

A History of Coffee

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“There is a danger that the history of coffee may lead us astray. The anecdotal, the picturesque, and the unreliable play an enormous part in it.”
F. Braudel

Pecevi, an Ottoman historian of the early seventeenth century, writes: “Until the year 962 (1554-55), in the High, God-Guarded city of Constantinople, as well as in Ottoman lands generally, coffee and coffeehouses did not exist. About that year, a fellow called Hakam from Aleppo and a wag called Shams from Damascus, came to the city: they each opened a large shop in the district called Tahtalkala, and began to purvey coffee. These shops became meeting places of a circle of pleasure seekers and idlers, and also of some wits from among the men of letters and literati, and they used to meet in groups of 20 or 30. Some read books and fine writings, some were busy with backgammon and chess, some brought new poems and talked of literature. Those who used to spend a good deal of money on giving dinners for the sake of convivial entertainment, found that they could attain the joys of conviviality merely by spending an asper or two on the price of coffee. It reached such a point that all kinds of unemployed officers, judges and professors, all seeking preferment, and corner-sitters with nothing to do proclaimed that there was no place like it for pleasure and relaxation, and filled it until there was no room to sit or stand. It became so famous that, besides the holders of high offices, even great men could not refrain from coming there. The imams and muezzins and pious hypocrites said: ‘People have become addicts of the coffeehouse: nobody comes to the mosques!’ The ulema said: ‘It is a house of evil deeds; it is better to go to the wine tavern than there.’ The preachers in particular made great efforts to forbid it. The muftis arguing that anything which is heated to the point of carbonization, that is becomes charcoal, is unlawful, issued fetvas against it. In the time of Sultan Murad III, may God pardon him and have mercy on him, there were great interdictions

and prohibitions, but certain persons made approaches to the chief of police and the captain of the watch about selling coffee from back-doors in side-alleys, in small and unobtrusive shops and were allowed to do this. After this time, it became so prevalent that the ban was abandoned. The preachers and muftis now said that it does not become completely carbonized, and to drink it is therefore lawful. Among scholars of religion, the sheikhs, the viziers, and the great, there was nobody left who did not drink it. It even reached such a point that the grand viziers built great coffeehouses as investments and began to rent them out at one or two gold pieces a day.”

Almost all the themes one would need to cover in dealing with the history of coffee and coffeehouses are underscored here: new and immensely popular forms of sociability in the early modern era; secularization of public space; literary activity; novel sites for the formation and manipulation of public opinion; tensions with the authorities; coffee as a commodity, driven to significance by growing demand and supply, and the coffeehouse as an investment. Pecevi could limit his account to the Ottoman realm, from Yemen to Hungary, but already in his lifetime the buzz of coffee was spreading as a part of daily life both eastward to Iran and India and westward to Europe, with the opening of coffeehouses in Isfahan, Delhi, Oxford, Paris, Vienna, and many other cities before the end of the 17th century. This paper will deal with the latter theme of coffee and coffeehouse (or, café) as part of a global history of trade from the 16th to the 19th century as well as some of its repercussions in social and political life.

By the time it reached Istanbul, coffee had been known in the certain parts of the Arab world (the Arabian peninsula, late Mamluk Egypt and Syria) for more than a century. The

earliest reports on the consumption of coffee associate it with different mystical figures, and in each case with their concern with wakefulness. A Cairene historian relates:

“At the beginning of this [the 16th] century, the news reached us in Egypt that a drink, called qahwa, had spread in Yemen and was being used by Sufi shaykhs and others to help them stay awake during their devotional exercises ... Then it reached us, some time later, that its appearance and spread there had been due to the efforts of the learned shaykh, imam, mufti and Sufi al-Dhabhani ... He found that among its properties was that it drove away fatigue and lethargy, and brought to the body a certain sprightliness and vigor.”

The early consumption of this invigorating liquor seems to have been limited at first to Sufi confraternities, homes, and small street stalls. When coffee reached Cairo and Istanbul, however, trendsetter cities of huge populations and prestige, some merchants of the bean took an imaginative entrepreneurial step and created an institution for its consumption in a social setting. And a trend was indeed set, as coffeehouses spread like wildfire all around the empire.

As a consumer good, coffee hardly knew any social boundaries. Thevenot, who stayed in Istanbul in 1655, noted that the Constantinopolitans deemed coffee to have medicinal properties, and added: “There is no one poor or rich, who does not drink at least two or three cups a day. ... All sorts of people come to these places, [i.e., the coffeehouses] without distinction of religion or social position; there is not the slightest bit of shame in entering such a place, and many go there simply to chat with one another.”

It should be noted, however, that when Thevenot speaks of there being “not the slightest bit of shame in entering such a place,” he is speaking only of men. Coffeehouses were, in the Middle East and the Balkans, and for a while after its introduction in various parts of Europe, male spaces. It takes a perceptive and gender-conscious observer like Lady Montague, wife of

the British ambassador to the Ottoman empire in the early 18th century, to see that Ottoman women, too, loved to sip at the cup; moreover, they were as concerned as men with conviviality and found ways to meet similar social demands but in different institutions: the public bathhouses, Lady Montague observed, serve as “women’s coffeehouses.” A substantial part of the demand for coffee was also for consumption at home, as coffee became a regular component of breakfast.

Coffeehouses, however, constituted the primary source of demand, as indicated by the sharp decline in customs revenues when these politically volatile institutions were banned by the authorities (and by some of the pragmatic arguments made by those who wanted to revoke the bans for fiscal reasons). Genders hardly mixed, but all sorts of men indeed, “without distinction of religion or social position,” did visit coffeehouses. Over time, coffeeshops emerged with specialized clientele: certain professions, groups, or regiments of the military were likely to have their coffeehouses (adorned with the insignia of that specific regiment, for instance). Many coffeehouses, however, at least the larger and centrally-located ones, attracted different sorts of people. Ottoman-Jewish rabbi were compelled to answer questions such as “whether coffee prepared by gentiles was prohibited not only on the Sabbath but on the remaining days of the week as well.” Rabbi David ibn Abi Zimra who resided in Egypt betw.1513-53, probably the first to face such a question, “saw no problem with the beverage being prepared by a non-Jew. ... Coffeehouses, however, were for him another matter entirely: ‘I do not consent to its being drunk at a meeting place of non-Jews, ... if it is indeed for medicinal purposes one may send for it and have it delivered home’.”

It is not only the religio-ethnic composition of the patrons of coffeehouses but also the new modes of sociability and patronage made possible by these institutions that transgressed the social boundaries that the authorities of different communities would like to maintain. Some members of the Ottoman elite lamented the fact that conspicuous patronage and ostentatious hospitality had been rendered so inexpensive:

“Those who used to spend a good deal of money on giving dinners for the sake of convivial entertainment, found that they could attain the joys of conviviality merely by spending an asper or two on the price of coffee.”

To boot, the new modes of sociability facilitated by the coffeehouses were also secular, or at least outside the direct control of the religious authorities. No such space existed before: the taverns were not shunned by all of Muslim society, but their appeal was much more limited. There was also the issue of sobriety and acceptability of coffee in general that alcoholic beverages could not enjoy. Taverns simply did not represent a competition to the coffeehouses in terms of the size of their clientele, either Muslim or non-Muslim.

Coffeehouses around the world also provided settings for and linkages to other sectors of what one might call, admittedly somewhat anachronistically, the arts and entertainment industry. Recitation of books, epics, romances spread over many nights like modern soap operas. Shadow and puppet theater performers found ready and captive audiences there. London coffeeshops also served art auctions and displays. Thevenot, a French traveler of the 17th century, observed that “generally in the coffeehouse [in the Orient] there are many violins, flute players, and musicians, who are hired by the proprietor of the coffeehouse to play and sing much of the day, with the end of drawing in customers.” Card games, backgammon, and chess, as well as poetry competitions, animated the same environment.

Just as life in the coffeehouses must be understood in terms of various interlinked activities, the consumption of coffee must be seen in terms of its linkages to various other commodities. A jurist of the late-16th century was referring to opium and hashish when he wrote: “I was asked about coffee whether it is permitted and safe. I replied: yes, it is safe. The only difficulty I have is with those additions to it.” Not as an additive but as a companion to coffee, and at least as addictive, tobacco emerged around the turn of the 17th century and became immensely popular. A poem composed in Arabic captures the intimate link people drew between the two substances: “tobacco without coffee is like sex without passion.” As for its introduction in Istanbul (“the coming of the fetid and nauseating smoke of tobacco”) as part of the new patterns woven by merchants and rapid changes in demand experienced by consumers in the early modern era, an Ottoman historian wrote that “the English infidels brought it in the year 1009 (1601) and sold it as a remedy for certain diseases of humidity. Some companions from among the pleasure seekers and sensualists said: ‘Here is an occasion for pleasure.’ And they became addicted. Soon those who were not mere pleasure-seekers also began to use it. Many, even of the great ulema and the mighty fell into this addiction. From the ceaseless smoking of the coffeehouse riffraff, the coffeehouses were filled with blue smoke, to such a point that those who were in them could not see one another. ... By the beginning of the year 1045 A.H. (1635-36), its spread and fame are such as cannot be written or expressed.”

Europe’s initial encounter with coffee was abroad, through travelers in Ottoman lands. And some the earliest European observers of the coffee scene were, not surprisingly, physicians since the medicinal properties of this new drink were to occupy the minds of many observers in the east and the west from the functional level of its benefit and harm to the theoretical level of classification according to Galenic humoralism. Sandys, an Englishman who visited Istanbul in

the early 17th century, wrote: “There they sit, chatting most of the day and sippe of a drink called coffee, in little china dishes, as hot as they can suffer it: black as soote, and tasting not much unlike it ... which [aide]th, as they say, digestion, and procureth alacritie.” Or, Pietro della Valle, famous Italian traveler who eventually boasted of being the first person to take coffee beans to Europe, observed that consumers found it beneficial, primarily “per la corroboratione della stomaco e per la vigilanza della notte.”

Starting around the middle of the 17th century, coffee became a temptation and then a habit for Europeans as well. The apocryphal story of the café in Vienna has it that the Ottoman armies, in hasty retreat when the 1683 siege of Vienna turned into a disaster, left all their belongings in the encampment, including bales of coffee. The Viennese are supposed thus to have started brewing coffee and enjoying it with a croissant, as tokens of the victory over the coffee-drinking Crescent. It breaks my heart to speak against such a well-spun tale, but we do know that coffee was brought to Vienna and to Paris much before that by Armenian merchants. Oxford, however, was probably the first town to have a coffeehouse (being a university town, this is perfectly understandable). [Here, note will be taken also of coffee’s competition with tea and chocolate.]

The growing European consumption of coffee eventually also implied changes in the production and commerce of coffee. A good deal of the initial loss suffered by the merchants of the Red Sea and Cairo in the spice trade, due to the circumnavigation of the southern tip of Africa by Portuguese sailors, was in fact recovered by the arrival of coffee. The far-reaching commercial ventures and sophisticated strategies of the coffee merchants of Cairo are richly documented and indicate that Cairene merchants were making huge fortunes out of the growing

demand for coffee from the late-16th to the mid-18th century. Dutch and English merchants also became involved in the coffee trade from Yemen during the 17th century.

Throughout the late-17th and early-18th centuries, coffee was exported in large quantities from the Middle East toward Europe. Ever mindful of trade balances, mercantilists were alarmed at the rising volume of coffee imports. By the 1710s, “the Dutch were growing coffee in Java for the European market and the French were [soon thereafter] even exporting coffee, grown in their West Indian colonies, to the Ottoman empire. By 1739, West Indian coffee is mentioned as far east as Erzurum in eastern Anatolia. Colonial coffee brought by Western merchants was cheaper than that coming from the Red Sea and greatly reduced its share of the market.” As an imported commodity, coffee was soon joined by sugar, as the Ottomans “took to sweetening their coffee” (possibly because non-Yemeni coffees were relatively bitter). The political turmoil of Cairo in the late-18th century, that paved the way for Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, cannot be understood without coming to terms with the changes in the production and marketing of coffee.

It took a long time for the authorities to take coffee lightly. Part of the reason was directly political, and that part is better understood, but at least part of the tensions between the authorities and the coffee-drinking public was related to the increasing use of the nighttime by the latter. It would be foolish to argue that coffee is the factor behind the extension of human activity and public sociability into the nighttime in the modern era, but coffee accompanied that momentous change, and a fine companion to our modern tempo it has been. It made the morning and the night more manipulable than they had ever been and thus served as a tool in the colonization and conquest of the night that is part of the story of modernity and is still unfolding. [I am currently working on developing some new data on the use of nighttime, such as changes

in the production and consumption of candles and lighting oil, as well as governmental or municipal efforts to increase street lighting. These will be presented if ready by July.]