of chests filled with tea into the waters of Boston Harbor. Thus, when the British sought to punish the colonies by unfair taxation on tea, coffee became not only the preferred drink but the patriotic one as well. In fact, coffee was declared the "national drink" by the Continental Congress to protest the British taxation on tea. It is no surprise that the Green Dragon Inn, Tavern and Coffeehouse, was a regular meeting place as the rebelling Bostonians plotted The Party. After all, what better way to express American patriotism than to plan the overthrow of the British in a coffeehouse!

Another known hotbed of political, business, and social activity leading up to the revolution was Charlton's Coffeehouse in Williamsburg, Virginia. One of the most dramatic encounters of the period took place on the porch of the Coffeehouse in 1765, when an angry crowd protesting against the Stamp Act confronted the collector appointed by the royal governor. The collector later resigned his position and the Act was repealed by the British Parliament the following year.

But even before the Stamp Act protests, some English conservatives derided the American coffeehouses as "seminaries of sedition." The London Coffeehouse, which opened in Philadelphia in 1754, was a busy political and commercial center of this kind. People would come to negotiate deals, attend auctions, discuss politics, read newspapers, and, oh yeah, drink coffee. Serving also as a *de facto* mercantile exchange, it was a breeding ground for business and revolution. It was such a busy place that by the early 1770s the London Coffeehouse could no longer satisfy the increasing business demands of the city. Therefore, the city's merchants built the Merchants Coffeehouse, later known as City Tavern.

The City Tavern soon became the political, social, and business center of the new United States. It was among the first places where the Declaration of Independence was read aloud to the public, and it was a common meeting site of the newly formed Continental Congress. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and others frequented the establishment, claiming to enjoy "a feast of reason and a flow of soul."

Of course, not only in America did the coffeehouse become a center of radical politics and revolution. Coffee ignited controversy as soon as it landed on European soil. Opponents of this spreading phenomenon, especially in the Catholic Church, called the beverage the "drink of the devil" due to its introduction to Europe through Islamic countries. It is told that the controversy was so great that Pope Clement VIII was asked to intervene, and after tasting it, he gave it papal approval (to this day, however, followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly known as Mormons, abstain from drinking coffee).

Despite the controversy, in the big cities of England, Austria, France, Germany, and other countries, coffeehouses were quickly becoming centers of social activity and communication. Paris was to be known as the café society, as many intellectuals and sons of the Enlightenment frequented these exciting new establishments. The French philosopher and writer Voltaire is known to have drunk between fifty and a hundred cups a day! One famous spot in Paris was the Café de Foy, in which heated discussions took place. It is told that from this coffeehouse some French revolutionaries stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789.

Coffeehouses have remained at the forefront of political struggle in the twentieth century as well, and this was certainly not limited to Europe or the United States. A fine example is the India Coffeehouse in Lahore (now in Pakistan). Before the division of the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947, the region was bubbling with political activity under British rule, and in the midst stood, once again, the Coffeehouse.

The Pakistani historian and writer K. K. Aziz tells us that the India Coffeehouse was "for over 30 years the single most important and influential mental powerhouse which moulded the lives and minds of a whole generation."[2]

In Lahore, the India Coffeehouse and India Tea House, situated 150 yards apart, became the two most popular meeting places of the radical intellectuals. Aziz even writes that the Coffeehouse of Lahore "entertained more leftists than I found in the Communist Party office on McLeod Road."[3] They sipped their coffee and engaged in profound and contentious conversations. Aziz humorously writes that "the British were tea-drinkers, so were the Russians and the Chinese. But the leftists chose to issue their exhortations over a cup of coffee."[4]

Coffeehouses or Coffee Shops?

Not everyone conceives of the historical role of coffeehouses as liberators of the public sphere. The feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser criticized Habermas's depiction. She argues that while being an open space of political debate for some, the coffeehouses continued to exclude others, most importantly women. For Fraser the coffeehouses were a new form of political domination. She says that while being formally inclusive, these public spheres in fact excluded many.[5]

But even if we agree with Fraser's critical analysis, it still seems that today's coffeehouses are no longer the center of social and political activities they once were. The café scene is dominated by big multinational corporations. Coffee is big business, so big that it is one of the most traded commodities in the world. For many, the café is merely a shop, where you buy the product and leave. Paper cups have replaced more delicate forms of delivering the beverage, and lonely do-it-yourself counters holding milk and sugar have replaced the light-hearted conversation with the waiter. The variety of options of artificial sweeteners stands out as the uniformity of the artificial décor rests silently in the background. The diversity of beverage options far overshadows any possible diversity of thought and ideas. Between the Grande-Soy-Chai Latte and the Tall-Wet-Decaf Cappuccino, Starbucks dazzles its clients ("guests") with over 50,000 different beverage variations in an average location.

You might say that, as mentioned earlier, coffeehouses were always the site of commercial exchange and business dealings, a vibrant

environment of interaction. But that is perhaps the point. Rather than being a site of interaction, contemporary coffeehouses have become a place of common isolation. A place to be alone together. People sitting in front of their laptop, staring into cyberspace, armed with earphones in case anyone invaded their little nirvana of detachment.

So, is it a house or a shop? Is it a public sphere, or a private one? It seems that the technology of the twenty-first century makes the line between public and private ambivalent, or at the very least different from the one about which Habermas writes in the twentieth century. Facebook, YouTube, and other social media have famously made the distinction between public and private a daunting task. Sitting on a couch in a coffee shop these days, with wireless Internet and telephone connections at the tip of our fingers, we can feel right at home, or at work. Literally.

The Third Place

> *We feel that we are in the business of human connection and humanity, creating communities and a third place between home and work.*
>
> Howard Schultz, Chairman and CEO of Starbucks
> (Interview on "60 Minutes," June 2006)

Many, including Howard Schultz, speak of today's coffeehouses as *a third place*, referring to social surroundings that are separate from the two usual social environments of home and the workplace. This concept was first coined by Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*.[6] Oldenburg's idea was that third places are important for civic engagement, for a healthy democracy, and for providing a sense of place in the hectic and often overwhelming modern world. These places could be coffeehouses, but also community gardens, a main street, and even the post office.

For Oldenburg, the first place (home) and second place (work) are relatively isolated environments, especially when living in the suburbs. In contrast, third places can create regular and habitual associations, and can serve as social and psychological support systems. They are places to establish social ties and form a community.

As technology advanced, it enabled more people to "telecommute" and work from home. The first and second places have merged for many. Finding the home office to be a lonely environment, today's coffeehouse

offers the opportunity to work in a public space. All of us have probably had the experience of sitting down for coffee in a café only to find out that not many are relaxing, or engaging in conversation. Students are studying, researching, and writing on their laptops (and checking their Facebook, of course); others are holding job interviews, or business meetings; some are sending e-mails or talking on their smart phones; heck, I've seen people paying their bills and going over their bank statements (sorry, couldn't help but notice).

Chain coffeehouses like Starbucks, Caribou, and others are willing enablers of this trend. They create an environment that, though striving to be a third place, nonetheless incorporates motifs of the home and the workplace. In one section of the café you may find comfortable chairs, a rug, sometimes a fireplace. The restrooms are "down the hall and to your right." You even have access to electricity if you need to recharge your cell phone or laptop battery. You can sit there for thirty minutes or all day. You can buy one drink or even none at all. No questions asked. Some bring their own lunch with them. The coffeehouse wants to be a home away from home. In another section of the café you have the usual, homogeneous tables and chairs, along with all the utilities you need to open your own private café office.

Yes, the chain cafés are filled with nomadic workers and vagabond students, but many still have a personal connection to the coffeehouse of their choice. Even though Starbucks has over 15,000 locations in dozens of countries, many customers have a personal relationship to a certain location. As loyal Starbucks consumers visit Starbucks approximately a dozen times a month, they see a particular location as "their Starbucks." The chain intentionally makes each location a bit different from the others, trying to give it the feel of a neighborhood coffeehouse, while still retaining the idea that anyone walking in will know what they can expect to find.

Today's coffeehouse, aspiring to be a third place, is designed to be a safe haven from the stresses of our daily lives. It sometimes feels like people are nicer, and more trustworthy in this environment. For example, who hasn't encountered the "laptop-restroom dilemma"? You are sitting working on your laptop, your belongings spread out on the table. And then, alas, you need to use the restroom (why is the air conditioning on in January?). The dilemma begins: *Do I pack up my things, put them all in my bag, and carry everything with me? The place looks packed. What if I don't find a table when I get back? Especially a nice table like this, next to the window and a power outlet...* A second option is to make a run for it, hoping to find

everything intact when you get back. Really? Would you leave your laptop for five seconds (let alone five minutes) at a bus stop, or on a bench at the park? A third option is to ask someone to keep an eye on it for you. Weird. Why would you trust a complete stranger to look after your belongings so that other complete strangers don't steal them from you? This brings about the unrecognized science of scouting for the person you can trust to look after your stuff. If they have a laptop themselves, they are probably a better candidate. Another indication is if they seem like they plan to be here a while (with books and papers spread out on the table).

Most people opt for options two or three. I mean, really, do you pack your stuff every time you go to the bathroom at home, or at work? In the same way, the café is supposed to be a place that provides piece of mind. As one video produced by Starbucks says, it is "where the stresses of daily life evaporate like steam from a Grande Latte."

Where Did the Discussion Go?

Going back to Oldenburg, he thought that third places would be places where people come to be together, to converse, communicate, associate, and deliberate. They are vital to any dynamic democratic society. But is that what we have in today's coffeehouses? Indeed, people come there to *not be alone*, but they don't really come to be *together*. They come to a place where they can be around other people, without actually having to do anything with them.

Moreover, since many cafés have become pseudo libraries, taken over by the laptop generation, it makes you feel as if you should be quiet. God forbid you would actually talk while all these people are trying to study or work. Vocal discussion itself is implicitly discouraged, let alone a discussion involving multiple parties.

People in coffeehouses nowadays create a private space within the public space. By using technological devices, such as phones and computers, or by using simple things, like a book or a newspaper, customers define the boundaries of their private space through what they do. They seem to have such a sense of ownership over their spot that often you will see people cleaning their table, wiping it off before they leave, as if to say, "It'll be nice to have it clean and ready when I come back tomorrow."

Remember, Habermas pointed out that the main characteristic of the emerging public sphere in the coffeehouses was that private people came

together *to form a public*. More than any other kind of relation (economic or other), it was defined by conversational ("discursive") relations between people. For many philosophers of the public sphere, it is the common and public engagement in discussion, and then in action, that constitutes a sphere as public. Hannah Arendt, in her book *On Revolution*, wrote: "Power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another."[7] Revolutions and social change don't take place where people come to be alone.

When you think about it, the cookie cutter cafés, where everything is more or less the same anywhere you go, are comfortably numbing (as Pink Floyd puts it). In the chain coffee shops you know in advance what to expect, where everything is, and what's on the menu. There are no surprises, no reason to rethink your preferences, no need to cope with uncertainty. You can walk up to the barista and order your Venti-Extra-Hot-Half 2%-Half Skim-No-Whipped-Cream-Caramel-Macchiato without giving it a second thought. The environment is easy, familiar, and, well, ordinary. Not only are you absolved from talking, but you are absolved from thinking as well.

Arendt's words, written decades ago in her book *The Human Condition*, are perhaps prophetic: "Thoughtlessness – the headless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths,' which have become trivial and empty – seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing."[8]

Finally, we must ask ourselves why the shift to this kind of silencing third place has emerged. The fact that new technology enables it is not a sufficient answer. Why do we feel the need to flee the home and the workplace like never before? Why are they so stressful that all we want to do is be alone and feel together (with complete strangers)? Why do we substitute the intimacy of close relationships for the alienation of common solitude? Perhaps it is a symptom of broader social ills: Americans increasingly work more (much more than Europeans in terms of hours per day and days per year) and take fewer vacations. We are increasingly more stressed at work, and more anxious about balancing work–home demands.

The conclusion we reach may be that the social woes we face *should* drive us to the coffeehouse. But not so that we can sip our coffee alone, in self-created private enclaves within the public café. Not so that we can get away from others, but rather to congregate with others. To meet,

discuss, and ultimately act to collaboratively mend our society. We must reclaim the legacy of the coffeehouse as a true public sphere.

Brewing Social Change

In order to promote a vibrant, critical, and democratic public sphere, we must conceive of cafés as coffee*houses* rather than coffee *shops*. As a place where ideas are developed and exchanged, not mere commodities. In an age of suburban sprawls and Facebook walls, the art of public gathering must be rekindled and refined. While it is a movement that should spread globally, it must be realized locally. It should build community, celebrate diversity, and spark a flame around which we can gather and converse.

But what would that look like in our day? Have we not gone too far beyond the days of the Charlton Coffeehouse and the City Tavern to come back to such a tradition? These are all important questions, and like any question of relevance to the public sphere, the ultimate answers will be given by the public, in its actions or lack thereof. What I can offer here is a glimpse into some exciting local initiatives that are brewing in the coffeehouses of my community, Chicago.

First is an initiative called Café Society. Coordinated by a non-profit called the Illinois Humanities Council, Café Society is a network of weekly gatherings in regular coffeehouses, where families, friends, neighbors, and citizens come together to discuss current events and other important political and social issues. The idea behind this initiative is that by engaging in the meaningful exchange of ideas and perspectives, these conversations enliven the core of our democracy and empower the public to participate. The initiative even provides tools and support for people who have no regular meeting in their neighborhood and would like to start one.

A second example is a grassroots project called Discussions over Coffee, coordinated by the Jewish–Muslim Community Building Initiative. The initiative was started by a local non-profit called Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in response to the 9/11 attacks, and has become a force that brings together the Jewish and Muslim communities in Chicago to seek mutual understanding and collaborative social change. The Discussions over Coffee, which take place in local coffeehouses, bring together people of diverse backgrounds to study and discuss what Jewish and Muslim traditions teach about issues that concern us today, including social justice, the environment, and more.

Through such initiatives, in which ordinary people engage in extraordinary discussions, coffeehouses are once again centers of activity, critical debate, and social change. But wait a minute, you may question, Why should this great activity be done in a coffeehouse? There are a few reasons why coffeehouses can play an important role in community building, promoting discussion, and encouraging participation in the public sphere. First, they provide a neutral and inviting setting where all can feel equally comfortable. It is not someone's home, or place of worship. It's a fun place to hang out, with food and drinks available. The casual atmosphere also levels the field, a field otherwise defined by social and economic status. In fact, as the coffeehouses spread across London in the seventeenth century, those who frequented them were referred to as "levelers" (same as the name of a political party at the time). The levelers celebrated the decay of the old feudal order with its rigid social ranks. Another advantage is that coffeehouses are open to all, and are accessible. They can become a center for a neighborhood's social activity, and you can incidentally run into people that you haven't seen or talked to in a while. It leaves open opportunities for the unexpected and unintended.

And finally, of course, the coffeehouse setting offers us the one thing that a good conversation cannot do without: coffee.

NOTES

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 59.
2 Khursheed Kamal Aziz, *The Coffee House of Lahore: A Memoir 1942–57* (Lahore, Pakistan: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2008), p. 22.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 21.
5 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 113.
6 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Book Stores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marolow and Company, 1999).
7 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 175.
8 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 5.