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Coffee and the American Independence Movement

Working Paper No. 22

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Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: Coffee has a long history as a motivating force in society, as can be seen through its history in different parts of the world. The introduction of coffee houses to western culture would promote the emergence of a public sphere, and would come to influence revolutionary behavior in both Western Europe and the North American colonies.

***Journal of Economic Literature* Classification Codes:** N41, N44, N71

Key Words: American Separatism, Bourgeoisie, Coffee, Coffee Houses, Colonial America, Public Sphere, Revolution.

This inquiry seeks to establish that coffee and coffee house culture played a key role in promoting American independence. Coffee has a long and colorful history, and its introduction to western society would solidify its status as a motivating and radicalizing drink. The coffee house emerged in 17th century England as a product of Levantine trade routes and a developing taste for exotic goods among English citizens. The popularity of coffee would rapidly spread throughout Western Europe, and lead to the development and growth of public forums for the discussion of politics and culture. A public sphere would emerge from coffee house culture, and allow for increased political representation of the growing middle class in Western society.

As the English colonies would begin to take hold on the North American continent, a unique national identity would begin to take form among the colonists. Snubbing British culture in favor of American separatism would become the patriotic duty of many colonists, and tea drinking would receive the brunt of this patriotism. Coffee would become the national drink of the American colonists, and the early coffee houses and taverns of Boston and New York would serve as meeting places for revolutionaries and new American political dissidents.

The Emergence of the Coffee House

Throughout the age of exploration, as European nations earnestly began reaching into the world's other hemispheres, a growing interest in exotic goods was firmly taking root in Western Europe. Expeditions to other lands by traders and explorers were all driven by the potential wealth that existed in the goods and resources that they imagined they would find. Thus, a trade network began to emerge between Europe and the Levant, centered around certain goods. Silver, gold, silk and spices began to flood into major European cities through the Silk Road. New trade routes led to increased economic growth in many of western Europe's largest cities. Urban populations began to swell, and consequently, the quality of life in many of these major cities began to decline. New markets emerged for cures and medicines that would ease the ills of everyday life, and trade in exotic medicines and "spices" quickly began to grow.

There had long been a market for alcoholic beverages in European cities, and indeed it was consumed in very large quantities throughout much of history. In *The Social Life of Coffee*, Brian Cowan (2011, 33) explores the theory that most of the lower class public in early England were often intoxicated for the few centuries leading up to the period of

the enlightenment. The frequent consumption of alcohol throughout the day, and the use of intoxicating herbal “medicines” grew more and more consistent as the quality of life continued to decline. Cowan notes the use of exotic “spices” such as opium and cannabis, and cites Piero Camporessi’s book *Bread of Dreams*, wherein he writes about the consumption of *Pane allopiato* or “opiated bread” among the lower classes. Camporessi theorizes that this was a bread impregnated with opium, cannabis, or other, more indigenous psychotropic herbs such as Henbane or Ergot. The bread was manufactured and distributed by the ruling class in order to “lessen the pangs of hunger or limit turmoil in the streets”. A regular consumption of intoxicants on a daily basis contributed to a massive brain fog among a large part of the population, and as a result, the citizens of these growing major cities were effectively unaware of the oppression that surrounded them. Both Cowan and Camporessi see this “forced medication” as a social control mechanism, whereby the societal elites were exploring and introducing exotic substances to help people cope with the pains of oppression. Public discourse at this time was unorganized, with impromptu meetings held in taverns and the streets, and revolutionary ideas never

got a chance to strengthen through the intoxicated haze that overlaid public awareness.

When coffee first landed in Oxford in 1650, the scholars at the university quickly gravitated to the nearby establishment of a Jewish immigrant named Jacob. In his book, *the Penny Universities*, Aytoun Ellis (1956, 19) writes of “the first coffee house in Christendom, *The Angel* in the parish of St Peter in the East”. Jacob had established a coffee house in the parish near the university, where he served a bitter exotic drink, that he had imported himself from Turkey. The Angel is widely accepted as the first coffee house in England, and its proximity to Oxford University ensured that there was a steady stream of scholars that would frequent the shop. The scholarly interest in coffee would coincide with a growing interest in “Oriental Studies” at Oxford, and would further help to promote foreign trade along with the importation and distribution of coffee. It was not long, as Cowan (2011, 25) writes, before coffee was brought to London. In 1652, London’s first coffee house was opened in St. Michael’s Alley, and in a short time, London’s “national English virtuoso” community began to grow interested in and investigate the strange, bitter drink. The interest of scholars and virtuosi would provide the framework for the enlightened atmosphere

of English coffee house culture. It would not be long before many more coffee houses would spring up all throughout England. Ellis (1956, 33) notes that by 1739, there were over 550 coffee houses in London alone. This large number of intellectual hubs would provide a grassroots foundation that would allow for revolutionary thought and action in the years to come.

Coffee as a Motivating and Radicalizing Drink

Coffee has a long history of rousing excitement and change in the lives of its users. The origins of the discovery of coffee are often disputed, with the majority of origin stories centering around Yemen or Ethiopia (both countries take national pride in claiming the discovery of the drink). There are many myths and legends associated with the plant, and Islamic tradition tells of the Prophet Mohammed receiving coffee from the archangel Gabriel, in order to revive him when he was weary on his travels. Perhaps the most interesting and vivid depiction of coffee's origin is that of the dancing goats of Yemen (or Ethiopia). There are different versions of the story, but the version recounted by Ellis (1956, 3) tells how, in the 11th century, a remote mosque in Yemen called Shehodet employed a goatherd to tend the flock of goats that

provided the mosque with milk, meat, and hide. These goats were prone to wandering during the day, and would return to the mosque at dusk to sleep. The goatherd, being familiar with his flock, was surprised one evening when the goats did not sleep, but stayed up all night “dancing and jumping about, as frisky as colts”. This happened for a number of nights, and the goatherd went to the Imam of the mosque with his observations of the animals’ strange behavior. The Imam went to investigate where the goats were grazing, and discovered the goats eating the berries of small shrubs, which he noted grew in neat rows “as if planted by the hands of men”. He did not recognize the plant as native to his land, and wondered if they had been planted during a previous Ethiopian invasion. After returning to the mosque and subjecting the berries to many experiments, finally discovered that burning and grinding the seeds, and extracting them in hot water yielded a bitter, black “liquor” with an intoxicating aroma and stimulating effect. Soon after, the Imam began to distribute coffee to the mosque’s devotees while rousing them for their midnight prayer. Coffee soon became popular throughout Yemen, and would move swiftly north, to the Levant, and then to Turkey. From the markets of Turkey, coffee would then travel to England and the rest of the world.

The introduction of coffee to the middle-east saw its fair share of problems from authority. In Mecca, it was claimed that consumption of coffee increased aggressiveness and made men quarrelsome, as well as diverting attention from the importance of prayer. Ellis (1956, 8) writes that coffee houses were outlawed in Mecca in 1511, out of fear that they might unify political opposition. The ruling was withdrawn after a short period, when it was realized that people were then gathering in private residences to consume the drink, and socialize, thus increasing their oppositional power. Coffee quickly became a national staple in the middle east, and was used widely as a social drink and medicine.

The medicinal properties of coffee would be integral to its successful introduction to Western European markets. Cowan (2011, 25) states that until the opening of The Angel in 1650, coffee was difficult to find in England, and was sought after mostly for its medicinal qualities, which were thought to be many. As Western culture became more familiar with the plant, more and more uses and benefits were discovered. Coffee was originally thought to be in the same family as opiates, as Cowan (2011, 21) notes, this was written by Sir Francis Bacon in his *Historia Vitae et Mortis* in 1638. However, after coffee had become a staple at Oxford, a doctor by the name of Thomas Willis began

to experiment with its medicinal potentials. Cowan (2011, 25) tells us that Willis' experiments and personal observations led him to identify coffee with sobriety rather than intoxication. Willis declared coffee "highly efficacious for the driving away the Narcosis and stupefyingness", and claimed that he would rather send some patients first to a coffee house than an apothecary. It was not long before coffee had moved out of the elite zone of scholarly interest and into the larger English marketplace, where it was sold as a cure for many different ailments including headaches, consumption, coughs, dropsy, gout, scurvy, and even miscarriages. Coffee's popularity in English urban centers would coincide with the emergence of the middle class, and the sharpening of public opinion.

The thriving English trade economies and the increasing economic power of retail markets would eventually allow for the emergence of a new social "middle" class in English life. This emerging social class would embrace the culture of coffee houses and help to solidify the importance of public opinion in European countries. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991, 27-34) discusses how coffee houses allowed places for public discussion on matters of city life and

politics among the growing “bourgeoisie”, and thus contributed greatly to the emergence of the public sphere. Habermas defines the public sphere as “the sphere of public people come together as private”. New opportunities for wealth-creation allowed private individuals to acquire financial capital and social status that was unrelated to inheritance or land ownership. Matters that were once discussed privately (or not discussed at all), were elected to be shared in a public forum for the sake of unified cultural and political literacy. Habermas notes that tea, coffee, and drinking chocolate had all become common beverages of this emerging social strata, and coffee houses (often serving chocolate and tea in addition to coffee) became the natural venues for public discussion and elevated argument. Literature was often discussed, and critical debate of literary works eventually began to include economic and political issues, as well. A basic tenet of coffee house culture was the affordable nature of entry to the coffee house itself. This opened admission to a wider range of the middle and lower class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers, both rich and poor, who may have not previously have been privy to the topics being discussed. The collective opinions of this class of citizens would increase in gravity, and would eventually come to affect matters of state.

The inclusivity of coffee house culture was integral to Habermas' idea of the public sphere, and Habermas (1991, 37) further states that coffee houses "preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether". Social standing, economic power and political influence were all supposedly absent from the coffee house floor, and importance was placed on the argument itself.

More and more citizens continued to frequent coffee houses throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. Alcohol was not permitted in most coffee houses, and the atmosphere of sobriety had profound effects on the quality of discussion. As people moved from spending time in taverns to spending time in coffee houses, the public gaze began to steady, and people began to seek changes within the state. Tom Standage (2007, 165) in his book *A History of the World in Six Glasses*, explores the theory that the development of ideas by intellectuals, scientists and inventors began to thrive within the sober environment of the coffee house walls. Standage theorizes that this widespread sobriety helped to usher in the age of enlightenment throughout Western Europe.

Standage (2007, 166) compares the coffee houses of England to the those of France, where the government's regulation of the printed word was much more heavy-handed. The coffeehouses of England were centers for the free distribution of information, whereas the cafés of Paris had a harder time disseminating controversial information, due to the restrictions placed upon the owners. In Paris, a thriving market developed around hand-written gossip, and these pamphlets were distributed through the networks of cafés. In this way, an underground network of political dissidents and information gatherers began to develop a following that frequented the Paris cafés. Both the English and French coffee house networks would become hotbeds for political dispute, and revolution. French cafés would even come to play a role in the American independence movement.

English rule did not enjoy the power that public opinion had found, and coffee houses were at the center of the English politicians' fears. Cowan (2011, 194) writes that, as early as 1660, London coffee houses were already posing a problem to the English ruling class. Coffee houses were viewed by King Charles II and King James as potentially dangerous centers for subversive activity, and throughout the 17th century, King Charles, King James, and Queen Anne all attempted to

suppress or outlaw coffee houses altogether. Eventually it was realized that there was no way to stop the public debate and discussion that had taken hold among the middle class in Europe, or over seas in North America.

Coffee Houses and the American Revolution

In the North American colonies, the residents were already accustomed to English trends, and it was not long after settlement that coffee, tea and chocolate made their way to American soil. Given the English roots of many of the colonists, tea was the beverage of choice for the majority of the population, but coffee would soon capture the minds of the colonists in a similar way to that of the English citizens.

As economic activity began to increase in the colonies and new generations were born on North American soil, a growing sense of American identity began to emerge. This coincided with the emergence and growth of the public sphere in colonial America. As English rule and taxation became increasingly more oppressive, coffee houses and taverns once more served as meeting places for revolutionaries and separatists.

In New England, the history of coffee houses is closely intertwined with the inns and taverns of the time, and historians generally use the terms interchangeably. In contrast to the English coffee houses, coffee in New England was served alongside wine, ale, and tea in most establishments, and as a result, the North American colonies did not receive the full impact of European coffee house sobriety. These American taverns, however, were still very active places for public discourse and discussion of matters of state.

Coffee house taverns began to open in Boston and New York as early as the 1680s. At that time, tea was preferred by the colonists, but the popularity of coffee would rise swiftly throughout the next century, and would see an exponential increase after the Boston Tea Party of 1773. As tea began to symbolize English culture and oppression, the consumption of coffee would become a patriotic duty, and the American coffee house would flourish.

William Ukers (1922, 111), in his book *All About Coffee*, writes extensively about New England's historic coffee houses and taverns. Of particular interest is The Green Dragon Inn, known as "the center of social and political life in Boston for 135 years". Daniel Webster once referred to The Green Dragon as "the headquarters of the revolution",

and it was there that John Adams, Joseph Warren, Paul Revere, and James Otis met to secure freedom for the American colonies. Nearby, on State Street, was a tavern known as The British (changed to The American, as British culture fell out of favor with the colonists), where British loyalists would gather. There were frequent clashes between the patrons of The British and The Green Dragon, and it was one of these encounters where James Otis was famously beaten by a Boston customs collector. The Bunch of Grapes was another Boston tavern where it is said that the declaration of Independence was first read aloud to the public by a delegate from Philadelphia.

It is thought that much of the coffee that was imported to North America was brought by Dutch traders into the ports of New York. As such, there were numerous coffee houses and taverns in New York, which also served as hotbeds for social and political activity. Ukers (1922, 118) also writes of The Exchange coffee house and Merchant's coffee house, two of the most popular places for commerce in mid-18th century New York. The New York Stock Exchange is also said to have had its birth in Merchants coffee house, and during British occupation, The Exchange coffee house served as an auction site, selling the best and most prized ships of the time. As if the British crown had not been

snubbed enough by coffee house culture, it is stated by Standage (2007, 169) that Benjamin Franklin signed the Franco-American alliance in a French café.

Habermas' public sphere would be present in the colonial taverns, just as it had been in the English coffee houses and French cafés. The efficacy of public discourse and dissent would be greater among the colonists, as America's isolation from England and the English military made for a relatively weak political rule. Coffee house culture would come to permeate much of the American social fabric for centuries to come.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that coffee and coffee houses played a major role in revolutionary thought among North American colonists in the period leading up to the American revolution. The historical nature of coffee as a radicalizing and agitating force would hold true for its long journey into the hearts and minds of the American people. Independence and political dissent were planted along with the first crops in the soil of Colonial America, and the coffee house and tavern

would galvanize public opinion, and would enlighten and motivate the minds of the western world.

Though the public sphere has more recently moved to globally accessible venues such as social media and internet blogs, the consumption of coffee among Americans has been, and will continue to be a formidable motivator in the minds of people through every strata of our society. A concretizing movement back into physical spaces, will help us to move forward as politically and intellectually engaged citizens.

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