

Coffee's Contribution to the Political Role of Coffeehouses in England During 1660-1720

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ABSTRACT

According to German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, coffeehouses had a political role—creating a public sphere for the bourgeoisie to talk about politics. Therefore, coffeehouses, or salons in France, could lead to civil revolts. However, it leads to the question that why coffeehouses prevailed over teahouses, taverns, or other kinds of public places. This study shows the traits of coffee that made it an appealing product to facilitate political engagement among people. Through 17th-and-18th-century letters and diaries, this paper focuses on coffee—the object itself, rather than coffeehouses—to argue and explain why coffee became a popular and political beverage.

Introduction

“Coffee in England is just toasted milk”, as Christopher Fry, an English poet said. Coffee was once extremely popular in England. The dominant view is proposed by Jürgen Habermas, who claimed that the coffee house as “a public sphere that functioned in the political realm arose first in Great Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century.”¹ This, however, was only part of the story. Coffeehouses had other roles as well, such as literary and economic ones. It contained a “variegated set of publics”, who created the various functions of the public sphere.² Women played an inconspicuous part in establishing businesses for selling coffee, though they were excluded from them.³ In addition, though it was claimed that coffeehouses were open to all men regardless of their social status, there were invisible limitations on plebeians. This illustrates the ‘true complexity’⁴ of coffeehouses and the variegated set of publics they contained. To show the role of coffeehouses in history, identifying the role of coffee itself matters. With coffee, Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere was formed, private people came together and established an unprecedented political confrontation against the government.⁵ This exotic drug changed the bourgeois lifestyle. Because of coffee, the first newspapers, men’s clubs, and political parties were organized, and revolutions plotted.⁶ However, there had to be a reason causing coffee to gain such popularity. Coffee’s traits of soberness, cheapness, and healthiness led to the political influence of coffeehouses because they kept people conscious while talking, enabling nearly everyone to enter the coffeehouse to talk about politics. It was also believed to be beneficial for one’s health, which made it even more appealing.

Coffee's Benefits

Coffee was non-alcoholic, cheap, and healthy, which undoubtedly gained it prestige among beverages. It first became well-known because of its pleasant pharmacological, spiritual, and physiological effects. Moreover, the definition of coffee was constantly changing, even if its exchange value and sales were not. It was named an exotic fruit, a remedy, and at last a drug or a necessity.

A lack of alcohol was the most essential benefit of coffee. Unlike alcohol, “coffee [made] no man drunk” and “never yet intoxicated any man”,⁷ always keeping people in a conscious condition, thus enabling men to talk about political issues at the long table which had been adopted from the Ottoman coffeehouses. When coffeehouses were at their peak, there seemed to be far fewer taverns and bars in England, because ‘while some few places added ale and beer as early as 1669, liquors were not items of importance for many years’,⁸ indicating that coffee almost perfectly replaced alcohol. Therefore, we can see that coffee’s sobriety enabled people to talk about political issues while having enjoyable beverages.

Coffee was also cheap. The biggest attraction for coffeehouses was the price of coffee. It only cost a penny, so all people could afford it.

“In an Ale-house you must gorge yourself with Pot after Pot, sit dully alone... But here for a penny or two you [might] spend 2 or 3 hours, have the shelter of a House, the warmth of a Fire, the diversion of Company and conveniency if you please of taking a Pipe of Tobacco, and all this without any grumbling or repining.”⁹

Here is the published character of a coffeehouse. The ‘one penny or two’ was not just for the coffee, for it included all sort of services that made strangers feel at home. The price contained human companionship, conversation, a well-decorated and comfortable environment, and a shelter for everyone. Considering these benefits, coffee was cheap. The previous drinks – beer or ale – were not so cost-efficient because people were constantly drinking ‘pot after pot’ and there was no facility in a tavern for talking with people. Therefore, comparing the price and the sense of cordiality, people were more willing to go to coffeehouses, and thus have conversations with others on political issues for half a day.

Another reason why people came to coffeehouses in the early period was coffee’s perceived health benefits. Coffee was reputed to cure any disease, so there were various ‘fantastic coffee claims’,¹⁰ boasting that it worked against contagions. Some doctors even sent their patients to coffeehouses rather than to the apothecary’s shop. Being called the ‘excellent fruit’,¹¹ coffee “[could] cleanse the English-man’s Stomak of Flegm”,¹² “dissolve Crudities, comfort the Brain, and dry up ILL Humours in the Stomach”, “refreshing the Heart, Corroborating the Spirits... quickening the Appetite, assisting Digestion”¹³—there were countless purported benefits. When people heard these claims, they must have been astonished by this magical drug, and they were certainly attracted by coffee since some must have cared about their health. Just as the first newspaper advertisement illustrated, this was a product with ‘many excellent vertues’¹⁴. Therefore, in the early stage of the spread and development of the coffeehouse, coffee’s pharmacologic functions helped people to facilitate political discussions. However, people paid less attention to the healthfulness of coffee when it truly became a necessity.

Coffee's Costs

Coffee did have some demerits. For example, it was believed to cause physical discomfort and impotence. However, the demerits did not outweigh the merits or significantly affect people's willingness to come to coffeehouses. In 1666 and again in 1672 the government planned to ban the coffeehouses. There were voices that opposed coffeehouses, such as the 1675 Ale Wives' Complaint Against the Coffee-houses. Charles II issued a ban on coffeehouses on December 29th, 1675, because of coffee's 'evil and dangerous effects', but the proclamation was recalled on January 8th, 1676 since a significant number of people's careers were lost and the prohibition of coffeehouses had decreased the king's revenue. Finally, coffee won the prohibition war, showing its importance in forming economic, literary, and socio-political life in England. Overall, the demerits of coffee did not matter that much until there were external competitors such as tea.

The most popular complaint against coffee was that it made drinkers impotent. In "A Character of Coffee and Coffee-houses," the author M.P. (unknown) claimed that the "pernicious Coffee, that they [were] grown as impotent as Age, as dry and as unfruitful, as the Deserts of Africk" and that coffee was 'effeminating'.¹⁵ Using a metaphor, M.P. exaggerated the harmful dryness of coffee. Meanwhile, in "The Women's Petition Against Coffee," the wives complained about coffee unmanning their husbands, crippling their 'kind Gallants' and made their husbands as unfruitful as those 'Desarts'.¹⁶ Coffee was a beverage that deprived men of their masculinity and made them feminine. For example, "The RULES and ORDERS of the COFFEE-HOUSE" demonstrated that courtesy of calling every individual 'sir' and that "to keep the house more Quiet". In a tavern, by contrast, these 'elegant' scene could hardly be seen.¹⁷ Beer or Ale were representations of manhood, and it was natural that when alcohol was replaced, men were labeled as Eunuchs.

Coffee also caused discomfort and some negative symptoms. Coffee, believed detrimental to those who had melancholic temperaments, was said to cause drinkers to be "apt to pervert both Spirits and Humours... and unable to perform any Functions... (people) not having a sufficient plenty of Spirits" and to become subject to disease.¹⁸ These complaints were likely true to some extent. However, we should not consider them as a problem for the Englishmen. Because, more accurately, the so-called discomforts were just side-effects that would not cause serious problems to one's body. Compared with the alcohol which Englishmen previously drank, the side-effects of coffee seemed to be much weaker.

Political Influence

All the traits above contributed to the political influence of coffee. Coffee facilitated socialization among people. Some people drank 3 or 4 dishes of coffee and 'this drink [would] not let them close their Eyes all night... These men [were] either afraid to be alone with themselves, or they to excess love Company, so that they never set apart any time to converse with themselves. This ill-tasted Liquor [made] Men to neglect and forsake themselves; for who [could not] rest, till he good Fellows [found]'.¹⁹ Coffee kept people awake and alert, but they were lonely, so they tended to find fellows for companionship. In this case, when people went for a cup of coffee, it meant that they were seeking somebody to chat with, and obviously politics were among the most preferred topics. In addition,

“in Wine Ale or Beer, most times either [destroyed] or very much mayhem the business of the whole day, whereas if people would be perswaded to play the Good-fellows in this wholesome wakeful Innocent drink, They would find it do no less good to their bodies, and much more promote and advance their business and Employments”.²⁰ This implies that coffee promoted efficient discussion. Undoubtedly, the same thing applied to the political influence of coffee, for coffee could advance political discussions and might enhance the quality of the topics. Therefore, political conversations came to be ‘transacted at some Publick House’,²¹ and as Pincus mentioned, coffeehouses specialized in the circulation of news.²²

Conclusion

It was coffee’s key benefits: a lack of alcohol, low cost, and healthfulness that mainly contributed to the formation of the political ‘bourgeois public sphere’ in 17th and 18th England, even if there were demerits of coffee. The French philosopher Bruno Latour has expressed that objects, or nonhumans, can enforce rules upon human beings.²³ Coffee, too, enforced laws and concepts, especially political discussions in coffeehouses. They were an interaction between humans and nonhumans, and the nonhuman formed and shaped people’s ideas. The characteristics of coffee shaped the social views of people. This represents the political value of coffee. As the social function disappeared and people went to coffeehouse to read newspapers, coffeehouses declined and were soon replaced by tea. However, the history of coffee should never be forgotten, for it shaped the history of 17th and 18th century England.

Notes

¹ Habermas Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991), 57.

² Brian Cowan, “What Was Masculine about the Public SPHERE? Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post-Restoration England,” *History Workshop Journal* 51, no. 1 (2001): pp. 127-157, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/2001.51.127>, 150.

³ William H. Ukers, *All about COFFEE. Second Edition* (New York: Tea & Coffee Trade Journal Co, 1935), 52.

⁴ Joseph Clarke, “Coffee: Grounds for Debate? An Assessment of the ...,” accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Clarke-Joseph.pdf>, 9.

⁵ Habermas, 27.

⁶ Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture and the World Economy: 1400 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 83.

⁷ M.P., A CHARACTER OF COFFEE AND COFFEE-HOUSES, 3. Accessed September 21, 2021.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A56639.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

⁸ Ukers, 57.

⁹ Coffee-Houses Vindicated IN ANSVVER To the Late Published CHARACTER OF A COFFEE HOUSE Asserting From Reason, Experience, and Good Authours, the Excellent Vse, and Physical Vertues of That Liquor. With The Grand Conveniency of Such Civil Places of Resort and Ingenious Conversation, 3. Accessed September 21, 2021. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A33605.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

¹⁰ Ukers, 54.

¹¹ Coffee-Houses Vindicated IN ANSVVER To the Late Published CHARACTER OF A COFFEE-HOUSE, 2.

¹² Ibid., 3

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ukers, 53.

¹⁵ M.P., 4.

¹⁶ THE WOMEN'S PETITION AGAINST COFFEE. REPRESENTING TO PUBLICK CONSIDERATION THE Grand INCONVENIENCIES Accruing to Their SEX from the Excessive Use of That Drying, Enfeebling LIQUOR. Presented to the Right Honorable the Keepers of the Liberty of VENVS, 2. Accessed September 21, 2021.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A66888.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

¹⁷ “The RULES and ORDERS of the COFFEE-HOUSE.” Accessed September 21, 2021.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/B01780.0001.001/1:1.1?c=eebo;c=eebo2;g=eebogroup;hi=0;rgn=div2;view=fulltext;xc=1;q1=coffee>.

¹⁸ Blount, Thomas Pope. A Natural History: Containing Many Not Common OBSERVATIONS: Extracted out of the Best Modern Writers, 112. Accessed September 21, 2021.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A28477.0001.001?c=eebo;c=eebo2;g=eebogroup;rgn=main;view=fulltext;xc=1;q1=coffee#hl6>.

¹⁹ M.P., 5.

²⁰ Coffee-Houses Vindicated IN ANSVVER To the Late Published CHARACTER OF A COFFEE-HOUSE, 4.

- ²¹ Coffee-Houses Vindicated IN ANSVVER To the Late Published CHARACTER OF A COFFEE-HOUSE, 4.
- ²² Steve Pincus, ‘Coffee Politicians Does Create’: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture, 818. *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 4 (1995): pp. 807-834, <https://doi.org/10.1086/245229>.
- ²³ Wiebe E. Bijker and Bruno Latour, “8 Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in *Shaping Technology, Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, Mass. u.a.: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 225-258.

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