Social Distinction in the Coffeehouse[1]

by Helen Sneha Jambunathan

Helen Sneha Jambunathan completed a BA in Writing and International Studies at Monash University Malaysia, graduating with an Honours degree in 2014. Her thesis was on third-wave café culture in Kuala Lumpur. She worked as a sessional tutor and research assistant in the same institution, and is currently pursuing a Masters in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, hoping to further study the cultural economy and the politics of everyday consumption.

The recent rise of third-wave coffee culture represents a worldwide change in the perception of the commonplace commodity of coffee — an everyday beverage, and also part of a thriving, grinding, billion-dollar global industry. Given how coffee effortlessly spans the mundane and the massive, the advent of the third-wave (involving specialty coffees, artisanal brewing, single-origins, and the like) will have long-lasting implications both within and beyond the coffee trade.

While much can be said about the various permutations and transformations that coffee beans undergo, they're all usually set to arrive at one destination: a cup. At least one end of the coffee chain is held down by everyday consumption practices, and, whether or not we realise it, these are much more loaded with social significance than is immediately apparent. Paying attention to the sites and politics of coffee consumption illuminates just how inflected with meaning these ordinary processes can be. This article reviews some of the existing scholarly literature relating to coffeehouses and social distinction. It begins with the literature on coffee itself as a vehicle of consuming difference, and then goes on to look at studies of the relationship between coffeehouses and social distinction. Taking a historical view by drawing on work that has already been produced, it aims to highlight the rich, if unexpected, intersection between coffee, cafés, and the micropolitics of everyday urban lifestyles.

Coffee and the Consumption of Difference

Cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai conceptualised commodities as bearers of social value in his 1986 book, *The Social Life of Things*, and indeed, a significant amount of research exists approaching coffee as a carrier of meanings. The multiplicity of meanings attached to coffee have even led to it being dubbed "the beverage of postmodernism" by anthropologist William Roseberry (1996, p. 770). Consuming coffee also entails consuming the varied meanings it carries. For example, previous work has shown that coffee consumption has racialised and gendered power dimensions (Myers et al., 2010; Rozin & Cines, 1982).[2,3] Much of the research on coffee and consuming difference has centred around the consumption of cultural difference, or Otherness, through coffee. An exemplary study in this regard is Charlene Elliott's (2001) unpacking of Starbucks' discursive marketing strategies. Elliott argues that Starbucks sells the symbolic consumption of difference through coffees from various geographical locations and markets "a place in a cup" (2001, p. 376). She coins the phrase "caffeinated cartography" to describe how Starbucks homogenises the global East and South to "relocate" the world's coffees into a Western perspective, to make them palatable to consumers there (2001, pp. 374–376). This practice relies on Orientalist discourse, as Starbucks appropriates world geography for marketing purposes, attaching reductionistic stereotypes to various cultures in order to facilitate the consumption of their coffee as an exotic symbol of the global. Elliott's work clearly demonstrates how coffee operates as a conduit to consuming

---

[1] Excerpts of this piece are adapted from a chapter in a forthcoming book.
[2] Researchers Myers, Bellows, Fakhoury, Hale, Hall and Ofman (2010) provided evidence to show that female customers in Boston cafés "wait an average of 20 seconds longer for their orders than do male customers", concluding that this was due to gendered discrimination (p. 1761).
[3] Rozin and Cines' (1982) study on the ethnicised dimensions of coffee consumption in Philadelphia clearly showed "ethnic specific patterns of response" (p. 79) relating to coffee preferences from White European, African-American, Italian, and Jewish respondents.

difference in the form of another culture. More recently, Sonia Bookman's (2013a) research in Canada has shown how certain coffee brands, through accentuation of the geographical origins of various coffees, provide opportunities for customers to consume other cultures and places. She observes:

> Invited to explore the 'world of coffee' and literally taste the differences in origin, consumers are afforded the possibility of expressing cosmopolitan openness by engaging with cultural diversity as constituted via the medium of coffee. Taking up such opportunities, some consumers discussed how they felt connected with various cultures and places around the world through virtual travel and taste (Bookman, 2013a, p. 62).

Drawing on Elliott's notion of "caffeinated cartographies", Bookman suggests that brands invoke "taste geographies" and virtual experiences of cultural diversity which are then negotiated by consumers — either taken up or subject to critique (2013a, pp. 62–63). This aspect of her study forms a valuable complement to Elliott's work by taking into account consumer interpretations and active meaning-making processes surrounding the potential consumption of difference through coffee.

Consuming difference through coffee can also extend into the context of tourism. In *Common Grounds of Coffee and Tourism* (2010), author Lee Jolliffe discusses how coffee and cafés can be experienced through travel, which is in itself a pursuit of different experiences. In part, the intersection of coffee and tourism occurs when travellers "come into contact with a beverage that is familiar [coffee], yet through its different cultural and hospitality contexts provides a distinctive experience" (Jolliffe, 2010, p. 9). To be sure, this is part of the larger frame of culinary tourism. Visiting cafés, drinking coffee, observing and participating in coffee rituals (the production and consumption of coffee), and performing tourist activities relating to coffee (such as visiting coffee farms or museums) are all ways in which tourists may consume new and different cultural experiences through coffee.

Currently, a number of studies based in Asia revolve around coffee-drinking and café patronage as gateways to the symbolic consumption of the West. Helena Grinshpun (2013) observes that on the coffee scene in Japan "the Euro-American culture emerges as a consumed artifact" (p. 3). Similarly, Maguire and Hu (2013) suggest that Chinese consumers use Starbucks "as a glocal bridge, to experience a Western way of life" (p. 670). In Taiwan, a traditionally tea-drinking nation, coffee is associated with modernity and luxury and cafés facilitate the experience of a Western lifestyle (Shih & Chang, 2010). Other researchers working on Taiwan have looked at the relationship between what they termed "Western culture adoration" and the consumption of coffee from Starbucks (Su, Chiou, & Chang, 2006, p. 177). Using a cultural psychology approach, they investigated consumers' perceived value of Starbucks coffee, concluding that "Western culture adoration" does in fact greatly influence Taiwanese consumers' perceptions of coffee quality — consumers reported feeling attracted to Starbucks due to the opportunities to experience Western drink and culture there (Su, Chiou, & Chang, 2006, p. 185). These studies are useful toward carrying out similar research in Southeast Asian contexts, as they illuminate another contemporary aspect of the politics of the consumption of difference — in this case, the glamorisation of Western culture through coffee-drinking.

Distinction in the Coffeehouse

Coffeehouses and status politics have a long and complex association. Jurgen Habermas (1991) famously attributed the birth of the public sphere to the lively debates held in the status-leveling coffeehouses of 18th century Europe (p. 36).[4] However, his conception of the coffeehouse as an egalitarian, equalising space has since been debunked by other scholars (eg Laurier & Philo, 2007) who expose it to be an idealistic view, showing that the Habermasian coffeehouse was in fact more elitist and less accessible than he allowed for. Furthermore, women were unwelcome in coffeehouses of the time (Clery, 1991), thus making them spaces exclusive of not only certain classes, but entire genders. In a similar vein, on the world's first coffeehouses in the 16th century Muslim world, historian Ralph Hattox (1988) has argued that:

> From the assumption that all classes went to coffeehouses it does not of necessity follow that all classes went to the same coffeehouse, or that the coffeehouse was in any way a place where social betters and inferiors mingled, where urbanites from different quarters associated (p. 94).

Here is evidence, then, that social distinctions and coffeehouse patronage have a long and intimate history — one that has continued into recent times. Inseparable from this is the role of consumption in transmitting social messages. Roseberry was one of the earliest to make the link between the niche specialty coffee market and class connotations, stating that

---

[4] This view of the coffeehouse as a status-leveler was one shared by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989), who conceptualised them as "third places", sites of "informal public life" (p. ix) distinct from, but complementary to, the first places and second places of home and work respectively. Oldenburg describes them as communal places "not confined to status distinctions" (1989, p. 24).

young, privileged urbanites used consumption of these as markers of distinction (1996, p. 773). He also foresaw and addressed the third-wave boom:

> Gourmet coffees can be standardized, and their processes of production and marketing concentrated, but it is unlikely that these coffees will ever become truly mass-market coffees. Their continued success will depend upon the processes of social and cultural differentiation they mark, even as the social locations of groups of consumers are blurred (Roseberry, 1996, p. 774).

From the vantage point of the present, Roseberry was remarkably far-sighted. He was, however, writing when Starbucks was, if not quite in its infancy, not yet a global player of its present magnitude.[5] With the global mass availability of increasingly complex coffee beverages, the capacity of the third-wave to fuel social distinction has multiplied. It facilitates consumer practices of differentiation through the use of strategies such as consuming "in a manner that disguises the mass market" and seeking "authentic" goods (Holt, 1998, p. 21), or even through expressing dislike (Bryson, 1996) for the trendy and mass-produced. Sociologist Douglas Holt's (1998) work on cultural capital and consumption is relevant here: updating Pierre Bourdieu's (1984b) work on social distinction in an American context, Holt suggests that contemporary understandings of class and consumption "focus on consumption practices rather than consumption objects and on mass rather than high culture" (1998, p. 1). This entails a new emphasis on embodied forms of cultural capital (taste, behaviour) among consumers (Holt, 1998, p. 5). His approach was adopted by Sonia Bookman, who showed how specialty coffee brands in Canada "are not only markers but also makers of class distinction" (2013b, p. 406) among consumers, selling the promise of "distinctive experiences around coffee consumption" and thus no longer marketing solely based on coffee's attributes as a good (2013b, p. 411).

In Asia, practices of distinction surrounding coffee and cafés once again take on a slant along the East-West binary. As discussed in the previous section on the consumption of difference, various permutations of the association of 'Western' culture with desirability influence café patronage across the continent. This also becomes a form of status advancement — consuming the West itself becomes a source of capital and the Westernised nature of many contemporary coffeehouses a point around which to display social distinction. For example, Grinshpun's (2013) work on Japan's coffee culture suggests that "mastery of the [Westernized] coffee-related lingo and its implementation... translate[s] into cultural capital", requiring a kind of code-switching between local and Western elements (p. 14). Maguire and Hu's (2013) research in China shows that consumers utilise Starbucks coffee consumption as an exclusive status marker (p. 676), and the same held true in the study of "Western culture adoration" among consumers in Taiwan (Su, Chiou, & Chang, 2006, p. 185). Additionally, in Singapore, the emerging hipster culture in the gentrifying district of Tiong Bahru partially revolves around "cultural experimentation" with Western elements in local settings, which contributes to its desirable distinctiveness (Chua, Tan, & Tan, 2014, pp. 2–3).

A New Blend

In Southeast Asia, where middle-class spending power seems ever on the rise, similar dynamics as discussed in the foregoing sections are at play. Consumption is increasingly a medium around which social distinctions are communicated and contested, and the mushrooming of designer cafés in Kuala Lumpur over the last five to eight years makes them a rich site for future inquiry along these lines, especially given the relative newness of the third-wave movement. The everyday purchasing of coffee remains an ideal conduit through which to observe the politics of social distinction in public consumption spaces, and even if not — it's still something worth mulling over while sipping your next cup.

References

Bookman, S. (2013a). Branded cosmopolitanisms: 'Global' coffee brands and the co-creation of 'cosmopolitan cool'. *Cultural Sociology*, 7(1), 56–72. doi:10.1177/1749975512453544

Bookman, S. (2013b). Coffee brands, class and culture in a Canadian city. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(4), 405–423. doi:10.1177/1367549413484298

Bryson, B. (1996). 'Anything but Heavy Metal': Symbolic exclusion and musical dislikes. *American Sociological Review*, 61(5), 884–899. Retrieved from http://www.asanet.org/journals/asr/american_sociological_review.cfm

Chua, J. Y., Tan, S. J. H., & Tan, S. Y. (2014). *The rise of 'hipster' culture in Singapore: Spatial transformation in Tiong Bahru*. Paper presented at Encountering Urban Diversity in Asia: Class and Other Intersections, 15–16 May 2014, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

---

[5] When Roseberry's article was published in December 1996, Starbucks had just opened its first overseas international store in Tokyo in August of that year.

Clery, E. J. (1991). Women, publicity and the coffee-house myth. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2(2), 168–177. doi:10.1080/09574049108578077

Elliott, C. (2001). Consuming caffeine: The discourse of Starbucks and coffee. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 4(4), 369–382. doi:10.1080/10253866.2001.9670363

Grinshpun, H. (2013). Deconstructing a global commodity: Coffee, culture, and consumption in Japan. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1–22. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1469540513488405

Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Hattox, R. S. (1988). *Coffee and coffeehouses: The origins of a social beverage in the medieval Near East*. Seattle/London: University of Washington Press.

Holt, D. B. (1998). Does cultural capital structure American consumption? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25(1), 1–25. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/209523

Jolliffe, L. (2010). Common grounds of coffee and tourism. In L. Joliffe (Ed.), *Coffee culture, destinations and tourism* (pp. 3–22). Bristol: Channel View Publications.

Laurier, E., & Philo, E. (2007). 'A parcel of muddling muckworms': Revisiting Habermas and the English coffee-houses. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 8(2), 259–281. doi:10.1080/14649360701360212

Maguire, J. S., & Hu, D. (2013). Not a simple coffee shop: Local, global and glocal dimensions of the consumption of Starbucks in China. *Social Identities*, 19(5), 670–684. doi:10.1080/13504630.2013.835509

Myers, C., Bellows, M., Fakhoury, H., Hale, D., Hall, A., & Ofman, K. (2010). Ladies first? A field study of discrimination in coffee shops. *Applied Economics*, 42(14), 1761–1769. doi:10.1080/00036840701721687

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place* (3rd ed.). Massachusetts: Da Capo Press.

Roseberry, W. (1996). The rise of yuppie coffees and the reimagination of class in the United States. *American Anthropologist*, 98(4), 762–775. doi:10.1525/aa.1996.98.4.02a00070

Rozin, P., & Cines, B. M. (1982). Ethnic differences in coffee use and attitudes to coffee. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 12(2), 79–88. doi:10.1080/03670244.1982.9990699

Shih, Y., & Chang, C. (2010). The sweet and the bitter of drips: Modernity, postcoloniality, and coffee culture in Taiwan. *Cultural Studies*, 10(6), 445–456. doi:10.1177/1532708610372766

Su, A. Y., Chiou, W., & Chang, M. (2006). The impact of Western culture adoration on the coffee consumption of Taiwan: A case study of Starbucks. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 11(2), 177–187. doi:10.1080/10941660600727590