

## The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse

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**Reviewer:**

William Clarence-Smith

As the question of taste increasingly preoccupies social historians, this forms an admirable contribution to a burgeoning set of historical works that explore why and how we alter what we eat and drink. Moreover, the book critically and provocatively addresses the controversial question of the 'public sphere', of which the early modern coffeehouse is routinely seen as such an important manifestation. In addition, the author contributes powerfully to 'commodity chain' literature, even if his focus is resolutely on the consumption end of the chain, by taking coffee as a means to illuminate many recondite corners of social life. Erudite and persuasively argued, this work is based on a truly impressive range of primary and secondary sources, as demonstrated in the extensive bibliography. However, the author has a certain tendency to weave backwards and forwards in telling his story. This results in a fair amount of repetition, makes the book longer than necessary, and crowds out some topics that could profitably be addressed. In terms of presentation and scholarly apparatus, the well-chosen illustrations are a great boon for the reader, but the use of endnotes rather than footnotes does little credit to Yale University Press, and the index is on the skimpy side.

Some of Cowan's fiercest critiques are directed at those historians who unproblematically portray coffee as a beverage of the rising bourgeoisie, bearing with it the seeds of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism. According to Cowan, 'contemporary historians' have accepted the triumph of coffee much too easily, seeing this as an inevitable victory of the rising forces that championed political participation, social fluidity, commercial expansion, politeness, and 'modernity,' that vaguest of concepts. John Brewer, Roy Porter, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch are very much in his line of fire. This is a salutary position to take, for it stands as a strong warning against anachronism and teleology.

As an early modernist, Cowan prefers to see the rise of coffee as a tale firmly anchored in the ancien régime. The success of the drink was uncertain, and still needs to be properly understood and explained, for novelty continued to be looked at askance at this time, and many new products brought back from overseas exploration were rejected. Coffee was not only new, but it also had a bitter taste, although the concurrent growth of sugar consumption helped to offset that drawback. Coffee was also culturally strongly associated with Muslim infidels, to whom it owed its name, even if this imparted a certain exotic thrill to the drink. Furthermore, imports represented an inevitable drain on the balance of payments, as coffee could not be grown in Britain, and this was an anathema to those adopting bullionist and mercantilist views. Far from moving effortlessly to the centre of British gastronomic habits, coffee faced an uphill struggle, and came close to being no more than a passing fad. For Cowan, the cultural side of the 'commercial revolution' still largely needs to be written, and this is a worthy manifesto for future research on commodities other than coffee.

To understand why coffee was adopted and spread, the author reviews a wide range of theories. Neo-classical economists consider that supply creates its own demand, notably through the mechanism of falling prices. *Marxists* point to the need to keep immiserized labourers hard at work, with sugar perhaps more important than coffee itself. Social historians variously stress pre-modern medical ideas (investigated in some detail here), social status, social emulation, sobriety, the work ethic, and romantic sensibility. Cowan himself plumps for the pioneering role of the virtuoso ethic of curiosity. This leads him to an extended and fascinating consideration of a self-declared cosmopolitan social elite of virtuosos, who moved on the fringes of the court and of universities, and who seem to have been especially prominent in early-modern Britain, as compared to other European states. Blurring the boundaries between the genteel and the popular, they popularized coffee as one in a set of exotic rarities from foreign parts.

Nevertheless, the reader is left wondering why this one element is singled out to such a degree, and whether the adoption of coffee was not due to a confluence of different factors, one of which may not be given its due here. Cowan is somewhat slow to focus on the psychoactive and allegedly addictive alkaloid known as caffeine, treated mainly in chapter 2, and he is reluctant to give it much significance in his story. There is now quite a bit written on caffeine and other alkaloids, and it is possible to see the spread of coffee as merely one among many examples of drug addiction, albeit one with relatively minor and benign side-effects. Cowan hints at this, but does not squarely engage with the arguments.

In addition, his virtuoso theory does not seem to answer some of his own pertinent questions, notably as to why this elite did not adopt other foreign novelties, such as betel, cannabis, and opium. To argue that these products were more 'associated with licentious sexuality or drunken disorder' than hot beverages seems scarcely satisfactory. This is especially the case with the betel quid, which Cowan misleadingly refers to as 'betel nut', and which contains relatively mild alkaloids, not very different from those in coffee, tea, and cocoa. However, whereas the areca nut could be exported in cured form over long distances, and slaked lime paste was easily procurable locally, it was effectively impossible to obtain leaves from the betel vine, the third necessary ingredient in a betel quid, in a sufficiently fresh state. Some Europeans resident in the tropics, unaffected by this limitation, certainly took enthusiastically to chewing betel. The same problem of the freshness of the leaf was even more important in preventing the spread of chewing qât, obtainable in the very same places that Yemeni coffee was procured, but not mentioned by Cowan. As for cannabis and opium, they were not really new to European consumers, and opium addiction, in the form of laudanum ingestion, did come to spread extensively in Britain, associated most famously with the tragic figure of

Thomas De Quincey.

Similarly the virtuoso theory does not compellingly explain why coffee fared as it did compared to competing hot beverages. Cowan rightly criticizes S. D. Smith's influential and widely-cited views on the crucial role of the East India Company in lobbying for import duties and excise taxes that favoured tea. Cowan tellingly notes that the East India Company was installed in Mocha as well as in Canton, and thus had an excellent motive to lobby as much for coffee as for tea. However, there is a lot more to be said about the competition between tea and coffee in Britain, and it is surprising in this respect that John Burnett's *Liquid Pleasures, a Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (1999) does not feature in the bibliography. Moreover, although the existence of London chocolate houses is acknowledged, there is little said on this beverage, despite the fact that it was often served in coffeehouses. Indeed, the case of chocolate serves as a further refutation of Smith's insistence on the primacy of taxation, albeit in the context of the early-nineteenth century resurgence of coffee consumption in Britain. As for salep or saloop, Cowan ignores it altogether, even though this drink came to occupy a significant niche in the public consumption of hot beverages, not least in London, as shown in M. Grieve's 1931 classic, *A Modern Herbal*. Salep was made from powdered orchid roots, which were initially imported from the Middle East by the Levant Company, and were increasingly harvested from the wild in England.

To be fair, the book concentrates on coffeehouses rather than on coffee. Their origins lay in establishments serving alcohol, although bathhouses and barbers' shops could also claim some rights of paternity. Their generally nondescript architectural features and their role as 'penny universities' are interestingly portrayed. It is shown that their function in disseminating news, orally or by way of newspapers, gradually overtook that of presenting virtuoso collections of oddities. Women were not expressly excluded from coffeehouses, but they were certainly marginalized as customers. They were rather more present as proprietors and workers, giving rise to accusations of prostitution. The presence of effeminate men was also often seen as a problem, and indeed they were sometimes caricatured as Jews or foreigners. However, the author skates away rather too quickly from the homophobic and xenophobic aspects of this story. Overall, it is not clear to this reviewer how much of this material is really new, except perhaps in terms of the extent of the detail that is provided, but it certainly makes for a fascinating tranche of social history.

Cowan further highlights the uncertainties of governments, agonizing over how to deal with coffeehouses. They went from stuffing them with spies at one extreme, to closing them down at the other, with high-church royalists as the main opponents of these establishments. Cowan argues for more continuity in the story of the official harassment of coffeehouses after 1688 than is generally allowed for. This is a fair point, but he may go too far in his revisionist claim, as he admits that there were no further attempts at outright prohibition after the glorious revolution. Tories and Whigs are declared to have been equally elitist and manipulative in their attitudes, and yet the latter's belief in self-regulation, rather than political repression, was surely rather more important than is stated here.

More generally, Cowan attacks the whiggish proponents of the coffeehouse as an example of the interlinked development of rational modernity, the consumer revolution, and the public sphere. Indeed, Jürgen Habermas emerges as the author's *bête noire*. For Cowan, every age can be seen as having engendered consumer revolutions and enjoyed public spaces, and there is no inherent reason to privilege the era of the emerging European bourgeoisie. In contrast, he places great emphasis on the diversity of coffeehouses and their clientele, described as 'a variegated set of separate publics rather than a unique one'. Moreover, subtle mechanisms of social exclusion made these spaces less 'public' than they might appear at first sight. Rather than preparing democratic revolutions, the role of coffeehouses was 'to make the cultural politics of Augustan Britain safe for an elitist whig oligarchy'. Cowan is a self-confessed 'splitter' rather than a 'lumper', and for him the devil lies in the detail. However, it is ultimately not all that clear how different his perspective really is, as evidenced in this passage: 'The coffeehouse was perhaps the most important social space in which civil society began to flourish, in the century before Enlightenment writers such as David Hume and Adam Ferguson gave it a name and theorized its significance'.

In terms of geographical coverage, the title of the book refers to Britain, but London dominates the story to a

quite remarkable degree. This undoubtedly reflects the huge influence of the capital city in the adoption and spread of the new beverage, and the concentration of coffeehouses around the seat of political power. However, London is already the best-known aspect of this story, and 'provincializing' the text would have given the book more impact. Why, for instance, did York contain as many as thirty coffeehouses by the late-eighteenth century? Even if the great bulk of available evidence undoubtedly concerns London, Cowan has missed an opportunity to apply some 'positive discrimination' to right the historiographical balance between the metropolis and the rest of the country. Wales is particularly poorly covered, notably in comparison with Scotland and Ireland, even though the author makes it clear in passing that coffeehouses spread to the Welsh lands. Whether a population that was still overwhelmingly Welsh-speaking reacted differently to curiosities from overseas is in itself an interesting question.

One could even suggest that it is a pity that Britain beyond the waves, especially the North American colonies, has been excluded from this book, save for a stray mention of a Boston coffeehouse. The adoption of hot beverages by British settlers overseas was arguably influenced by many of the same social processes that were at play in the metropolis, and the differences could in themselves be extremely revealing. Coffeehouses appear to have been less prominent in British North America than in Britain itself, but this is something that needs to be explored. The adoption of coffee by indigenous elites and peoples more obviously belongs to a different story, and yet, for example, it might be instructive to delve into the roots of the split between tea-drinking North India and coffee-drinking South India. Even if the weak and peripheral English East India Company had little or nothing to do with this divide, the question of evolving tastes in Britain's non-settler colonies remains to be considered.

A trumpet blast for the need for a global approach does indeed appear in the conclusion, and a welcome spotlight is turned on overseas connections in chapter 3. Unfortunately, though, the common dichotomy between a commodity producing 'South' and a commodity consuming 'North' is maintained, leaving little room for an exploration of how Britain might have affected the drinking of coffee by Asians, Africans, and Amerindians. Moreover, the author displays a somewhat insecure grasp of the cultivation and marketing of coffee on the other side of the oceans. To proclaim in the conclusion that 'the history of British coffee took place in Mocha, Surat, and Cairo,' as much as in Britain is undoubtedly true, but any reader should exercise caution in looking at this version of this side of the story. It may well be that the book that I co-edited with Steven Topik, *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia and Latin America, 1500–1989* (2003) appeared too late to be of use, but Cowan ignores fundamental work by André Raymond and Michel Tuchscherer on Red Sea trade and production, even referring to a non-existent 'Imam of Mocha'. He neglects the development of coffee cultivation in India itself, fanning out from Mysore and affecting the emergence of a surplus in Mocha for sale to Westerners. Java is held to have had 'plantations', a rather misleading term to employ for the forced smallholder cultivation imposed by the Dutch from 1725. When discussing British reluctance to grow coffee in the Caribbean, there is no mention of L. J. Ragatz's classic work, or indeed of later publications that stress the difference between the old sugar islands on the one hand, and the neutral and ceded islands, more prone to grow coffee and cocoa, on the other. The materials presented on coffee dealers in Britain, and on re-exports and smuggling of beans, are thus the most interesting and useful parts of chapter 3.

Reviewers have an irritating tendency to lament the fact that their own interests are not covered, and to focus on their own areas of expertise, neglecting what the author knows about and has worked on. Asking a specialist of overseas coffee to review a book centred on British consumption of coffee clearly runs that risk, and it is important to end by stressing that Cowan's focus and research interests rest squarely on seventeenth-century London. In that domain, he is thoroughly at home, and in impressive command of a superlative variety of sources. This is a beautifully written book, which sustains the attention of the reader from start to finish, and which any lovers of the story of coffee will proudly display on their bookshelves.

#### **Other reviews:**

Guardian

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