At the Amsterdam
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> *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffee House* by Brian Cowan; Yale, 364 pp, £25.00, January 2006 [ISBN 0 300 10666 1]
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> *Coffee House: A Cultural History* by Markman Ellis; Phoenix, 304 pp, £8.99, November 2005 [ISBN 0 7538 1898 1]

I went to a coffee house this morning. I had a 'grande' latte. It cost me $3.20. Sometimes I carry the coffee with me to work in a cardboard cup; this time I sat in the coffee house and drank it while reading the newspaper. I went by myself and did not have a conversation with any of the other customers – several of whom I vaguely recognised but most of whom were strangers. Almost all of them were talking to someone they had come with, reading their own papers, or doing something on the internet, as this coffee house is a wireless hot spot.

Here are some other things I didn't do at the coffee house: I did not hear a philosophical or scientific lecture, though I inadvertently picked up fragments of talk about accountancy reform and recent appointments to the Supreme Court – this coffee house is adjacent to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and across the Charles River from the Business School. I did not take part in a political cabal, or think that one was being plotted around me, unless the normal conversation of Harvard elites counts as such. It did not occur to me that any of the discussions taking place might be reported to George W. Bush or the FBI – though one can never be too sure of that these days. If there had been an attempt by the Bush regime to ban this coffee house as a hotbed of sedition, or to send agents to spy on its clientele, I had not heard of it. I did not witness the dissection of a dolphin, the display of an elephant or a rhinoceros, or an exhibition of a child with three penises and a woman with three breasts. I did not hear customers sing an eight-part canon; I did not take a bath, gamble with dice or secure the services of a prostitute. A fellow customer did not offer to sell me shares in a publicly traded company or insurance on my life or property, and I did not buy books, paintings or whale oil at a candle auction. The clientele was fairly specific to the neighbourhood and so not very heterogeneous, and, if the neighbourhood did not make it socially pretty samey, then the outrageous price of the latte did. No one was smoking – it's banned – and many of the customers were women.

All of this makes the coffee house I go to a very different sort of place from those that proliferated in London from the middle of the 17th century; but despite these marked dissimilarities, social and cultural theorists have placed a heavy bet on early coffee houses as crucibles of modernity. It started with Habermas, who in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) argued for their importance in the rise of the 'bourgeois public sphere'. What was said to be pertinent about the hundreds of coffee houses jostling for custom in late 17th and early 18th-century London was, first, the social diversity of their customers; second, the temporary setting aside of distinctions of social rank; third, the common conversation in which their customers were swept up; fourth, the circulation of print, and especially of printed news, in the place where this jumble of people were talking about it; and, fifth, the occasional closing of the circle through the embodying of coffee-house talk in new forms of print which could then become the objects of still more coffee-house talk.

Habermas's 'public sphere' was a theorised formation distinct from the family, the state and the incorporated institution, and the coffee house, similarly, was a physical place distinct from the private household, the court, the church or the guildhall. And so the coffee house, according to Habermas, was a new sort of place, and the outcome of transactions within it was the category we have come to know, and take for granted, as 'public opinion'. In the 1970s, Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* made Habermas's argument more concrete and detailed: late 17th and 18th-century coffee houses 'naturally were places where speech flourished'. When a man went into one, he paid an entrance fee of a penny, was told the house rules and then sat down 'to enjoy himself'. Sennett gave that enjoyment a functional explanation: it meant

> talking to other people, and the talk was governed by a cardinal rule: in order for information to be as full as possible, distinctions of rank were temporarily suspended; anyone sitting in the coffee house had a right to talk to anyone else, to enter into any conversation, whether he knew the other people or not . . . It was bad form even to touch on the social origins of other persons when talking to them in the coffee house, because the free flow of talk might then be impeded.

These are the reasons recent academic writing about coffee and coffee houses has been dominated by political historians and cultural theorists. Because the modern world was washed into existence on a tide of caffeine, the subject is too

important to be left to historians of food and drink. Brian Cowan is a political and social historian, but *The Social Life of Coffee* is systematically sceptical about Habermas's claims. True, Charles II made a serious – if ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to suppress coffee houses towards the end of 1675, and was enraged by the very idea of places where 'false news' was spread and discussed by people who had no right to meddle in the business of their government. The mixture in a public house of promiscuous, face-to-face talk and unregulated cheap print was explosive. As Adrian Johns has noted, 'the alliance of coffee and print transformed authorship, communication and conversation.' But precisely because coffee houses were places where people freely spoke their minds on matters that were supposed to be none of their business, they were fertile fields for government spies. By the 1670s and 1680s, London's coffee houses were swarming with informants, notably including their owners, who were obliged, as a condition of retaining their licences to operate, to give assurances that they would not permit any 'scandalous papers, books or libels', and would inform the government if sedition were being brewed on their premises. This was a significant threat: shortly after the king backed down from his banning order, several proprietors were arrested for continuing to permit 'seditious discourses, and spreading false and seditious news'. Until the end of Charles II's reign, and beyond, London's coffee houses continued to be threatened with closure, even as they became more and more integrated into the structures of City and crown regulation.

As Cowan shows, not all of them were dens of sedition: Sam's coffee house was the base of the royalist journalist and official press censor Roger L'Estrange, who described it as a place 'where a company of honest fellows meet to confound the lyes of a caball of shamming whigs'. And, while coffee houses collectively might indeed be public places with heterogeneous clienteles, each had its own social character. During the Interregnum, if you wanted chat about republican utopias, you could catch James Harrington at Miles's; if you wanted literary wit, John Dryden and his mates would be at Will's; and in the 1710s you could join in polite conversation with Addison and Steele at Button's. If you wanted to gamble, the Young Man's was a good bet; if experimental natural philosophy was your thing, Royal Society virtuosi frequently repaired to Garraway's after their official meetings; if you wanted medical discourse, Child's was your local, while the coffee houses of choice for mercantile affairs included Jonathan's, Man's, the Marine and, of course, Lloyd's. Others catered for regional and expatriate clienteles: the British, Caledonian and Edinburgh (for London Scots); the Essex, Kentish, Sussex, Gloucester and Salopian; and the Paris (where most of the customers seem to have been German). A Swiss visitor in the 1720s remarked on the social and cultural specialisation of London establishments: some were for 'learned scholars and for wits'; some were for 'dandies', 'politicians' and 'professional newsmongers'; while 'many others are temples of Venus.' Cowan notes that almost as soon as the political labels 'Whig' and 'Tory' became current in the 1680s, coffee houses emerged that were associated with each faction. The Amsterdam was the preferred hangout of Titus Oates, the radical Whig, while the Tories ruled at Sam's, Ozinda's and the Cocoa Tree. By the end of the century, there may have been as many as a thousand coffee houses in London. The ones you didn't go to were as important to your public identity as the ones you did. Places that were open to all comers in principle might be selective, even exclusive, by custom.

And Cowan doesn't wholly buy the Habermasian story of the coffee house as the site of a rational and unconstrained 'ideal speech situation'. Disputes frequently turned nasty. At the Amsterdam, Titus Oates and a provoked customer got into a widely publicised brawl, with dishes of hot coffee being thrown around the room. When Addison and Steele celebrated coffee-house conversation, what they meant was the ideal of calm, disciplined politeness: 'The Coffee-house is the Place of Rendezvous to all that live near it, who are thus turned to relish calm and ordinary Life,' Steele wrote in 1711. But Addison and Steele also deprecated coffee houses' tendency to be dominated by 'fops', pedants, bores, storytellers and speculators, and the intrusion of 'the rabble of mankind, that crowd our streets, coffee houses, and publick tables' into political debate. Coffee-house Whigs, as well as coffee-house Tories, were agreed that the rabble should mind their own business. Cowan reckons that Habermas and his followers mistook the ideal for the real: 'Perhaps it is here in the idealised mental world' of Addison and Steele, he says, that 'we find Habermas's sober, rational, public sphere of private men coming together to exercise their reason in public. But it was difficult to find this ideal public sphere in the real coffee houses of London.' Taking Habermasian history with a spoonful of salt is almost certainly a good idea; nevertheless, there was something about the 17th and early 18th-century London coffee house that attracted an enormous quantity of contemporary comment, much of which centred on its modes of access and forms of sociability, which were understood as a departure from tradition. Cowan is right to point to the heterogeneity of coffee-house culture, and to criticise the just-so character of Habermas's account, but early modern Londoners themselves reckoned that something new and important had been intro-

duced into their society. They struggled to understand what sort of place the coffee house was, what they liked about it, what worried them about it and what role coffee itself played.

'A Coffee-house is free to all Comers,' a 1661 pamphlet observed. It was a public house. Anyone could go there, sit wherever they liked at a common table, without respect of social rank, and do anything they wanted provided it didn't disrupt service or disturb the clientele – hence all those auctions and insurance deals, though the canon-singing and dolphin dissection must have driven some customers to search out establishments that were less noisy or smelly. In late 17th-century London, coffee was cheap. At a penny a dish, it was cheaper than wine, and about ten times cheaper than tea. Coffee was the defining drink – no other sort of public house served it – but others were also available: tea, chocolate, sherbet, a zabaglione-like concoction called 'content', and, in some establishments, even brandy, whisky, aqua vitae, cider, perry, beer and ale. A few wealthy Londoners roasted and brewed their coffee at home, but, unlike tea, it was not then a major domestic drink; it was overwhelmingly consumed in public houses. And, unlike tea, it was a man's drink.

About a fifth of London coffee houses were presided over by women, and Cowan finds scant evidence of formal rules banning women, but the coffee house was a masculine environment, more because what was talked about there – all that science, business and politics – was supposed to be of no interest to women than because of active exclusion. A woman could come in, but she wouldn't be made welcome. As Steele put it, 'it is very natural for a Man who is not turned for Mirthful Meetings of Men, or Assemblies of the fair Sex, to delight in that sort of Conversation which we find in Coffee-houses.'

Contemporary recipes for brewing coffee produce a fairly light but not insubstantial drink, somewhere between the highly extracted Starbucks espresso and the dishwater still favoured in Middle-American diners. Coffee houses serving less exalted customers would buy inferior or even partly rotten beans, and they might recycle the grounds, keeping costs down and producing an even weaker and nastier drink. Freshly made coffee was understood to be better, but many establishments kept their brewed coffee heated up for hours. So the cheapness of the coffee was one basis for the accessibility of coffee houses to all classes, but by no means the only one.

The coffee house was one among several sorts of public house where you could meet and drink in early modern London. Ale houses and taverns were all over the place. So why was it the coffee house that became the focus of all that talk about new forms of sociability? Does coffee itself have anything to do with it? Markman Ellis's book is livelier and more wide-ranging than Cowan's, extending its inquiry through 18th-century England to the great 19th-century Viennese coffee houses, and, further, into the world of espresso-drinking 1950s Londoners and early 21st-century Starbucks lattes. Cowan and Ellis might easily have switched their main titles: Ellis wants to address what coffee did to you and what its early drinkers thought it did, while Cowan is concerned overwhelmingly with the political history of coffee houses. Ellis is interested in that too, but he finds much more reason to talk about what contemporaries made of coffee's taste, appearance and physiological effects. One aspect of coffee-drinking that appealed to many late 17th-century Londoners was sobriety. Whatever coffee did to you, it didn't make you drunk, so it didn't disqualify you for business or rational discourse. Shortly after the first coffee houses opened for business, a 1657 tract applauded this new 'Coffa Drink' which

> hath caused a greater sobriety among the Nations: For whereas formerly Apprentices and Clerks with others, used to take their mornings' draught in Ale, Beer, or Wine, which by the dizziness they cause in the Brain, make many unfit for businesse, they use now to play the Good-fellows in this wakefull and civill drink.

That's true enough – even if, as Ralph Hattox has shown, there had been violent debates in Islam about whether coffee should be counted as an intoxicant and therefore prohibited – but claims that coffee ushered in a bright new era of English sobriety needn't be taken neat. While coffee didn't make you drunk, Londoners didn't generally consume it to the exclusion of alcohol. So it was not universally accepted that the net effect of a proliferating coffee culture *was* a temperate society. An early Restoration text conceded that 'Coffee makes no man drunk,' but insisted nevertheless that

> it is no more to be commended, than a Neates-tongue, a dish of Anchovies, or a salt Bit, which never yet intoxicated any man. For Coffee being mixt with the more drying smoak of Tobacco makes too many run to the Tavern or Alehouse to quench their thirst . . . This foreign Liquor in truth qualifies the Vapours of Wine, which makes your Good Fellows resort thither to heat their Stomacks made cold and infirm by their having powred thereinto too too much Wine, and thus they inable their weak Stomacks to receive a new Load.

And in 1674, *The Women's Petition against Coffee* condemned the coffee house as 'only a Pimp to the Tavern, a relishing soap preparative to a fresh debauch'. Coffee did not come remotely close to driving the booze-merchants out of business: along with hundreds of coffee houses, early 18th-century London – by one count – supported 447 taverns, 5875 beer houses and 8659 brandy shops.

Coffee, it was generally agreed, promoted wakefulness, and modern physiological knowledge points to the ability of caffeine to cross the blood-brain barrier, where it increases the production of adrenaline in the pituitary gland and elevates the heart rate and blood pressure. But the early moderns didn't know anything about caffeine and, while they pretty much agreed that coffee kept you up at night, there was even some dissent about that: writing in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* in 1699, an apothecary admitted that coffee 'has been generally thought to be an Antihypnotick or Hinderer of Sleep . . . but now it is come into frequent use, the contrary is often observ'd,' so perhaps the English constitution was just getting used to it. In a Galenic medical idiom, coffee was understood to be a 'drying' agent, and much mirthful commentary dwelled on its alleged detumescent action, while its devotees countered that criticism by pointing to the profusion of coffee-house hookers. Some said that coffee made you fart; others that it achieved a salutary unblockage of the bowels. It was commended to women, to be consumed in the home, as a way of encouraging menstrual flow and easing the discomforts of late pregnancy, and to men for relief of the 'French-pox'. It was prescribed as a way of treating rheumy eyes, drumming in the ears, shortness of breath, pains of the spleen, gout, palsies, scurvy, bladder stones and infestation by intestinal worms. That is to say, 17th-century Londoners saw coffee initially as a powerful drug, and only by and by came to regard it in non-medical terms.

Above all, it was said to sharpen the wits – an effect related to, but distinct from, its encouragement of wakefulness. If rational discourse was what you wanted, then coffee was the drink for you. The association between coffee and brain-work was recognised during the later 17th century, and is, of course, still acknowledged. (The 20th-century Hungarian number-theorist Paul Erdös defined a mathematician as a machine for turning coffee into theorems.) A 1675 vindication described coffee-drinking as 'the Minds best Dyet, and the great Whetstone and Incentive of Ingenuity', and its early popularity at Oxford, and among the Royal Society virtuosi, strengthened coffee's association with the life of the mind. As it helped you think better, so the sociability of coffee-drinking multiplied the power of individual reason: 'You have here the most civil . . . the most Intelligent Society'; coffee-house conversation 'cannot but civilise our manners, Inlarge our understandings, refine our Language, and teach us a generous confidence and handsome Mode of Address'.

Nevertheless, coffee was undeniably a 'forein Liquor' and coffee-house modes of sociability were understood as imports. For that reason alone, both coffee and coffee houses became the focus of criticism, with claims that neither the drink nor the associated sociability suited English natures. Opponents said that it looked like soot, smelled like shit and tasted like shoes; and all that coffee-house chatter was condemned as alien time-wasting and effeminacy. Coffee beans came from the Arabian peninsula and coffee houses were such a notable feature of the Ottoman Empire that few European travellers failed to remark on them. Coffee was 'the wine of Islam': it was, Ellis writes, 'the sign of Turkish difference, and the perfect symbol of Islam'. And since routine drunkenness was widely considered a pathology of English society, English travellers to the Middle East, and those who read their narratives, were fascinated by what this non-intoxicating 'wine' did to and for you. One of the strengths of Ellis's book is the depth of attention paid to the European understandings of Ottoman practices. Almost without exception Europeans fastened on the open sociability and egalitarianism attending Ottoman coffee-drinking and the Turks' sense that it enhanced mental function and encouraged conversation. So coffee came to England freighted with the baggage of Orientalism – what was dreaded and despised about the Islamic East as well as what was frankly admired. Many early coffee houses traded on their Levantine connections, as if to warrant the authenticity not only of the drink but of the coffee-house way of being.

It is hard to think of any necessary causal connection between the chemical constituents of coffee and the forms of sociability mobilised around its consumption – consider the very different careers of caffeine-containing tea from China and chocolate from the New World. Late 17th-century Londoners bought a dark, hot, bitter brew called coffee when they spent their penny at a coffee house, but they also bought forms of sociability that were explicitly, if eclectically, modelled on those of the coffee houses of Smyrna, Aleppo, Cairo and Constantinople. 'The Ottoman Origins of Modernity' might make Habermas swallow hard, but, follow his arguments about the London coffee house, and that's one place they lead.