Coffee House and Periodical Cult of 17th-18th Century England

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Historians have long recognized that the large body of periodical literature surviving from the eighteenth century, along with the smaller amount preserved from the seventeenth century, is an important source of insight into the early development of modern society in the West. Periodical press has been considered to be established in England with the appearance of *London Gazette* in 1655. Beginning in the reign of Queen Anne, the English press grew rapidly, to become a large and elaborate system by the middle of the eighteenth century, still based in London but with a well-articulated network extending throughout the country and across the Atlantic to the American colonies. Most periodical activity was concentrated in the metropolitan centres of Paris and London. However, by mid-eighteenth century nearly fifty English-language periodicals were edited and printed outside London. In England, metropolitan newspapers circulated regularly to the country on the main post days, where they competed with local journals.

That the first half of the eighteenth century was a time of vigorous expansion for the English-language periodical press is further confirmed by such circulation figures as are available. Regardless of varying speculations as to the number of readers who consulted each copy of a periodical, it is evident that periodical publishers were reaching out to larger audiences. The average circulation of the Gazetteer, one of London's most successful newspapers, may be put at over 1,000 copies per issue in 1737, at 1,500 in 1751, and over 5,000 in the late 1760s.

In England and the American colonies, the periodical press operated within an expansive communications system that made room for people of lower social origins. By the 1730s, an aspiring editor in London could hope to secure financial backing from aggressively competitive booksellers, who formed partnerships to support periodicals that would not only return sizeable profits but advertise their other publications.

Periodical essays typically appeared in affordable publications that came out regularly, usually two or three times a week, and were only one or two pages in length. Unlike other publications of the time that consisted of a medley of information and news, essay periodicals were comprised of a single essay on a specific topic or theme, usually having to do with the conduct or manners. They were often narrated by a persona or a group of personas, commonly referred to as a "club." For the most part, readers of the periodical essay were the educated middle-class individuals who held learning in high esteem but were not scholars or intellectuals. Women were a growing part of this audience and periodical editors often tried to appeal to them in their publications.

The Tatler (1709-1711) and *The Spectator* (1711-1712) were the most successful and influential single-essay periodicals of the eighteenth century but there are other periodicals that helped shape this literary genre. Other eighteenth century periodicals, including Samuel Johnson's *The Idler* and *The Rambler*, copied the periodical essay format. Issues of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were published in book form and continued to sell for the rest of the century. While the periodical essay emerged during the eighteenth century and reached its

peak in publications like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, its roots can be traced back to the late seventeenth century. The spread of popularity of these periodical works were at large contributed by a new phenomenon called the coffee house.

The first purpose-built English coffee-houses were established in the 1650s in Oxford, where the mind-stimulating benefits of the beverage complemented the spirit of sober academic discussion and debate evident at the university there. These early coffee-houses (christened 'Penny Universities' by outsiders) were largely the exclusive resort of the educated and well-to-do, places where learned men and their students came to demonstrate their wit and intellectual talents: this feature of coffeehouse culture was also in evidence in London as the drink slowly gained popularity there.

First introduced in the time of the Commonwealth, the first recorded in England was in Oxford in 1650. London's first coffee-house was established in 1652 by a Greek servant to the Levant Company, Pasqua Rosée. This establishment was soon joined by a handful of other coffee-houses based in the City and on the fringes of the rapidly developing places in the country. The popularity of the first coffee house led to opening of another 1656 and by 1663 82 new came to exist. Among the most celebrated coffee and chocolate houses were the Bedford (Covent Garden, a favourite with actors), Button's (Russell Street, Covent Garden, popular with Joseph Addison and his circle), Slaughter's (St Martin Lane, a favourite of William Hogarth and other artist) and so on. Though undoubtedly a novel alternative for those seeking to avoid the often drunkenness of London's many taverns and alehouses, mid-17th century coffee-houses struggled initially to achieve much popularity. For many years they remained the haunt of a well-educated and commercial elite.

From the 1660s onwards, however, London experienced a boom in the number of its coffee-houses, reaching perhaps 550 separate establishments by the first half of the 18th century. Many busy Londoners preferred the informal surroundings of the coffee-house to the stuffiness of the royal court, legal chambers, offices and other places of professional business. Samuel Pepys, for example, noted extensively in his diary the usefulness of his visits to the coffeehouse, where he was able to pick up gossip, listen to debates or simply make useful trade connections. Coffee-houses were thus highly significant centres for the dissemination and receipt of the commercial and political intelligence that swirled around London.

Coffee-houses were also busy centres of printed news and intelligence. In 1688, King James II banned the distribution of any newspapers in coffee-houses (other than the official state paper the London Gazette) as a measure designed principally to prevent the circulation of publications believed to be critical of the state. When the legislation controlling the publication of newspapers generally lapsed in 1695, several periodicals were launched in London (usually published two or three times a week), catering to the insatiable demand for fresh information. By 1702, London possessed its first true daily newspaper, the London Courant; between each publication runners were employed to visit the coffee-houses to spread important news 'flashes' that could not wait for the press.

The highly charged masculine and intellectual nature of the coffee-house also overflowed into the literary world. As with politics and trade, specific coffee-houses developed their own attractions to London's authors, poets, journalists and wits. At Will's Coffee-House at the end of Bow Street, for example, poet John Dryden held court among the capital's literary classes, exchanging lampoons and satirical verses with his fellow writers. As a young man, Alexander

Pope persuaded his friends to accompany him to Will's in order to hear Dryden's words of wisdom, despite Pope's own lowly background that otherwise precluded him from any contact with the literary elite. (As a practising Catholic, Pope was also forced by law to live outside of London.) Jonathan Swift, on the other hand, found Will's to be less than impressive. Here he found 'the worst conversation he ever heard in his life', conducted by a handful of wits with an air of self-importance.

Late 17th-century coffee-houses were noted for their egalitarian and democratic character; people of all ranks sat alongside one another, actively engaging in debate with both friends and strangers alike. The layout of many coffee-houses fostered this rich social mixing. Many coffee-houses possessed long communal tables where patrons were expected to sit and engage in conversation. From all walks of life people came to sip from a bowl of coffee and chat with their neighbours, free from the social conventions of class and deference that were usually extended to social superiors in other settings.

In an age characterised by social division and status this 'coffee-house culture' has thus been interpreted as a focus of change in British social and political relations. The socially 'levelling' effects of coffee-house conversations were responsible for the growth of a new 'public sphere', in which criticism of the court and government could be freely expressed by all comers, without fear of arrest or prosecution – a focal point for vociferous political debate that we value as a key feature of democracy today.

Contemporary coffee drinkers recognised this 'civilising' atmosphere at the time. Joseph Addison, for example (the publisher of The Spectator magazine), believed that by the early 1700s the coffee-house existed as a refuge from the 'savagery' and anonymity of bustling urban society, where new standards of genteel behaviour could grow and flourish. Similarly, Richard Steele described the coffee-house as a rendezvous for 'all that live near it, who are thus turned to relish calm and ordinary Life', where men of all ranks could evade the rough and tumble of London life. The most enduring descriptions of eighteenth-century coffee house culture survive in printed publications that were produced to be read in just such coffee houses. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, London was becoming Britain's first twenty-four-hour consumer society. It became the fashion to drop into club-like coffee houses where people could discuss politics, literature, culture – and crucially – their own lives, as thanks to technological advances and lapses in licensing rules, news and gossip now permeated the printed world.

It was into this society that Joseph Addison and Richard Steele released a periodical titled *The Spectator* (1711). This paper's manifesto was to fill these coffee houses with knowledge, culture, ideas and, above all, conversation. As the paper's fictional editor modestly claims: 'I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses'. The coffee house that Addison and Steele inhabited might not have been quite the enlightened hub of culture that they reported, but in penning this imagined coffee house they created a legacy that still survives today.

By the close of the 18th century the popularity of coffee-houses had declined dramatically. Among several reasons few were that already by the 1750s consumption of tea, which many people found to be a sweeter, cheaper than coffee and more palatable drink of choice, was beginning to eclipse that of coffee. By the late 1700s the socially mixed and welcoming

character of the coffee-house had changed dramatically. Many coffee-houses had become more exclusive in character, and only opened their doors to a well-heeled clientele able to afford expensive subscription fees. After mid-century many popular coffee-houses were transformed into elite private member clubs, in business for the benefit of wealthy and aristocratic gentlemen only. By 1750, new ways of obtaining news, gossip and commercial information – namely from the cheap popular printed news press – had seriously undermined the place of the coffee-house within British culture and politics.

A depiction of 18th century Coffee House. Coffee houses were hubs of social activity, particularly popular with businessmen, politicians, stock market traders, writers and intellectuals.

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