Caffeine Culture before Starbucks: Shared Interests, Outlooks, and Addictions in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World Coffeehouses

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Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, The Atlantic World (Apr., 2004), pp. 33-37

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163681

Accessed: 25-02-2020 13:28 UTC

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Caffeine Culture Before Starbucks: Shared Interests, Outlooks, and Addictions in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World Coffeehouses

This lesson encourages students to analyze coffeehouses as cultural symbols. The coffeehouse exemplified a relationship between commodities, ideas, and habits of consumption that was emblematic of the colonial-era Atlantic World. Patrons of coffeehouses consumed the most lucrative stuff of empire: tobacco, sugar, tea, chocolate, and coffee—all containing addictive qualities and all produced by slave labor. Reading newspapers and metropolitan periodicals, such as *The Spectator*, patrons also imbibed a world view that resonated in Boston, Bristol, and Barbados. Coffeehouses embodied the seamiest aspects of Atlantic World commerce—slave labor, addictiveness, and the allure of consumption—patrons shared fashionable sociability, and a process of self fashioning among a rising bourgeois clientele.

An Early London Coffee House, ca. 1705. (Anonymous artist. Image courtesy of the British Museum and Art Resource, New York.)

National Standards

This lesson plan fulfills the following standards:

Era 1: Three Worlds Meet;

Standard 2: Historical comprehension (using paintings and architecture to elaborate on textual history); early exploration and colonization; the resulting cultural and ecological interactions;

Era 2: Colonization and Settlement; and

Standard 3A: Demonstrate understanding of colonial economic life and labor systems in the Americas.

This lesson plan will also help students master Standard 3 of the National Standards in Historical Thinking: Historical Analysis and Interpretation.

Student Objectives

1. To list major Atlantic World trade commodities and explain why consumers craved them.
2. To understand the brutal exploitation of slave labor required to bring tobacco, sugar, and coffee to market.
3. To analyze the dynamic between habits of consumption, profits, and the exploitation of labor.
4. To evaluate a process whereby consuming material goods and print media shaped coffeehouse patrons' sense of identity.
5. To interpret primary documents.
6. To evaluate material culture as a historical source.

Time

This lesson plan should take three fifty-minute class periods.

Background

The eighteenth century marked a spike in the importance of consumer goods to Britain's empire. In a related development, a rising mercantile bourgeoisie at home and well-to-do colonials at-

Slaves harvesting sugar cane in Antigua. (From William Clark, *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua, in which are represented the process of sugar making, and the employment of the negroes . . .*, [London, 1823]. Image courtesy of the British Library.)

tempted to crash the gates of aristocracy by purchasing luxury goods and educating themselves in fashion, taste, and manners. Historian Richard L. Bushman has shown how the "refinement of America" began among elites in the late 1600s, accelerated through the 1700s, and then extended down the social scale (1). To aspiring "gentlemen," coffeehouses counted for more than sociability and refreshment, they were the place to learn, rehearse, and confirm a legitimizing identity.

This same class of patrons had economic interests that coincided with coffeehouse consumption. New England merchants in the carrying trade, Virginia's great tobacco planters, Jamaican sugar nabobs, and Edinburgh "factors" all derived their wealth from the commerce evidenced in coffeehouses. For such patrons, coffeehouses provided news of the marketplace and confirmed their economic outlooks and values.

For teachers of the United States survey, I recommend implementing this lesson as part of a unit on "colonial maturity." Students should already have studied the African slave trade, mercantilism, and the "triangular" trade between the Americas/Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. They should be familiar with regional economic specialties within the thirteen colonies and how the colonies fit into empire-wide patterns of commerce. The lesson on coffeehouses gives a vivid example of the extent of America's connections with the greater Atlantic World.

In a pinch, teachers can prepare this lesson by selectively reading three monographs. I suggest *Sweetness and Power, the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985) by Sidney W. Mintz; *Market a la Mode, Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in* The Tatler *and* The Spectator (1997) by Erin Mackie; and *Tobacco Culture, the Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (1985) by T.H. Breen. Also, students will read two primary sources: Richard Steele, *The Spectator, No. 49* (1711), and an entry from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (January 27, 1664). A more thorough reading list appears in the endnotes for teachers wishing to refine the lesson (2).

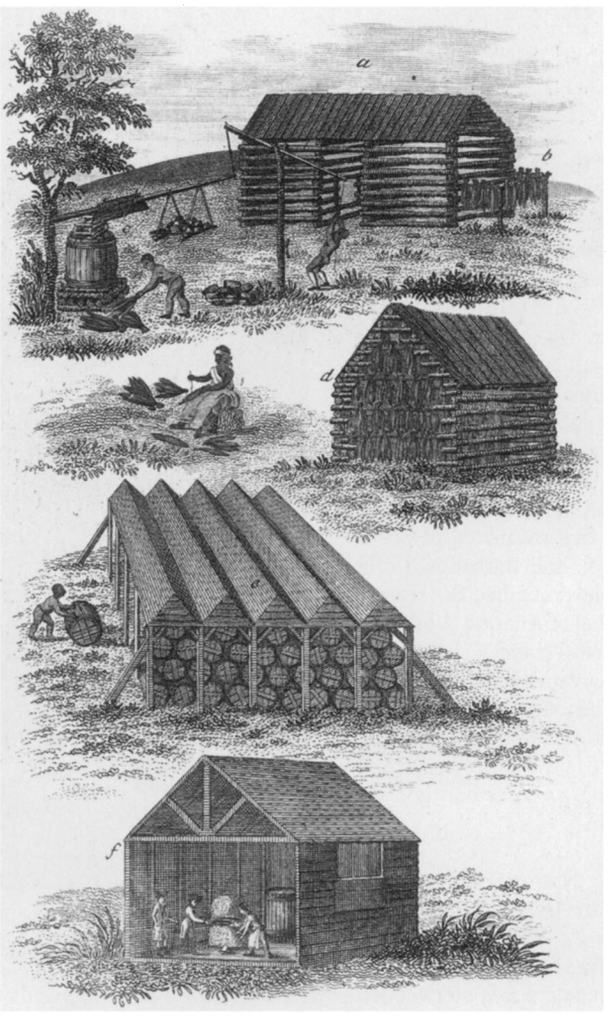
Procedure

First Class Period: Material Culture and Patrons of the Coffeehouse

1. Begin by showing students the eighteenth-century depiction of a coffeehouse shown in this article. Tell them that in the 1650s coffeehouses were new in Europe, but by 1720 they were ubiquitous throughout the English-speaking Atlantic World. London alone boasted about three thousand such establishments in 1714 (3).

2. Ask students if the coffeehouse scene provides clues to the popularity of such establishments. Have them describe what they think the clientele is doing. What clues do their dress and posture provide about their class status? My students remarked that the customers appeared argumentative and combative—a reasonable conclusion and suggestive of a group of social strivers.

3. Tell students that coffeehouses disseminated ideas. Note that many of the patrons are reading books, pamphlets, and broadsides, and are engaged in heated discussion. Throughout the English-speaking Atlantic World, coffeehouse patrons tended to read similar literature: so called "gentlemen's magazines" such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. These journals favored satire, essays, poems, and *belles lettres*; they provided advice on etiquette and moral commentary; and they avoided politics. Collectively, they helped middle-class men throughout the English Empire imagine themselves as related by taste, style, and ideas (4).



"Stages in the production of Virginia Tobacco" (FromWilliam Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco* [London, 1800]. Image courtesy of the New York Public Library.)

4. Point out that coffeehouse patrons throughout the Empire also consumed the same substances: coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, and tobacco—all produced in colonies and widely distributed. In their places of origin, these beverages were bitter, and, when first exported, they fit established English tastes for bitter foods like pickles, watercress, beer, radishes, horseradish, and bitter melons (5).

5. Explain that coffeehouses became gastronomical innovators because they popularized the use of sugar to sweeten traditionally bitter drinks. Thus, they introduced both new tastes *and* a new cultural palate. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz claims that Englishmen found the use of sugar to sweeten coffee, tea, and chocolate especially compelling (6). Coffeehouses propagated both sensory taste and tastefulness in fashion and thought.

6. Emphasize that all the commodities consumed in coffeehouses are addictive: caffeine in coffee and tea; chocolate; sucrose in sugar; nicotine in tobacco (7). Highlight for students that patrons must have found the combination of sociability, news, and new, addictive, substances almost irresistible. Ask students to identify where these commodities came from and who produced them. (See Marcy Norton's essay on chocolate on page 14.)

7. End the period by asking students to compare eighteenth-century coffeehouses with Starbucks or other popular, local coffeehouses.

Seattle-based Starbucks Corporation opened its first store (above) in the city's Pike Place Market in 1971. With 79 stores in the Seattle region alone, Starbucks serves its coffee products in over 7,200 locations around the globe and reported over $4 billion in net revenues in 2003. (Photo courtesy Michael Regoli.)

Second Class Period: Ideas and Identity of Coffeehouse Patrons

1. Distribute and have students read in class Joseph Steele, *Spectator No. 49*, and the diary entry from Samuel Pepys (8). Both sources describe coffeehouses and what patrons did there.

2. During the rest of the period, discuss the ways in which coffeehouse patrons behaved, what subjects they discussed, and what self images they sought to project. The purpose of this session is to identify how coffeehouses offered opportunities to fashion identity. Use Steele and Pepys as the basis for discussion. Ask students to identify what these documents suggest about behavioral ideals among coffeehouse patrons.

Third class period: blood, sweat, and toil: production of coffeehouse commodities

1. Show students eighteenth-century depictions of the stages of tobacco production and of the production of sugar.

2. Ask students to identify where these crops grew and to describe the climates necessary for the cultivation of sugar and tobacco.

3. Ask students to speculate about which crop required the most labor to produce.

4. Describe for students the stages of production for each crop as depicted by T.H. Breen and Sidney Mintz (9).

5. Point out that consumption in market economies is rarely benign. The genteel consumption of coffeehouse patrons was made possible by the forced labor of millions of African slaves. Teachers might conclude this lesson by asking how modern consumption choices can have negative consequences: the decision to purchase athletic shoes or clothing made by sweatshop labor, for example, or the decision to buy an environmentally-destructive truck or sport utility vehicle. ❑

Endnotes

1. Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, (New York: Knopf, 1992).
2. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Erin S. Mackie, *Market a la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Steele in Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1: 208-11. Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, 11 vols, Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970); For the influence of English periodicals such as *The Spectator* on colonials, see Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America*, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998) especially chaps. 2-3; and for a particularly compelling example of a colonial striving for gentility see Kenneth A. Lockridge, *The Diary and Life of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674-1744* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); for a dated but lively source on coffeehouses see William B. Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London*, 2 vols. (London: J.C. Nimmo, 1901), 2: 162-92; and Richard B. Schwartz, *Daily Life in Johnson's London* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 61-2.
3. Schwartz, *Daily Life in Johnson's London*, 61.
4. Mackie, *Market a la Mode*, 1-29; Rozbicki, chapt. 2; and Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Verso, 1991), chapt. 4.
5. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 6-18.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. *Spectator No. 49*, in Bond, ed., 1: 208-11; *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 1: 27-8.
9. Ibid., Breen, 46-58; Mintz, chapt.2.

Christopher L. Doyle teaches at Farmington High School in Connecticut. He first implemented this lesson while working as an assistant professor of history at the University of Northern Colorado. He has published on the social history of Revolutionary-era Virginia in the Journal of Southern History *and* The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, *and on teaching history in the American Historical Association's* Perspectives.

HANDOUT ONE

Richard Steele, *The Spectator, No. 49*, 26 April 1711
. . . *Hominem pagina nostra sapit* [Our book savours of the man].
Martial.

It is very natural for a Man who is not turned [suited] for Mirthful Meetings of Men, or Assemblies of the fair Sex, to delight in that sort of Conversation that we find in Coffee-houses. Here a Man, of my Temper, is in his Element; for, if he cannot talk, he can still be more agreeable to his Company, as well as pleased in himself, in being only a Hearer. . . .

In the place I most usually frequent, Men differ rather in the time of Day in which they make a Figure, than in any real Greatness above one another. I, who am at the Coffee-house at six in a Morning, know that my friend *Beaver* the Haberdasher has a Levy of more undissembled Friends and Admirers, than most of the Courtiers or Generals of Great Britain. Every Man about him has, perhaps, a News Paper in his Hand, but none can pretend to guess what Step will be taken in any one Court of *Europe*, 'till Mr. *Beaver* has thrown down his Pipe, and declares what Measures the Allies must enter into upon this new Posture of Affairs. Our Coffee-house is near one of the Inns of Court [in London, residence of law students], and *Beaver* has the Audience and Admiration of his Neighbours from Six 'till within a Quarter of Eight, at which time he is interrupted by the Students of the House; some of whom are ready Dress'd for Westminster, at eight in a Morning, with Faces as busie as if they were retain'd in every Cause [case] there; and others come in their Night-Gowns to Saunter away their Time; as if they never designed to go thither. I do not know that I meet, in any of my Walks, Objects which move both my Spleen and Laughter so effectually, as those Young Fellows at the *Grecian*, *Squire's*, *Searle's* and all other Coffee-houses adjacent to the Law, who rise early but for no other purpose but to publish their laziness. . . . the vain Things approach each other with an Air, which shows they regard one another for their Vestaments. I have observed, that the Superiority among these proceeds from an Opinion of Gallantry and Fashion. . . .

When the Day grows too busie for these Gentlemen to enjoy any longer the Pleasures of their *Deshabile*, with any manner of Confidence, they give Place to Men who have Business or good Sense in their Faces, and come to the Coffee-house either to transact Affairs or enjoy Conversation. The Persons to whose Behaviour and Discourse I have most regard, are such as are between these two sorts of Men: Such as have not spirits too Active to be happy and well pleased in a private Condition, nor Complexions too warm to make them neglect the Duties and Relations of Life. Of these sort of Men consist the worthier Part of Mankind; of these are all good Fathers, generous Brothers, sincere Friends, and faithful Subjects. Their Entertainments are derived rather from Reason than Imagination: Which is the Cause that there is no Impatience or Instability in their Speech or Action. . . . These are the Men formed for Society, and those little Communities which we express by the Word *Neighbourhoods*.

The Coffee-house is the Place of Rendezvous to all that live near it, who are thus turned to relish calm and ordinary Life. *Eubulus* [taken from the name of a classical- Greek comic poet] presides over the middle Hours of the Day, when this Assembly of Men meet together. . . . His Wisdom and Knowledge are serviceable to all that think fit to make use of them; and he does the Office of a Council, a Judge, an Executor, and a Friend to all his Acquaintance, not only without the Profits which attend such Offices, but also without the Deference and Homage which are usually paid to them. The giving of Thanks is displeasing to him. The greatest Gratitude you can show him, is to let him see you are a better Man for his Services; and that you are as ready to oblige others, as he is to oblige you.

In the private Exigencies of his Friends he lends, at legal Value, considerable Sums, which he might highly increase by rolling in the Publick Stocks. He does not consider in whose Hands his Mony [sic] will improve most, but where it will do most Good.

Eubulus has so great an Authority in his little Diurnal Audience, that when he shakes his Head at any Piece of publick News, they all of them appear dejected; and, on the contrary, go home to their Dinners with a good Stomach and chearful Aspect, when *Eubulus* seems to intimate that Things go well. Nay, their Veneration towards him is so great, that when they are in other Company they speak and act after him; are Wise in his Sentences, and are no sooner sat down at their own Tables, but they hope or fear, rejoice or despond as they saw him do at the Coffee-house. In a word, every Man is *Eubulus* as soon as his Back is turn'd.

Having here given an Account of the several Reigns that succeed each other from Day-break 'till Dinner-time [noon to about 3 p.m.], I shall mention the Monarchs of the Afternoon on another occasion, and shut up the whole series of them with the History of *Tom* the Tyrant; who, as first Minister of the Coffee-house, takes the Government upon him between the Hours of Eleven and Twelve at Night, and gives his Orders in the most arbitrary manner to the Servants below him, as to the disposition of Liquors, Coal, and Cinders.

—Excerpt from Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Spectator* (5 vols., Oxford, 1965), I, 208-211.

HANDOUT TWO

The Diary of Samuel Pepys

Up and to the office; and at noon to the Coffee-house, where I sat with Sir G Asckue and Sir Wm. Petty, who in discourse is methinks one of the most rational men that I ever heard speak with a tongue, having all his notions the most distinct and clear; and did among other things (saying that in all his life these three books were the most esteemed and generally cried up for wit in the world—*Religio Medici*, Osborne's *Advice to a Son* and *Hudibras*) did say that in these, in the two first principally, the wit lie in confirming some pretty sayings, which are generally like paradoxes, by some argument smartly and generally urged—which takes with people who do not trouble themselves to examine the force of an argument which pleases them in the delivery . . . ; whereas . . . he did really find fault and weaken the strength of many of Osborne's arguments, so as that in downright disputation they would not bear weight . . . . He showed finely whence it happens that good writers are not admired by the present age; because there are but few in any age that do mind [pay attention to] anything that is abstruse and curious; and so . . . the generality of mankind [prefers] pleasing themselves in the easy delights of the world, as eating, drinking, dancing, hunting, fencing, which we see the meanest men do the best, those that profess it. A gentleman never dances so well as the dancing-master and an ordinary fiddler makes better music for a shilling than a gentleman will do after spending forty. And so in all the delights of the world almost.

Thence to the [ex]Change . . . .

—Excerpt of entry of 27 January 1664, from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, R.C. Latham and W. Matthews, eds., (11 vols., Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970-), v. 5, pp. 27-28.