

Brewing Pots of Revolt: Coffeehouses

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This paper examines how coffee acts not only as a mere beverage, but also as a social agent within the context of coffeehouse culture. It concentrates mainly on Ottoman, British and French examples from the 16th century to the 19th century. The coffeehouses of that period would be defined as representations of the world; they were the expressions of the value system of their society. Therefore, coffeehouse culture needs to be discussed in terms of its role in the evolution of the public sphere, how it shaped public opinion and how resistance was brewed into rebellion throughout history. In that respect, the capital cities of the powerful empires, İstanbul, London and Paris, where absolute authoritarian and monarchical powers reigned, provide rich ground for examining the evocative role of the coffeehouse in social, political and economic life. They provide us with scenes of everyday life where various social structures, professional groups and social classes take part. In England for instance, there were ‘Whig coffeehouses, Tory coffeehouses, commercial, clerical and merely social coffeehouses’ (Maude, 1933, p. 3). The following verse says it with a little complaint:

‘There’s nothing done in all the world
From Monarch to the mouse,
But everyday or night ‘tis hurled
Into the coffee-house.’

Since its invigorating effects were first tested by chance in the high plateaus of Ethiopia by goats, coffee has become part of our everyday lives. It is a strong beverage; it stimulates mental activity through mind-altering powers, serves as an agent for radical thought and creative thinking and heightens perception. It fuels communication and thus, coffeehouses were inextricably linked to intellectual and political life. From the middle of the 15th century on, when coffee began to be consumed as a popular drink in the Islamic world, first in Yemen, coffeehouses sprang up and functioned as important political, social and economic institutions. According to the most popular story, we owe the practice of coffee drinking much to the religious practices of Sufi dervishes (Hattox 1996, p. 14). The mind-opening, energizing and stimulating effects of coffee had made this beverage indispensable for the devotional practices during the night. Not surprisingly, coffee and coffeehouses grabbed the attention of authorities because of its capacity to gather people and encourage extended social intercourse. The first prohibition of coffee drinking had taken place in Mekke in 1511 (A.H. 917) (Hattox 1996, p. 29). The impetus for prohibiting coffee drinking was based on religious and moral arguments. The arguments against coffee and coffeehouses were: it is unacceptable for

the Islamic law for it is intoxicating and the beans are roasted beyond the point of carbonization, it is an innovation, or *bid’ah*, political activities in the coffeehouses becomes threatening for the authority, so called improper and criminal activities encouraged by the patrons of the coffeehouses are against public morality (Hattox 1996, p. 6). It was seen as an intoxicating beverage and the places where coffee was consumed were considered like taverns. The word *qahwa* was commonly used before coffee was known: it was one of the epithets of wine. Its Arabic root q-h-w/y denotes the idea making something repugnant or lessening one’s desire for something (Hattox 1996, p. 18).

In the mid 16th century, the first coffeehouses were opened in İstanbul by two men, one named Hakem from Aleppo and the other named Şems from Damascus. The city was rapidly populated by numerous coffeehouses with rich variety. It could be said that there were two major types of coffeehouses; one was the neighbourhood coffeehouse, the other was the guild coffeehouse (İşin 2006, p. 31). They had become major elements in everyday life besides the mosque, the work space and the home. The new culture flourishing in the coffeehouse threatened the Ottoman way of life which was characterized by an introverted world. This process of socialization was beyond the control of authorities (İşin 2006, p. 25).

From its roots in religious worship and ceremonies and then its way to Azhar in Cairo, Hattox (1996, p. 96) defines the coffeehouse as a Muslim institution from the very beginning. From these origins, it had flourished within the sophisticated coffee culture created in the Ottoman land. As it is briefly put by Ünver (1967, p. 3) ‘Ottomans established a coffee and coffeehouse civilization’. The coffee and coffeehouse culture were introduced to Europe by the Ottomans. Schivelbusch’s (2000, p. 127) term ‘borrowed culture’ describing the luxuries refurbishing the life of the European upper class introduced to the Occident by the Orient would be exemplified by coffee. It was not only a new flavour, it was also a totally new culture of socialization developed around this beverage.

Coffee had initially been consumed by large groups of people, in public as was the case of many novelties throughout the history of humankind and then became a habit in the private domain, i.e. at home (Schivelbusch 2000, p. 62). The social nature of coffee becomes instrumental at two points: one is developing an acquaintance with this new beverage, and the other is fuelling communication. Coffee drinking encouraged a particular form of socialization paving a way to the



Fig. 1. Cover of *The Illustrated London News*, Jan.5, 1878.

coffeehouses. As mentioned above, coffeehouses acted as a ground for learning the practice of consuming this new beverage. Regarding the capacities and the attitudes of humans in accepting or developing a familiarity with new flavours, Mennell (1996, p. 2) mentions that this is a process of learning. He points out the differences and difficulties 'in the perception and recognition of unfamiliar flavours', while putting coffee in the category of flavours learned with time. He also reminds us how coffee is perceived as 'bitter and characterless' and 'innately aversive' when it is first encountered. The processes of internalization and habituation of drinking coffee were possible within the sociable environment of a coffeehouse. Therefore, it became a total experience through which the effects of the coffee were enjoyed and a taste was acquired for it. It could be argued that the coffeehouses promoted the social nature of this beverage, contributing to it being a learned flavour, and hence becoming a habit.

Although it exceeds the limits of this study, it should be noted briefly that, in the coffeehouses, not only the flavour, but a kind of civility based on this new type of socialization was acquired. Here, Sennett's (2012, p. 5) definition of cooperation as 'an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter' becomes important. At this

point, we can say that disobedience, resistance or uprising are cultivated through cooperation which defines particular norms of civility in the coffeehouse. Frequenters of the coffeehouse as a 'public version of civility' (Sennett 2012, p. 127) who would normally have conflicting views seem to arrive at a consensus when it comes to topics of opposition.

In the Ottoman coffee culture, the decorum around this beverage signifies gentleness and hospitality. It is known that coffee was offered to the enemy with a full cup while served to the ally with a half (Ünver 1967, p. 46). This example is quite telling in situations of rivalry; the way coffee is served provides an elegantly crisp way to give messages. Pertaining to these values of coffee culture, coffeehouses were places of dialogue and tolerance at the same time. As it is seen in Fig. 1, conversations are accompanied by coffee, not only in coffeehouses, but sometimes in the tent of the commander during a war. Looking at this drawing depicting the scene in the tent of the Chief Commander of the Ottoman army, Mehmet Ali Paşa, during the Russian War in 1877, one cannot help but imagine that coffee was possibly warming the communication between the troops while adding to the civility.

Far from the field of the same war, coffee again brings people together, but this time in a coffeehouse in Therapia (today Tarabya), one of the provinces along the Bosphorus on the European side of Istanbul (Fig. 2). In this drawing depicting an open air coffeehouse, a group of men centrally located in the picture are actively talking (as it is described in the subtitle, 'discussing the war'), other men sitting around in small groups follow this hot discussion with suspicion and in a cautious way. The men at the centre seemingly have the power to manipulate the opinion; the tension in the air is perfectly represented.

During his reign, Süleyman The Magnificent ordered special books and publications to be prepared in order to promote reading as a major activity in the coffeehouses of İstanbul, so as to occupy people and to avoid gossip or rumour and discussion that would incite the opposition. This was considered as nurturing a culture of reading in the coffeehouses which later gave birth to the *kıraathane*. *Kıraathane* literally means 'public reading house'; which was a type of coffeehouse where reading was the main facility. With that connection, coffeehouses were sometimes known as *mektebi İrfan*, which means 'school of enlightenment' (Ünver 1967, p. 44).

In addition to enhancing the everyday lives of people by its taste, by its material culture, coffee had introduced a new process of socialization to the urban life and culture. As they were the physical and cultural setting of this sociability, coffeehouses had also become places of political fermentation where resistance and opposition to the authority were nurtured. In many cases, the active consumers of coffee in these places started to decline in their obedience to legal and religious prescriptions. By the same token, authorities had often tried to suppress the coffeehouses, for they had been an active ground for communication; talks, discussions, gossip and hearsay

which formed and deformed the public opinion that threatened the power of the authority. Verbal communication extending into the form of gossip is one of the major ways of heralding in the illiterate societies. Therefore, it is considered dangerous by the government and the aristocracy throughout history (Lefebvre 1976, p. 73).

As another typology, guild coffeehouses in the Ottoman cities stood as substantial public spaces influencing the sociocultural aspects of trade and craft. Within the boundary of this category emerged janissary coffeehouses. These coffeehouses, run by and frequented by the janissaries who were the elite corps in the Ottoman army, deserve to be examined within the context of this study as being a distinct type of coffeehouse where coffee drinking means more than just a social habit. These were remarkably the hotbeds of discussions, opposing ideas and rebellions while being lively establishments nurturing the Ottoman coffee culture. There also exist British and French examples which are no exception to that.

Janissary coffeehouses

Janissary (*yenîçeri*) was a member of an elite corps active in the Ottoman army between the late 14th century and the early 19th century. They were originally slaves or recruited through the system called *devşirme*. *Devşirme* (literally; gathering, collecting) was an innovation of the Ottomans who designed and systematized it mainly to fill the ranks of the *yenîçeri* corps and of the palace staff. In this system, boys from Christian families from the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire were levied at an early age; they were converted to Islam while being prepared for the Ottoman army and the administrative services in the palace. During the 15th and 16th, centuries they were reputed to be the best trained and most effective soldiers in Europe. They had political power which sometimes threatened the sultan. Janissaries were closely associated with the religious order of Bektashi Dervishes and relatedly, dervishes were attached to all the units of the janissaries in their barracks and to the troops in the field. Thus the janissaries closely affiliated with the Muslim institution of *ulamas*, *muftis* and *kadis*; therefore acquired elements of political power (Kafadar 1981, p. 36). There were also privileges granted to janissaries such as being exempt from taxes.

As well as being the elite troops in the army, in the service of the sultan, janissary corps was also responsible for establishing security, order of law and municipal affairs. They were organized in groups called *orta* (mess) who had



Fig. 2. Supplement to *The Illustrated London News*, July 15, 1876, p. 65.

their own patrols; these so called headquarters were generally installed next to the coffeehouses owned by the janissaries. Therefore, they were in close contact with the public (Çaksu 2010, p. 86). After the last quarter of the 17th century, janissary organizations started to change; while their salaries were decreasing, they started to become engaged in commercial activities. Coffeehouse trade had become one of the major occupations of these people.

These coffeehouses that were owned or frequented by its members were also distinguished according to their patronesses and they were identified with the official emblem of each mess hung over the entrance door and also painted on the walls (Kafadar 1981, p. 113). The emblem was carved on a wooden plaque which was mostly made out of rare wood like ebony or box-wood. Placement of this plaque was a ceremonial process on the inauguration day of the coffeehouse. There was a parade lead by a janissary of a high rank carrying the plaque on his head and he was followed by a group of 40-50 young janissaries wearing their knives in gold or silver sheaths and cashmere shawls (Koçu 1952, p. 123). In these coffeehouses, coffee was prepared and served by the owner or sometimes by a young employee. The manners, the body language and the way they dressed-up all displayed their disobedient and rebellious characters. For instance, they had the emblem of their mess tattooed on their upper-arms and they always wore their shirts with the sleeves folded in order to make them visible. These coffeehouses generally had good locations in the city and were decorated in an elaborate way. Janissaries were like undisciplined bandits and sometimes employed gang like tactics and methods, this fear they instilled gave them a certain power to get money from the people in their region for building their coffeehouses (Koçu 1952, p. 122).

The janissaries stood as a socio-political force often in opposition to the central state. They led numerous revolts between 1622-1730, while forming and breaking alliances with segments of the society (Kafadar 1981, p. 121). These alliances were usually brewed in the coffeehouses, thereby these places were known to be the nurseries of sedition and rebellion. Kafadar notes that 'some of the *yeniçeri* affiliated petty craftsmen of Istanbul conspiring against the government mainly in the coffeehouses instigated the *esnaf* to close down their shops and join in the revolt' (Kafadar 1981, p. 108). Patrona Halil revolt was the first janissary revolt. It is telling that his main assistants in the revolt were *manav* and *kahveci* (a fruit seller and a coffeeshop keeper) (Kafadar 1981, p. 109).

Hot discussions ... big fires!

Following the big fire in 1633-1634 (A.H. 1043) which swept the district of Cibali in İstanbul, Sultan Murad IV demolished all of the coffeehouses in the area and closed them. As well as that, smoking was prohibited, for it was a highly popular accompaniment of coffee in the coffeehouses of İstanbul since the beginning of the 17th century (İbn-ül Emin Mahmud Kemal Library, a periodical, n. 322). The controversial discussions were the major cause of the fire in these places; hot talks ignite hot disputes and consequently they set the fires. It is said that the main reason for closing the coffeehouses was to keep the owners of these establishments, the janissaries, under suppression as they were considered to be riotous (Cevdet Paşa tarihi, v.I, p. 39). This group of people was often called as '*eşkiya*', an Arabic word meaning 'riotous' or 'gangster'. Sultan Murat was known to stroll occasionally in the city incognito in order to keep public spaces like coffeehouses under surveillance.

Throughout the time, drastic measures taken against coffee, initially in the form of prohibiting the practice of drinking, but later it had turned into preventing people from socializing in coffeehouses. Repeated attempts at suppression were made; but for whatever reason, prohibitions were short-lived. During the periods of prohibition, people always found ways of coming together and drinking coffee. For instance, barber shops served as coffeehouses for men in these times and a new type of coffee place became popular, like *koltuk kahvesi* which could be defined as 'coffee bars' where people stayed for a short time and coffee was drunk while standing up. *Koltuk* is a Turkish word having two different, but related meanings, one is 'arm-chair', the other is 'inner part of upper arm'. The term *koltuk kahvesi* is the type of coffeehouse usually installed at the back of a shop hidden from the eyes. This is a makeshift coffeehouse where men take their coffee while slightly leaning on a counter with his arm. Similarly, makeshift taverns (*meyhane* in Turkish) called *koltuk meyhanesi* also exist, where alcoholic drinks mostly *rakı* and wine and accompanying dishes (called *meze* in Turkish) are enjoyed.

Condemning and disapproving of the policies of the current administration were at the core of the talks and discussions in coffeehouses. This social and political atmosphere in the coffeehouses was described as 'coffeehouse politics' (Ünver 1962, p. 47). There's a metaphorical saying in Turkish language '*kahve peykesinde aleme nizam vermek*' which could be translated as 'promising order to the global affairs from the coffeehouse bench'. The topics of conversation in a coffeehouse had no boundaries. Coffee drinking acted as a camouflage for meetings forbidden by the authorities. Coffee was a perfect reason to meet in crowds and the coffeehouses, being a standard part of the everyday lives of Ottoman people had become a refuge for these meetings.

British coffeehouse

After coffee was introduced to Europe in the first quarter of the 17th century, the atmosphere in the British and French coffee houses were no exception; they were centres of scientific education, business deals, political and literary discussions, news and gossip. The first coffeehouse in Britain was opened in Oxford by a Jewish man named Jacob in 1650. Four years later, it was followed by the second coffeehouse in Oxford established by another Jew coming from the Ottoman Empire. As it would be seen in other examples in Europe, men coming from the East were pioneers in the coffeehouse trade. In his comprehensive study, Cowan describes the introduction of coffeehouse to Britain as 'an exotic transplant into English society' (Cowan 2005, p. 90).

The first coffeehouses in Oxford acted as clubs for intellectuals and scientists which eventually became the Royal Society. It is no surprise that a Cambridge professor, John Houghton makes a comparison between coffeehouses and universities (Robinson 2013, p. 79). In his lively study, *The Early History of Coffeehouses in England*, Robinson (2013, p. 80) points out the similarity of the system both in the coffeehouse and in the universities that the 'power of combining almost endless variety with a certain amount of order'. Following this, he quotes the rhyme:

So great a universitie
I think there ne'er was any,
In which you may a scholar be,
For spending of a penny.

Almost hundred years later, coffeehouses seemed to be more favourable than the libraries or universities as read in the accounts of a Professor of Poetry in Oxford, 'As there are books suited to every taste, so there are Liquors adapted to every species of reading' and he continues 'learning remains no longer a *dry* pursuit' (Robinson 2013, p. 84).

The coffeehouses in Britain were seen as cultivating environments characterized by new forms of social interaction and freedom of discussion. 'Geniality' and 'openness' were major characteristics of this new 'society of

ingenious gentlemen'. A pamphleteer in 1665 says that 'Coffee and Commonwealth came in together for a Reformation to make a free and sober nation' (Robinson 2013, p. 95). Contrary to this conception, coffeehouses were soon perceived to be nurturing the illicit. As in the Ottoman case, the coffeehouses in Britain were suspected as scenes of plotting, and as places of revolt. The following decade, in 1672, the king demanded that a way be found for him to lawfully act against the coffeehouses. Based on the explanations of their eastern counterparts, English lawyers stated that 'retailing coffee might be an innocent Trade', but drinking it in the assembly of the coffeehouses would be 'thought common nuisances'. In addition to this, some measures taken by the Ottoman authorities are considered to be good examples; following his return from Constantinople, the Commissioner of Customs to Charles II, the Hon. Dudley North suggests the prohibition of coffeehouses (Robinson 2013 p. 158, 159).

What do the King of England and the Ottoman Sultan share in common?

There exist some noticeable cases in common between the histories of Ottoman and British cultures where coffeehouses were considered as potential places where opposing ideas were brewed, hence political unrest was fueled. Coffee drinking was prohibited and coffeehouses were closed several times in both of these regions. Robinson defines the coffeehouse as a 'political institution' which is 'in collision with the tyrannical government' (Robinson 2013, p. 140). During the mid 17th century, certain government officials in Britain were entrusted to keep coffeehouses under surveillance. Following the complaints of King Charles in 1666, Lord Chancellor Clarendon suggested that the coffeehouses should be suppressed or spies should be sent to these places in order to report about people 'who had talked with most licence in a subject that would bear complaint' (Robinson 2013, p. 160).

Ottoman archives contain numerous documents called '*havadis jurnalleri*' meaning 'news journals' (Kırlı 1999-2000, p. 443). These are the reports prepared by the spies accounting the everyday talks, gossip and hearsay of people in the coffeehouses, streets and bazaars. The word *jurnal* in the Turkish name of these reports is quite telling. It is an imported word written and pronounced according to the phonetics of Turkish language. It means 'to spy' belonging more to the slang type vocabulary. Besides, in these '*havadis jurnalleri*', getting news in the coffeehouses was described as '*havadis çalmak*' which could be translated as 'stealing the news'. The way it is described displays the value of this news in the mind of the authority. It is no surprise that 2/3 of these news journals were the written accounts of the public opinion in the coffeehouses (Kırlı 1999-2000, p. 445). Particularly the documents dating between 1840-1845 provide us with valuable evidence of the big ears of the Ottoman government in the coffeehouses of İstanbul. Thus, it should be noted that the coffeehouses in

Britain and in İstanbul were not only places for common people to get news; they were perfect grounds for the rulers to collect information and to gather public opinion. The only difference was the news was heard out loud by the clientele, but recorded in silent secrecy by the surveillance.

When the aforementioned reports are analyzed within the historical context, there is an observable change in the attitude of the Ottoman government and its mechanisms for controlling and regulating the relationship between the state and the society. This can be evidenced in the policies related to the coffeehouses which were the most significant public spaces in the everyday lives of Ottoman citizens. Starting from the mid 16th century when coffee first started to be consumed within the social environment of the coffeehouses in İstanbul to the end of 19th century, these policies were determined by the attitude transforming from the most tyrannical type to the one prepared to reconcile (Kırlı, 1999-2000, p. 452). Along this time line, one thing in common is that the coffeehouses stand as the best public places to witness daily concerns, opposing ideas and particularly the perceptions about the Sultan. Authorities did not approve of these 'talks on state affairs' and were merciless in their punishments; some janissaries were exiled; some coffeehouses and barbershops were closed; some women affiliated with these 'talks on state affairs' in the baths were imprisoned (Çaksu 2010, p. 89). The baths considerably acted as coffeehouses for women in Ottoman land, for coffeehouses were men's realm.

Needless to say, the authorities soon realized the possibility of making the best use of the common feature of the coffeehouses as an agent of rapidly spreading the news and in forming the public opinion. During the Dutch war it is said that Sir William Batten desired the contents of his letter to Captain Cook to be published in the coffeehouse journals 'where it will spread like leprosy' and consequently stir up the warlike instincts of the citizens (Robinson 2013, p. 144).

Coffeehouses as a political institution and a place for revolt were threatened by the prohibitions most of the time. Besides that, coffee was sometimes found more intoxicating, hence more dangerous than wine. The times of war particularly became more critical in terms of controlling and suppressing the liberties and freedom of speech. During the war with Candia (nowadays Crete) in 1656, Grand Vezir Köprülü Mehmet Paşa made sudden visits to the coffeehouses and taverns incognito. Witnessing serious discussions and the blame placed on the ministry by 'men of gravity and character', he decided to close the coffeehouses. As Robinson puts it, this was a 'paradoxical result that the *innocent coffeehouses* were forbidden, whilst the *illicit sale of wine* was allowed to continue' (Robinson 2013, p. 39).

French coffeehouses

Coffee consumption had begun in France almost contemporaneously with England. However, the market

was smaller and the number and the role of the Parisian coffeehouses in economic, social and political life (fabric) was in no way comparable to London or Istanbul during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. By 1720 the number of coffeehouses in Paris was 380. As it was in London, each coffeehouse in Paris attracted a particular clientele owing to their associations with selected lines of business. During the same period, the Government applied strict curbs on press freedom and closely monitored state censorship, leading to a very high reliance on coffeehouse gossip and news mongering. Not surprisingly, the coffeehouses were full of government spies. However, with the intent of keeping track of public opinion, the coffeehouses seem to have been tolerated to continue to operate.

Yet, on July 12th 1789, in the presence of police spies, Camille Desmoulins, at the *Café de Foy*, while standing on a table and brandishing two pistols, roused his countrymen with his historic appeal '*aux armes citoyens!*' The Bastille fell two days later and the French Revolution began (Heise 2001, p. 165). The firewood that was stacked by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, through his ideas at the *Café De Regence*, Voltaire at the *Café de Procope*, Fontenelle and Diderot in other coffeehouses in France, was finally ignited by Camille Desmoulin, thus sparking the French Revolution which marked a turning point in modern civilization.

Conclusion

Today's coffeehouses in Turkey can be categorized in two groups; one is the traditional coffeehouse, called *kahve* in Turkish (a shortened version of the word *kahvehane* meaning coffeehouse), the other is the modern coffeehouse called *café*. The major distinction between the two is that first one is the men's realm, whereas the second serves for all. *Kahve*, stands as the continuation of the coffeehouses of the Ottoman and early Republican period. While retaining some characteristics, they are no longer hot beds of social and political unrest; they have become passive places where unemployed men gather, play games, watch TV, kill time with sleepy eyes and their popular drink is tea. On the other hand, the modern one, the *café*, as the name suggests, is rather an imported type of coffeehouse. The irony is that it is an importation from the West where the coffee culture was originally taken from the Ottoman region.

As Intile (2007, p. 60) argues, today, the internet acts as the coffeehouses did by 'facilitating conversation' and making 'distinctions disappear as we hide behind our computer screens'. Further to this, today's *café*s, with the WiFi access *conditio sine qua non*, would easily be defined as sociable spaces for leisure and relaxation where public opinion is still formed, but this time in the silence of virtual reality. Social media created through the internet,

however, has the power to act like the rebellious coffeehouses of old. This was best highlighted by the case of Arab Spring which ignited through crowds on the internet and the power of social media.

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