Cafes and crowds

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Abstract: *From its very outset the city has been the site for the generation of crowds. Writers on the city such as Simmel and Cannetti reflecting upon crowds and their characteristics as a mass of undifferentiated people. From video-ethnographic research we have been doing in cafés we would like to consider crowds from a different angle. Crowds off the streets, though still in the public sphere, beloved of Habermas, of polite public conversations and civil society. We will examine how crowds are involved in creating ambience and how we analyse our relationship to the crowds that we find in cafes. Neither civility nor cosmopolitanism are accepted as solutions to the problems raised by life in the city, indeed they are refigured as problems themselves which life in cafes orients toward.*

Fig. 1. Button's Coffee House, 1700s, Covent Garden, NE Central London

Joining the polite crowd of the eighteenth century coffee house

As is fairly well-known, there is a tradition of social-theoretic inquiry for whom the café, or to be more precise the coffee-house, has an important role to play in conceptions of an idealised realm of public sociability, civility and discoursing. At the same time, there is a link to theories of how, in effect, the crowd, as angry, mobile, maybe riotous mass (Canetti 1960), is converted into something social and civil. Where the monological chant of the mob is replaced by the dialogical hum of citizens talking to one another in an edifying manner. The spur for such thinking is undoubtedly passages in Jürgen Habermas's writing about *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, trans. into English 1989), where attention is paid to "the historical foundations of civil society" – and more specifically to "innovative urban public spaces and institutions" that according to Habermas "allowed the construction of what he has famously called the 'bourgeois public sphere'" (Ellis 2001b).

Over the past few years Markman Ellis has been re-examining Habermas's theory, which relied mainly on secondary historical sources, through engaging with primary historical materials. Ellis agrees that there are cases of the coffee-house as a space where the public street crowd is reconvened as something with much more potential for rational reflection, critical assessment and – perhaps – hatching schemes for new charities, political parties and so on. In this respect, Ellis (2001a, pp29-31) pp29-31 takes his cue from Richard Steele (whose café is pictured), writing in *The Spectator* in 1711, about the coffee-house "not only as metaphorical site but also as a potential agent of moral reform" (p.29): i.e. the site where the rumbustiousness of the crowd, as also the

self-interest of the individual, are transformed into a new kind of sociability animated by the polite (but also on occasion challenging) conversation that is the tap-root of Habermas's 'bourgeois public realm'.

However Ellis (2001a, p37) proposes, on the basis of historical evidence, that

> … the coffee-house was often anything but quiet, polite and business-like, and, moreover, that this disputatious simulation was a signal source of the customer's interest in attending the coffee-house. The unruly element was described in terms of babble, noise and smokiness, argument and faction. A diverse array of figures articulate this counter-culture coffee-house, amongst whom might be numbered the gambler and card-shark, the drunkard duellist, the projector (a promoter of mad-cap schemes), the philosopher and literary critic (given to extreme opinions), the buttonholer (one who literally seizes the observer by the buttonhole, in order to secure undivided attention) and the coffee-woman.

fig. 2, Hogarth – 'A Midnight Modern Conversation'

Here is not the quiet and contemplative polite crowd; here is something noisier, more a cacophony of competing voices than a restrained turn-taking; something more quarrelsome, more Rabelasian, more akin to the cast of eccentrics, perverts and money-grabbers apparently found on the streets than the occupants assumed to ornament the interiors of the Age of Reason. And it is a heterogeneous crowd, a messy and mixed-up affair, whose micro-social and –spatial dynamics were doubtless far more complex than we have previously imagined.

After reminding us that the coffee-house was as often bawdy and villainous as it was civil and truthful, Ellis turns to the place of women. Ellis stresses "the fact that the early coffee-house was not open to women in the same way as it was to men" (p.9). In fact, many coffee-houses *did* contain women, but as serving staff or even as owners (especially widows). Ellis describes how many coffee-women ended up being – or at least being perceived to be – eighteenth-century sex-workers, whether simply through a

'flirtatiousness' that helped to drag in punters and to sell (second-rate!) coffee or in the guise of a more fully-fledged role as prostitute offering sexual favours in the upstairs rooms of the establishment. Contemporaries noted that such women inspired desire, passion and many other 'irrational' emotions in the young men who frequented the coffee-houses, driving some to suicide, and in effect their presence and activity – their 'coquetry' – became viewed as "a poison, 'a Ratsbane', to the coffee-house sociability, which ought properly to be orderly, conversational, convivial and homosocial" (p.33).

What also resurfaces in this context, especially once Ellis is recounting tales of drunkenness, gambling, debauchery, lewdness, sexual encounters and the like, is the heterogeneity of the eighteenth-century coffee-house experience, marked by many different 'crowds' acting in a whole variety of ways from the most polite to, as inferred, the most impolite. Ellis (p.37) records that Moll Long and her King's Coffee-House in Convent Garden was Hogarthian, being illustrated in one of Hogarth's plates, embracing "a boisterous sociability equated with promiscuity, tumult and poverty: a carnivalised sociability, more popular than polite". He duly concludes that it "is clearly a different sort of coffee-house from that celebrated in its Habermasian model, with a significantly different and more subversive regime (boisterous, sexually promiscuous, heterosexual, status-obsessed and heterodox)" (p.37).

Rejoining the cappuccino crowds of 21st Century café culture

Habermas's idealised version of the coffee house brings out the importance of the coffee house as one of the *civil* spaces of the public sphere between the court and the home. Ellis shows how polite and rational debate while part of the institution was never enough to do justice to how the coffee house was manifest. In a way this might not do a great deal of harm to Habermas's argument about the necessity of such a place for the development of the modern city. It may be that second rate coffee, prostitution, sexual desire, lying and outright bad behaviour are also essential elements of the good city. Let us turn now to the present day and look at the café as the *cosmopolitan* place. This is the ideal of Claudio Magris, an eloquent Italian travel writer, in his book 'micro-cosms' (1999). He writes of a famous café in Trieste:

> 'The San Marco is a real café – the outskirts of History stamped with the conservative loyalty and the liberal pluralism of its patrons. Those places where just one tribe sets up camp are pseudocafes – never mind whether they are frequented by respectable people, youth most-likely-to, alternative lifestyles or *a la page* intellectuals. All endogamies are suffocating; colleges too, and university campuses, exclusive clubs, master classes, political meetings and cultural symposia, they are all a negation of life, which is a sea port,' p7.

Here, it is clear that a café with one kind of crowd, be it revolutionary, yuppy or down-at-heel is not a *real* café. Any café dominated by the one crowd will deny its customers the positive life of mobility and social mixing[1]. The best form of the café, according to

[1] As Blum (p128, 2003) puts it: 'The modern café itself is a place of transport. That this is a recurrent in globalization commentary is reflected in the criticism of those "yuppies" in cafés sipping Italian coffee pretentiously. If at first we suspect that the yuppies are imagining being elsewhere, then the snobs might be our urban dreamers. But more likely, the yuppies are

Magris, is one that has loyal and liberal customers and that its customers belong to a diversity of social types. As he goes on:

> The San Marco is a Noah's Ark, where there's room for everyone – no one takes precedence, no one is excluded – for every couple seeking shelter in a downpour and even for the partnerless, p3

While there may not seem to be much to find disagreement with here, we will turn to our primary material of what actually happens in a variety of cafés[2]. The ESRC project we have been working on has gathered ethnographic records of the daily life of a dozen different cafés around the UK from transport cafés to Starbucks branches.

Our shift in tandem with Ellis's is to look at reexamine theoretical statements in the light of primary materials. This shift is one potential response to the questions raised in the colloquium's call about whether general theory is appropriate. It is a shift that hopefully re-engages the theorist with the *common knowledge* that the customer has, to look again at collective problems[3].

Consequently our study is attuned to how customers go about analysing particular cafes as their kind of place or not, as welcoming or not and as inspiring our loyalty (so important not just to Magris café but any kind of café). It is obvious, in fact too obvious, that customers' analysis occurs as part of courses of action: walking into cafés, being served, sitting around for a while, then leaving them, building up repeated experiences of cafes and more[4].

These café crowds vary not only from café to café but by time of day within the same café. Beanscene in Glasgow is often referred to as 'babyscene' by warrant of its daytime crowd but at night it favours loud, live music and has a quite different crowd. While each crowd, as you can catch a flavour of from the clips, is hardly ever uniform we nevertheless find ways of beginning to categorise it as a kind of café crowd[5]. We look to

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contemplating the inflation of their present place and time as the rectification of worldly injustice which only now permits the city to recognize itself as having everything anyone has and having it now for the first time. Yet, what is disappearing and hard to find is the "traditional and ordinary," which while not appearing good, "might be good for us." That is, what is most desirable (stylish and nutritional amenities) "might not be good for our emotional and mental states."

[2] Alan Latham has done comparative work in New Zealand (Latham 2003a; Latham 2003b).

[3] In the colloquium's call: "Discussion will centre on experimental analyses and research methodologies, and on the kinds of knowledge we wish to produce. Is a general theory of the city desirable? What does it mean to have an urban theory? Should our knowledge be a means of navigating or sensing place (like the 'London Knowledge' of cabbies)? Is there any mileage in the act of comparison, and if so, what? How can that knowledge be displayed (apart from the standard academic text)?"

[4] There is not the space here to go into what the café makes possible through making it part of one's routines – a key thing is of course becoming a 'regular'. This is not all by any means since, as Jane Jacobs (Jacobs 1961), Ray Oldenberg (Oldenberg 1997) William Whyte (Whyte 1943) and (Duneier 1999) all make clear, communities need 'characters', and these characters need the stages where they can build up their character through various incidents. They often use the example of the pavement but the café is equally important and perhaps more so since by its protection, by the small collection of mutually cognisant regulars and under the eyes of the staff different sorts of characters can inhabit it.

[5] The lived work of constituting cafés as particular convivial places is a central concern of the 'Cappuccino Community' project and is reported on elsewhere -s www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/

where the café and crowd are found:

> On a shopping street, beside a university, on a hidden away side street, in a London suburb, in a shopping mall, in a railway station

We look to the way the café has named itself:

> Caffe Nero, Offshore, Spoon, Costa, the Trucker's Café

Decorated itself:

> Italian, 'Friends' (e.g. sofas), retro, battered formica

Chosen its staff:

> European and trendy, students, husband and wife,

And its menu: whether it serves cappuccino and lattes.

To the time of day: breakfast, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon, night-time

We look to the customers currently present:

> Suits, students, locals, mothers with babies, shoppers, passengers waiting

and what they are in the course of doing:

> having lunch, reading newspapers, talking with another, tending to children (equally running around being children) and waiting for a train

and we hear the noise the customers are making as a collective:

> quiet, buzzing, overheard conversations, tannoys making announcements.

Much of this analysis we do, as Harvey Sacks would say, 'at-a-glance', as we enter a café. 'At a glance' analysis of appearances is in itself a remarkably fast and economical way of apprehending a place. However our interest is more in what can be done once we *have* a particular kind of crowd in a cafe that can be seen to be, say, 'the locals' of a city, and we on the other hand are just visiting the city. Then we use our potential self-categorisation as a 'stranger' and the crowd's categorisation as 'the locals' to see how 'locals' treat 'strangers'. On the basis of what gets done to us by this crowd we can say of a city, for instance Manchester, 'Manchester is a friendly city' or equally 'Manchester is an unfriendly city' (Sacks

1992Vol 2, pp 533-541). Equally if we find the crowd to be an office worker crowd we can make assessments about what office-workers are like as a collective in relation to how we categorise *ourselves* in relation to *them*, and this might be as a mosher, as a mother of a baby or as a wheelchair user (Lenney and Sercombe 2002). Where some of our self-categorisation might pose potential problems for a certain kind of crowd, this would be at its most stark, where say a Palestinian walks into an Israeli café for the first time.

The significant point for Magris's and others' ambition is: were all cafés to contain cosmopolitan crowds then we would only ever be able to find out how cosmopolitan crowds treated us. Part of its very composition being that is always mixed. At the same time cosmopolitanism itself would risk the loss of its identity, becoming as (Szerszynski and Urry 2002) put it 'banal'. The cosmopolitan café is just one possible kind of café and, as we have hinted, comes with its particular problems, its necessary exclusions. If there is too much of any one crowd (e.g. typically tourists) then it will be swamped.

A further possibility of having a recognisable regular crowd in a café is that as a *member* of it (rather than as a person or group found by contrast to it) we share a common situation with common problems (Blum 2003; McHugh 1968; Raffel 2001). Perhaps this is at its sharpest focus in the clip of mothers with newly born children visiting a public place for the first time. Yet it is also the case for travellers waiting in a railway station, for city centre office-workers having breakfast out (Laurier 2003), reading newspaper together or having a meeting. Switching back to the cosmopolitanism of the current cappuccino boom, as a member of a crowd, who are not simply our friends nor strangers, nor any old crowd, we come to see, for instance, how academics like ourselves respond to cosmopolitanism as it arrives in the form of a "tall skinny hazelnut latte." Do other fellow academics start saying that kind of thing aloud and how do others respond if they do?

Conclusions

To recap, while we agree with Habermas that coffee houses were places that provided and supported communal life in the city, civil life and rational conversations co-existed in cafes with lying, crime, dull monologues and bad coffee. Contemporary writers such as Ian Borden (2003) trade on the same equation as Habermas in arguing that the relentless spread of cappuccino cafés results in a monocultural middle class, gentrified and polite society. Our argument is that in cafés we encounter the play between the civil and its opposites and, perhaps more importantly, variations in how different communities orient to civil life.

The boom in cappuccino cafés and the dismay over the decline of 'classic cafés' (Maddox 2003) poses the problem that the idealised cosmopolitanism of, say, massey's 'global sense of place', leaves something missing (Blum 2003). We do not only want nor need the *flows* of a seaport we also desire and find contentment in a sense of rootedness, belonging and attachment – a kind of positive parochialism. Moreover a café cannot be *everyone's* refuge from the undifferentiated crowd of the streets since such open-ness would lead to each café containing, after all, a 'microcosm' of the street and thus being no different from the mass except in number. For us to like a café, to adopt it, and develop commitment to it will involve the café having a particular crowd that we can feel we have a relationship with.

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