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# The politics of sobriety: coffee and society in Georgian England

It was said of Socrates, that he brought philosophy down from heaven, to inhabit among men; and 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. (Thomas Addison)

This is one of the disadvantages of wine. It makes a man mistake words for thoughts. (Samuel Johnson)

The prohibitory Gin Act of 1736 had a number of political consequences: it revealed the extent to which public concerns over drunkenness provided a way of reinforcing social hierarchies; it exposed the limitations of State control in the area of private consumption; it showed the extent to which the right to get drunk could be hitched to the idea of personal liberty; and it showed, for the first time, that the prohibition of intoxicants can increase their attraction through imbuing them with an aura of political transgression. It also made explicit some of the inherent contradictions which beset any attempt politically to manage a market economy. Although this was not the first time drunkenness had become politically significant, it was the first time that that significance had so clearly exposed the extent to which alcohol behaves as a kind of archetypal commodity: an object in which consumption, pleasure and waste are inextricably bound together and on which a complex, diverse and politically significant economy rests. With hindsight we could say that in 1736 it became clear that the modern world was going to have to deal with drunkenness, but that to do so effectively might just push the political logic of the market beyond its own limits. As the 1736 Act came up for repeal in 1742 members of the House of Lords complained that facilitating the ‘vices, debaucheries, and destruction of millions, is a manifest inversion of the fundamental principles of national polity’;<sup>1</sup> but their idea of national polity had turned out to be neither practical nor in the interests of a powerful coalition of traders and landowners. Furthermore, facilitating expenditure was necessary to the economy. As a commodity with the capacity to expand its market share

by mere dint of being made available, and which had an extraordinary capacity to dematerialise money, alcohol turned out to have a striking affinity with the ideal logic of capital itself. The gin craze uncovered the fact that the logic of intoxication was not entirely distinct from the logic of the market. However, gin was also caught up in a wider cultural dialectic; one which began to open up meaningful and politically significant distinctions between being drunk and being sober.

In addition to the deep-rooted political impacts of prohibition, something else was happening in Georgian England which would shape the politics of consumption in a profound way, and which would prepare the ground for the Victorian temperance movement. This was the beginnings of a politics of sobriety – a strange concept in what was perhaps the most drunken period of British history, but one whose seeds were sown in the attempt by the emerging middle class to carve out a cultural territory from which its already well-developed assault on established aristocratic power could be consolidated. If wine, beer and port acted as signifiers of party allegiance after the Restoration, then that resonance was echoed by the way in which coffee came to signify a set of cultural, political and philosophical values which transcended the fuzzy party lines of Georgian England.

### A wakeful and civil drink

The first coffee houses appeared in England in the 1650s.<sup>2</sup> In 1734 there were 551 registered coffee houses, but the real figure was more likely to have been in the thousands.<sup>3</sup> While this was not a lot in comparison to the number of alehouses and ‘brandy shops’ (there were reckoned to be almost 9,000 alehouses in London alone in 1739), it was comparable to the number of inns and taverns.<sup>4</sup> Coffee houses mattered primarily because they acted as hubs for the explosion of new intellectual, economic, artistic and political activity which characterised Georgian London. Stock-jobbers bought and sold at Man’s and Jonathan’s, maritime insurers struck deals at Lloyd’s, and traders bought and sold at Garraway’s. Leading Whigs gathered at St James’s, while the Cocoa Tree was popular with Tories and Jacobites. London’s coffee houses were the meeting places par excellence of the new middle class. They acquired the nickname ‘penny universities’ for their role in disseminating education beyond the closeted and elitist groves of contemporary academe. For David Hume they were ‘a sign of the liberty of the constitution’ and for the French writer Abbé Prévost they were the ‘seats of English liberty’.<sup>5</sup> It was primarily in coffee houses that the new journals and newspapers – the *Evening Post*, the *Daily Courant*, the *Spectator*, *Tatler*, the *London Journal* – were read and discussed. The middle-class challenge to traditional aristocratic political,

intellectual and economic authority was mounted largely from the coffee houses – a fact reflected by a Royal Proclamation released by a panicky Charles II in 1675 ordering the complete suppression of coffee houses as ‘the great resort of idle and disaffected persons’, only to be hastily withdrawn a year later.<sup>6</sup> Coffee houses represented the aggressive carving out of a new cultural middle ground: neither the ivory towers of aristocracy, nor the alehouses of the poor.

In his influential study of democracy and the public sphere, the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas claimed that the coffee houses of Georgian London were fundamental to the rise of modern democratic culture.<sup>7</sup> Philosophically, Habermas argued, they played a crucial role in what he called ‘the project of modernity’, one of the key features of which Habermas identified as the desire to arrive at meaningful explanations of the world through rational discussion. Modernity (and democracy) were, therefore, founded on a combination of scepticism and what Habermas called ‘communicative rationality’: that is, a model of reason which assumes rationality is the outcome of public intellectual exchange rather than more or less individualistic endeavour. Modernity, in other words, is characterised by the tendency to subject explanations of the world to *public* debate and *public* scrutiny.

The reason Habermas thought that the Georgian coffee houses were so important to the ‘project of modernity’ is precisely because they were centres of *rational* debate. They were not, by definition, centres of drunken debate. And this is exactly how the coffee-drinkers of their day liked to present themselves: they drank coffee because, while mildly stimulating, it was not intoxicating; it was what Francis Bacon had once called a ‘*wakeful* and civil drink’.<sup>8</sup> The reason coffee houses sprang up throughout London was only partly because of the availability of this new commodity, it was also because coffee houses provided a cultural space which contrasted significantly with alehouses, taverns and inns. Rural alehouses had, by the mid-eighteenth century, acquired some of the respectability previously limited to rural inns.<sup>9</sup> However, in the cities alehouses were still often seen as ‘receptacles of sots, and the scum of the Earth’ and tavern clubs were all too often mere ‘suck-bottle Assemblies’ bearing a closer resemblance to gatherings of ‘swill-belly’d wine-porters, than a formal body of ... reputable members’.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the coffee houses appeared civilised, urbane and reasonable.<sup>11</sup> It was their very sobriety that made the coffee houses the centre of what Habermas identified as the new ‘public sphere’.

### The politics of politeness

More than anything else, what coffee houses provided was a social space

that reflected ‘politeness’ and ‘manners’. Partly by way of re-evaluating some of Habermas’s more sweeping claims, Brian Cowan has argued that what the likes of Addison and Steele were attempting to achieve by cultivating a coffee-house culture of conversation and politeness was not so much to develop a project geared towards the universal adoption of ‘communicative rationality’, but rather to use politeness as a way of asserting cultural power.<sup>12</sup> The image of Georgian coffee house society which has survived in the popular imagination is in many ways the image conscientiously developed in the pages of the *Spectator*: one in which sophistication and good manners guaranteed a degree of liberty in speech and thought which set the ground for not only modern business practices but the democratic sensibility itself. However, the Georgian coffee house was an exclusive institution, open to women and the poor in principle only. Moreover, the idealisation of politeness which found its concrete expression in the coffee house was one which effectively turned the cultural predilections of a particular social group into a normative model for society as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

The depiction of coffee-house culture as uniquely sober was crucial here, especially in an age beset with anxieties over the anarchic tendencies of gin. Where drunkenness meant violence, criminality and conflict, sobriety meant civility, manners and politeness. Politeness was idealised, especially in the work of the Earl of Shaftesbury, on the grounds that it was the guarantee of liberty. For Shaftesbury, unlike more conventional civic republicans, good manners were not merely an indicator of the successful internalisation of the law; that is to say, people did not only behave well because they had fully absorbed strict social rules which protected other liberties, nor because they had successfully internalised social norms.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Shaftesbury argued that politeness and good manners were the foundation on which liberty rested: people could only be free if they were well-mannered towards one another.<sup>15</sup> In other words, it was only by cultivating social behaviours which celebrated ‘amicable collision’ that true liberty (which, for Shaftesbury meant a successful *modus vivendi*) could be sustained.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, drunkenness is at best an illusion of liberty and at worst an enemy of it. This idea had the advantage of condemning upper- and lower-class drinking alike: while it was agreed by many that gin drinking among the poor tended towards anarchy, the ‘lusty English freedom’ of the sozzled toff could also be condemned as mere illusion. For the likes of Shaftesbury drunkenness undermined politeness by encouraging boorishness; it encouraged heated exchanges rather than amicable collisions. From this perspective, polite coffee-house culture was the model for the *modus vivendi* which was only possible when the heat was taken out of interpersonal conflict.

Coffee-house culture, then, was presented as more civil because it was more sober. It was not, however, completely sober and nor did it pretend to be. There were some entirely practical reasons for this, not least that clean, safe water was almost impossible to get hold of – and no amount of tea or coffee would entirely replace the need for other forms of liquid refreshment. However, there were also a number of reasons why total sobriety would have been seen as extremely impolite. One was the deeply-held idea of conviviality: the empirically grounded belief, dating back at least as far as the Greek symposium, that drink facilitates free and easy conversation just as much as it can push such conversation into conflict. Of course, sympotic drinking was as much a form of disciplinary training as it was a means to oiling the wheels of philosophical exchange: in Plato's *Symposium* Socrates was not, strictly speaking, sober; he just knew better than anyone else how to hold his drink. There was also the crucial concept of *in vino veritas*: which implied that to truly get to know, and therefore trust, someone you were as well to see them drunk. Few Georgian champions of good manners demanded absolute sobriety. In his later, teetotal, years, Samuel Johnson insisted that wine provided 'neither ... knowledge nor wit', and he chided a tipsy Joshua Reynolds for not realising that wine 'makes a man mistake words for thoughts'.<sup>17</sup> However, Johnson still accepted that wine had both social and psychological benefits. Like many people, the very idea of demanding sobriety from others would have struck Johnson as both unsociable and fanatical, and thereby deeply ill-mannered.

Nevertheless, in polite culture such liberty as drink produced – the liberty of convivial exchange – still had to be disciplined through the adoption of rigorous social codes in order to prevent it descending into the licence of drunkenness which threatened the very foundations of true political freedom. For the disciples of politeness, this was an unarguable form of social progress – for the likes of Ned Ward, by contrast, it meant that coffee houses lacked 'the excitement and conviviality that a good tavern provides'.<sup>18</sup> The rigorous ideal of controlled drinking (something which Samuel Johnson came to see as beyond his own capacities) was a typical example of the civic republican principle that only self-discipline guarantees social freedom.

For mid-eighteenth-century civic republicans, freedom was imagined as a condition requiring the adoption of certain responsibilities, rather than a simple right which the State challenged at its peril.<sup>19</sup> However, it does not fully explain the culture of self-discipline and sobriety that characterised the polite coffee house. By contrast to the explicitly coercive enforcement of social control achieved through legislation and policing, politeness represented an inward discipline, rather than one imposed by

the law. Crucially, however, the polite model of discipline was one which was only available to those immersed in the patterns of social exchange and behaviour out of which the rules of politeness emerged. Politeness 'set up reciprocal relations between elite social status and cultural expression' in such a way as to 'fortify the distinctions between patrician and plebeian in culture'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, its avowedly middle-class rejection of both aristocratic and plebeian cultures of physical excess meant that the Whig culture of politeness could act as 'a form of policing just as stringent, just as socially exclusive, as Tory persecution'.<sup>21</sup>

### Sobriety as ideology

Habermas's assertion that coffee houses were the primary site for political debate in Georgian London has been challenged on the grounds that the alehouse remained 'the single most important locale where people engaged in political discussion', if only because there were so many more alehouses than coffee houses.<sup>22</sup> Formal politics certainly centred around drinking establishments with both Whig 'mug houses' and Tory alehouses briefly acting as hubs for organised political activities.<sup>23</sup> The continuing role of alehouses in the management (and corruption) of voting is vividly recorded in Hogarth's famous 'Election' series. All of which certainly contributes to the impression that the Habermasian view of the London coffee house is one so heavily shaped by the literature of its own propagandists as to be deeply problematic. In many ways Habermas buys rather naively into what was an ideological sleight of hand on the part of certain coffee-house habitués. The polite type personified in the fictional 'Mr Spectator' was only ever an idealisation. Coffee-house conversation was distinguishable from alehouse or tavern conversation within limits, but any idea that coffee houses were uniquely sober institutions is misguided. Coffee houses rarely sold non-alcoholic drinks exclusively: cider, brandy, whisky and beer were also widely available.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, one contemporary claimed that 'nothing is more common, even in our public coffee-houses, than to hear brandy, or as the more polite term it, *French* cream, called for to mix in coffee'.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, there was nothing to stop people from combining all sorts of different drinks in all sorts of different establishments, depending on their mood. On one boozy perambulation, the satirist Ned Ward observed that coffee was 'a liquor that sits most easily on wine', before staggering into a Temple Gate coffee house to 'check the aspiring fumes of the most Christian juice by an antichristian dose of Muhammadan loblolly'.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that sobriety in Georgian England was only ever relative should not lead us to dismiss the sober coffee-house ideal

as mere hypocrisy. Habermas may have been rather too keen to accept the self-mythologisation of the Georgian middle classes, and as a result he may have proposed overly grand claims for the role of strictly rational discourse in early democracy; however, if we accept Mr Spectator as an ideological figure, then Habermas's claims still stand albeit as the description of a concept, not a reality. What matters is the fact that sections of the urban middle class claimed sobriety for themselves, not that they still drank. What this meant was that sobriety became a means by which new social and political attitudes could be articulated in concrete terms. To be even a bit more sober than the aristocracy or the labouring classes was politically significant; to hitch that sobriety to the idea of social progress was a way of imbuing an act of cultural distinction with grand historical importance. It was precisely this fusion of social progress and sobriety which would drive the great temperance campaigns of the nineteenth century. In Georgian London the idea was still in its infancy, but it was clearly identifiable in the politics of politeness and the emergence of a bourgeois political public sphere centred on the coffee house rather than, as might otherwise have been the case, the tavern.

## Notes

- 1 House of Lords, *The Lord's Protest Against an Act for Repealing Certain Duties upon Spirituous Liquors* (London: 1743), p. 10.
- 2 B. Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 17.
- 3 B. Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 154.
- 4 Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses*, p. 23.
- 5 Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee*, p. 148; Porter, *London: A Social History*, p. 206.
- 6 Charles II, *A Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee-houses* (London: John Bill and Christopher Barker, 1675); Charles II *An Additional Proclamation Concerning Coffee-Houses* (London: John Bill and Christopher Barker, 1676).
- 7 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (London: Polity Press, 1989).
- 8 F. Bacon, *The Virtues of Coffee* (London: W. G, 1663), p. 8.
- 9 P. Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History* (London: Longman, 1983), p. 237.
- 10 C. Parfect, 'The number of alehouses shown to be extremely pernicious to the public' (London: R. Baldwin, 1758), p. 10; N. Ward, *A Complete and Humorous Account Of all the Remarkable Clubs and Societies in the Cities of London and Westminster* (London: J. Wren, 1756), p. 2.
- 11 Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee*, p. 48.
- 12 B. Cowan, 'The rise of the coffeehouse reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, 47:1 (2004), 21–46.
- 13 L. Klein, 'Liberty, manners, and politeness in early eighteenth-century England', *Historical Journal*, 32:3 (1989), 583–605, p. 589.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 591.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 603.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 602.



- 17 J. Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: J.M. Dent, 1978), pp. 233–5.
- 18 Earnshaw, *The Pub in Literature*, p. 123.
- 19 Dodsworth, ‘“Civic” police and the conditions of liberty’, p. 210.
- 20 Klein, ‘Liberty, manners, and politeness in early eighteenth-century England’, p. 589.
- 21 B. Cowan, ‘Mr Spectator and the coffeehouse public sphere’, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 37:3 (2004), 345–66, p. 351.
- 22 A. Houston and C. Pincus, *A Nation Transformed: England After the Restoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 141.
- 23 Haydon, *Beer and Britannia*, p. 101.
- 24 Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee*, p. 82.
- 25 Anon, *The Consequences Of Laying an Additional Duty on Spirituous Liquors*, p. 21.
- 26 N. Ward, *The London Spy* (London: Colleagues Press, 1993), p. 219.