Chocolate Class

Multimedia Essays on Chocolate, Culture, and the Politics of Food

The Role of Coffee in the Enlightenment Revolution

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Since the 15th century, coffee has been a recurring commodity with significant influences on various cultures, playing an unexpectedly important role in the Enlightenment revolution. Legend says that coffee was first discovered when a goat herder noticed that after eating berries from a certain tree his goats became so energetic that they didn't want to sleep at night. Upon trying the berries, the herder felt its energetic effects and shared them with his local monastery. According to the origin story the berries were met with disdain and one monk threw them into a fire. However, upon smelling the aroma of the roasting beans the monks decided to give the novelty a second chance. Like the tea-drinking Buddhist monks of east Asia, they found the coffee to keep them awake during spiritual practice and the commodity became commonplace [1]. While this origin story is likely apocryphal, it offers a useful insight into the early potential and unique aspects of coffee, namely offering an energetic effect with benefits beyond just luxury and taste.

While one would think that the influence of coffee has little historical significance, being simply one commodity among many, it has likely played an incredibly influential role in history and the development of the world we know today. Coffee is a high-impact commodity because of the effects it has on people as a stimulant, namely increasing short-term cognitive and physical performance, inducing higher levels of collaboration and socialization, and producing greater motivation [2]. Because of these effects, coffee stimulates high levels of collaboration between individuals, increasing the rate of technological and scientific advancements, as we will see through the enlightenment revolution occuring during the 18th century.

So how exactly did coffee help bring about the "Age of Reason" in 18th century Europe, and the great advances in politics, philosophy, science and communications? To answer this, we must first understand the psychological effects coffee has on people. Caffeine has been found to improve performance on sustained attention tasks, as well as on logical reasoning and semantic memory evaluations [3]. Additionally, according to a recent study from UC Davis, individuals who consume coffee have higher levels of participation in group activities and a higher affinity for socialization [4]. The study also showed that groups that consume coffee have an overall higher performance and are more likely to enjoy the social interactions, continuing to engage socially afterwards. These psychological factors can help explain the initial institutionalization of coffee as a social lubricant in Arabia and later Europe, with coffee houses emerging as hubs for socialization resulting from the increased affinity for socialization caused by caffeine.

Now that we've covered the basic psychological effects of coffee, we must look at pre and post-enlightenment Europe. Before coffee became mainstream, beer was often the beverage of choice because water was often too polluted to drink. Many Europeans drank beer almost continuously, often beginning their day with "beer soup", causing much of the population to be intoxicated on a regular basis [5]. However, thanks to the Turks' imperial ambitions, coffee was soon introduced to Europe and eventually replaced beer as the drink of choice. Those who drank coffee would begin their day alert and stimulated rather than relaxed and inebriated, and the quality of their work would improve. As coffee became more and more common in

Europe, coffee houses started becoming a staple throughout the region, creating social and collaborative spaces that hadn't existed before [6].

Soon more people began going to coffee houses which generated levels of collaboration never seen before, becoming places not just for enjoying a cup of coffee, but to exchange ideas. During this time coffee houses were places where men (almost exclusively) would often converse with complete strangers, engaging in serious conversation and conducting business which was not possible before in alehouses, which were noisy and rowdy places as a result of the intoxicating effects of alcohol. One could gain admittance by purchasing a cup of coffee for a penny and could then join the conversation groups, which resulted in coffee-houses often being called "penny universities" [7]. As a result, great thinkers were now not thinking alone, and could share their ideas with other experts while under the stimulating effects of coffee, which increased their levels of social collaboration and logical reasoning- essential aspects of enlightenment thinking. Additionally, coffeehouses were one of the few places where rank or status was not important, so conversations were truly of a democratic nature creating an alternative learning environment to institutionalized education [8].

While it's impossible to pinpoint all the ideas that were born out of coffee house discussions, we can find various examples throughout history where coffee houses served an important role in the development of great ideas. For example, before World War I, everyone who was going to be anyone hung out in Vienna's Café Central; Sigmund Freud and Leon Trotsky often played chess there, and incredibly influential individuals such as Lenin and Hitler would also visit. Additionally, the Vienna Circle would have meetings there, which consisted of a group of philosophers and scientists who made great advances in their fields. And who could forget Café de la Régence in Paris, where Karl Marx first met Friedrich Engels, who would go on to be the founders of communism. Below is a painting of a regular afternoon at the café, with men playing intellectually stimulating games of chess over coffee, developing their own knowledge of the game by collaborating with others [10].

Overall, we see that coffee has had a great effect on western culture during the enlightenment era, encouraging collaboration and discussion which contributed towards the advances in science and technology we have today. But now the emergence of coffee chains like Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts seems to

threaten the coffee culture that has been so influential in the past. The former sells itself as a place for pro-ductivity, while the latter as a grab-and-go coffee alternative, leaving little room for intellectual discussion [9]. Will coffee house culture dwindle and disappear completely as a result of the information revolution that allows for long distance collaboration and discussion? Or will the Third Wave coffee movement prove to be a success, acting as a hub for face-to-face discussions and sharing of ideas? In any case, it's clear that coffee will continue to play a large role in our lives for years to come, whether it be by making us more social, alert or just less tired.

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