

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Brian Cowan. *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xii + 364 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10666-4.

Reviewed by Mark Knights (Department of History, University of Warwick)

Published on H-Albion (August, 2007)

The coffee house has figured prominently in recent accounts of the public sphere and this engaging and interesting book is a timely contribution to the ongoing debate about the novelty and nature of this institution. The book tackles four themes that have generated much interest: the scientific culture of the seventeenth century; the coffee house in relation to the Habermasian public sphere and communicative practices; coffee and the consumer revolution; and gendered spaces. The coffee house, Brian Cowan argues, was the product of the virtuosi, the resort of the bourgeois public, the locale for the consumption of an exotic drug and a forum for male sociability. The book is interested in the intersection between “curiosity, commerce, and civil society” (p. 2) and as such cuts across several historical sub-disciplines to good effect. It surveys the period between 1650, with the establishment of the first coffee house in Oxford in 1650, and the 1720s, when tea overtook coffee sales.

Early chapters of the book explore the crucial role played by virtuosi in stimulating consumer interest in the exoticism of coffee and propagandizing its virtues (both medicinal and social). It is then shown how the coffee house became an intrinsic part of urban life. Coffee’s success, it is suggested, was in part due to its lack of intoxication, and hence to its association with sober and respectable behavior, though it did create considerable anxieties, explored in the last chapters of the book, about fostering vituperative political debate and contention. Cowan suggests that as a commodity coffee was rather slow to take off, but that entrepreneurial conservatism did eventually give way to dynamism, especially as the re-export trade boomed. Indeed, British domestic consumers “figured less and less prominently in this trade over the course of the eighteenth century” (p. 73).

Even so, London coffee houses were successful because they were versatile. They housed cabinets of curiosities, clubs of all descriptions, and picture auctions (the section discussing these is one of the most interesting parts of the book); moreover, they were closely associated with the news culture, which “accounts for the popularity of the institution beyond the virtuoso community after the Restoration” (p. 172). Chapter 7 provides a good chronological account of attempts to “police” the coffeehouses, since the “monarchical state” only “gradually and grudgingly” accepted that they could not be suppressed (p. 194). Even after the revolution of 1689 a politicized public sphere was hardly embraced by the government or even by Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, who attacked the lies, rumors, and foppishness of the coffeehouse. Fears that coffeehouse society was “decidedly uncivil and impolite” (p. 229) were commonplace. Indeed, rather than being seen as a forum for legitimate debate it was often an arena that de-legitimized partisan views. Thus the aim of coffee houses was not “to prepare the ground for an age of democratic revolutions; it was to make the cultural politics of Augustan Britain safe for an elitist Whig oligarchy” (p. 256), and Whig politeness “was a form of policing just as stringent and just as socially exclusive, as Tory persecution” (p. 238). This exclusivity extended to women, for Cowan argues that “there is no evidence of any woman actually taking part in a coffee house debate,” which were “simply no place for a lady” (p. 246). He admits that there are a few instances of genteel women recorded in coffee houses, but usually the women present were servants or proprietors.

Cowan is at pains to emphasize that “coffee and modernity did not emerge in tandem,” and to distance himself from the idea that coffee house politics prefig-

ured the rise of modern liberal democracy. Accordingly, he argues, “later Stuart and early Hanoverian British history badly remains in need of the strong dose of revisionist debate that radically transformed studies of the early Stuart era” (p. 262). Claiming to emphasize the “traditional” as much as the modern, this book nevertheless also aspires to contribute to a “‘post-revisionist history’ of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (pp. 3, 262) by steering a middle course between a reluctance to acknowledge change and a whiggish over-enthusiasm for it. Thus the coffee house is depicted as fitfully accepted rather than inevitable; as forged by the virtuosos not merely as the backdrop against which they performed; as not inevitably hostile to existing authority; and as ambiguous in its politeness, castigated as much as embraced.

Yet the nature of this “post-revisionism” is not always clearly outlined and there is some ambiguity in Cowan’s position. Thus part 3 opens with the statement that the “coffee house was a different sort of place than other public houses in early modern England.... It was a novel institution. As such it was treated differently” (p. 147). But three pages later Cowan castigates the accounts of others which have “a whiggish tendency to explain the rise of the coffee house in terms of the ways in which it was new” (p. 150) and thirty pages further on states that, in terms of public hospitality, “a well-equipped coffeehouse was little different from a tavern” (p. 181) and that some “were hardly distinguishable from inns” (p. 184). Placing the coffee house in a wider history of taverns and inns, and other places of sociable discourse, might indeed have been useful, for it might have allowed him to engage with the question of how far (if at all) the ideal of the coffee house’s “civil society” differed from the civic ideal that was intrinsic to notions of provincial urban self-

governance and how far coffee houses’ clientele spoke and acted differently to their alehouse brethren. Is the key difference that the coffee house widened the scope of debate, breaking urban magistrate’s conventions of secrecy and public discussion, or that the nature of debate was different?

Further contextualization might have added depth in other respects. Cowan argues that Britain was “exceptionally receptive” to the introduction of coffee consumption (p. 30), but some European or Atlantic comparisons might have been helpful to reinforce this assertion and to investigate the colonial implications of consumer behavior. Even within the British focus, the book is almost exclusively concerned with London. Whilst it is true that “it is only within this metropolitan context that we may fully understand the social and political significance of the English coffee house” (p. 153), the proliferation of coffee houses in provincial towns is scarcely explored and then only to shed light on “the metropolitan ideal.” It would be very interesting to know more about the provincial perspective, even if this meant going beyond 1720. Indeed, a further advantage of breaking the 1720 end-point would be that it would enable a comparison between coffee and tea along Cowan’s own lines of gender, commerce, science, and exoticism.

Yet, despite these criticisms (and one might add that it is a pity that footnotes appear only at the end of paragraphs, making it difficult to unravel them), this is a very welcome first book, one that students and researchers alike will find of great use to help them understand an important institution that is important for several current historiographical debates. It is very well illustrated and nicely produced—it should, like its subject, stimulate the reader.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Mark Knights. Review of Cowan, Brian, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13525>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.