CHAPTER 7

Society and the Social Life of the Coffeehouse

The fuss over individual and collective activities in the coffeehouse allows us to take in two levels of society at once. On the surface, we have a glimpse of coffeehouse society proper. Our attention is directed toward what went on and why, how the patrons amused themselves and were amused by others, and who associated with whom. What is, in addition, unintentionally revealed is an image of society as a whole, of how those who participated in the dispute over coffee viewed both the ideal and real rôle of man in his community and the world. When a society (or those who claim to be the moral spokesmen of that society) perceives something as objectionable, it tells us almost as much about itself as it does about the object of its displeasure. We can learn much of its expectations, its norms, and its social values. If we can get some idea of just what values were thought to be jeopardized by the coffeehouse, it is then possible to determine what aspects of urban social life the ultimate success of the coffeehouse affected, and how some of those things that were initially the very targets of criticism came in time to be accepted norms: how, in short, the society may have been in some small way forever changed by the new institution.

PATRONS

Our sources have much to say concerning who exactly went to the coffeehouse, but on some points they are mutually contradictory. Lane, discussing the coffeehouses of Cairo in the nineteenth century, was of the opinion that those who frequented the places were almost exclusively from "the lower orders." Alexander Russell makes a similar observation concerning Aleppo in the eighteenth century, dismissing those he saw in the places as "vulgar." Other authors, however, are almost unanimous in portraying coffeehouses as magnets for a much broader spectrum of society. Kâtib Çelebi depicts the behavior of the clientele as far from refined, but nonetheless includes in their number customers from almost every segment of society: "... the people [who went to coffeehouses], from prince to beggar, amused themselves with knifing one another." Dufour, writing about Istanbul, says that all but the "very high" come to the coffeehouse, and D'Ohsson, making a similar exception concerning his eighteenth-century contemporaries, includes among those who flocked to the newly opened coffeehouses in sixteenth-century Istanbul "beys, nobles, officers, teachers, judges and other people of the law."[1] The Venetian bailo, Gianfrancesco Morosini, paints a vivid picture of the coffeehouse patron in 1585:

> All these people are quite base, of low costume and very little industry, such that for the most part they spend their time sunk in idleness. Thus they continually sit about, and for entertainment they are in the habit of drinking, in public, in shops and in the streets—a black liquid, boiling [as hot] as they can stand it, which is extracted from a seed they call Caveè ..., and is said to have the property of keeping a man awake.[2]

Pedro Teixeira reports that in Baghdad "[coffee] is prepared and sold in public houses built to that end; wherein all men who desire it meet to drink it, be they great or

mean."[3] Thévenot is particularly emphatic about the universal appeal of the coffeehouse: "All sorts of people come to these places, without distinction of religion or social position; there is not the slightest bit of shame in entering such a place, and many go there simply to chat with one another."[4] Of course, local custom might have been involved in determining who came to a coffeehouse. Also possible is that by the time Russell and Lane wrote, much of the novelty of the places had worn off in the eyes of the local "beautiful people," leaving it to the less well-to-do as a source of cheap amusement.

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. The degree to which these social barriers were broken down was most likely determined by the location and type of establishment about which we are speaking. Niebuhr mentions some odd, innlike establishments that dotted the Yemeni countryside; with these we need not concern ourselves. They were intended strictly for the itinerant trade, and probably had little to do with the social lives of the locals.[5] On the social rôle of the coffee shop in the villages, there is again little to be said, not because it was not important in the context of the village, but because village life is so infrequently discussed in the mostly urban-oriented historical sources.

Within the main object of our interest, the urban centers, we may assume that the small neighborhood coffee shop was operated exclusively for local traffic, in most cases catering to a relatively homogeneous clientele. The same may obviously be said for the "take-out" coffee stall, which was an integral part of market complexes, and in later times included as part of the general plan for newly

endowed market areas.[6] Such places provided the coffee that doubtless accompanied social activities elsewhere, but were not themselves centers of such activity. The larger, more elaborate coffeehouse obviously was of greater potential as such a place of mingling. Some were situated to serve a particular clientele, such as those near the citadel of Cairo, which got much business from the garrison.[7] Others were in areas of great commercial activity, such as the chaotic Tahtakale neighborhood, the site of the first coffeehouses in Istanbul. In Damascus, there were several large coffeehouses which, judging from their scale and location at the hub of city life, were clearly intended to draw in all those who for any reason were in the central part of the town. One near the Sinānīye mosque, of particularly large dimensions, was simply called "the Grand Café"; near the gate of the citadel was another, with a river passing along one side, and shade trees.[8] If the majority of the thousands of urban coffee shops were of the humble sort, we still must assume that the larger ones in the central portions of the city were intended to attract customers from every quarter who were in that area.[9] One can presume that mixing in such places was not only across quarter lines, but across class lines as well. Even smaller cafés, which appeared in clusters at particularly important crossroads or along popular promenades, might also have served such an end.[10]

Thévenot, however, is probably a bit too sanguine in assuming the coffeehouses to be centers of interconfessional commingling. In Islamic society, the general tolerance for the protected Christian and Jewish minorities came accompanied with the understanding that the minorities were to remain both separate and unequal. The *sharī'a* sets out certain formal disadvantages for the minority communities, erecting clear legal barriers between the believer and the unbeliever that can be breeched by no means except conversion. These walls were made all

the more impenetrable by the all-too-human tendency toward contempt for those outside one's own group. These barriers were exceedingly formidable, and it is highly unlikely that they would break down over a cup, a pipe, and a relaxing game of chess. It is not even certain that any single coffeehouse catered to an ecumenical clientele. One may doubt that any given group would be formally barred, but in a society where the informal rules made it quite clear who belonged where, formalized segregation would be unnecessary. If you did not belong, you would not be comfortable.

In this one respect, at least, the tavern probably had a more heterogeneous clientele than the coffeehouse. The former was perforce run exclusively by non-Muslims, ostensibly for non-Muslims (to serve wine to a Muslim, or even to flaunt this loathsome habit in the sight of Muslims, was in some cases a capital offense). Some Muslims, however, doubtless came to the tavern, and these social misfits must have regularly had to rub shoulders with their confessional inferiors.

The coffeehouse, on the other hand, was essentially a Muslim establishment, in spite of all the conflict and controversy surrounding it. This controversy arose, indeed, because the coffeehouse *was* a particularly Muslim institution, not just some dive developed by and for the protected unbelievers. Connected in its embryonic stages to religious worship (albeit at times of questionable orthodoxy), nurtured, in both pious and unabashedly secular forms, in the holy and exclusively Muslim precincts of the Ḥijāz, and later introduced into Cairo through the portals of the Azhar, the coffeehouse was, in birth and development, a very Muslim institution. It may have indeed been *bid'a*, innovation, but if so, it was one springing from the native soil, indeed the sacred heartland, of Islam, not one introduced from the lands of the unbelievers.[11] Except in those times when it was entirely forbidden by civil authorities, coffee trade was solely the domain of Muslims. They, of course, dominated the caravans or convoys that plied, respectively, the Ḥijāz and the Red Sea. In addition, wholesale trade in coffee was, at least in Cairo, exclusively in their hands.[12] Opening or operating a coffeehouse did not of necessity detract from one's good name in the eyes of the pious, nor did it seem contradictory to one's functions as a member of the religio-legal elite. Some ulema in Cairo, even as early as the late sixteenth century, amassed considerable personal fortunes in coffee speculation; and in the eighteenth century, one can cite the example of at least one professor at the Azhar who owned, among other properties, a coffeehouse.[13] The Egyptian chronicler Isḥāqī (wrote 1623) tells of Ahmet Paşa, governor of Egypt in the late sixteenth century, increasing his prestige among the ulema and poor by funding, among other public works, coffeehouses in Būlāq and the Rashīd quarter.[14] Nor was patronage of a coffeehouse restricted to those whose sole concern was necessarily this world and not the next. Various religious functionaries (particularly men of a relatively high degree of religious learning, as opposed to minor mosque functionaries, a consideration we shall get back to) did not scruple to be seen in the coffeehouses of Istanbul. Moreover, in addition to the other entertainments that we shall discuss further on, there are occasional reports of there being those with some religious content. Niebuhr not only tells of "Mullachs, or poor scholars" entertaining customers with orations and stories, but on at least one occasion, in Aleppo, he saw a man of some wealth and learning who took it upon himself to go around to coffeehouses delivering harangues for the spiritual improvement of the customers.[15]

All this is not to suggest that Christians and Jews did not frequent coffeehouses. On the contrary, if only from the fact that Greeks and Armenians are constantly cited as having done much to introduce coffee drinking to Europe, we know that they were quite familiar with it.[16] But would they have been regular habitués of a coffeehouse with a predominantly Muslim clientele? It is, at best, unlikely. Coffee and the coffeehouse had developed very strong ties to the greater part of Muslim society. It was not necessarily considered a shameful business, work fit only for *dhimmī*s, to be involved in trafficking in coffee, either on a wholesale or retail level. In addition, the coffeehouse became curiously bound, if only indirectly, to the daily ebb and flow of the religious life of the Muslim community: its particular popularity on nights of Ramaḍān suggests its gradual inclusion in the set of socio-religious habits connected with that season when religious duties regulated the pace of life. In brief, Muslim society had taken it as its own institution, one in which the participation of non-Muslims was not essential and in which, in certain circumstances, their presence might be considered offensive. We must assume that the general tendency in the society toward religious separation applied to the coffeehouse as well.

ACTIVITIES AND ENTERTAINMENTS

Ibrāhīm Peçevi, in his chapter on the introduction of coffee to Istanbul, tells of how those who would formerly have spent large sums giving dinners at home for their friends could, with the coming of the coffeehouse, entertain for only a few coins.[17] The novelty of such activity was obviously quite striking in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and there is an implied revolution in the way people perceived of how things were to be done. The proffering of

hospitality was no longer something that could be undertaken solely in one's home. No longer was a host necessarily surrounded by possessions, wife, children, slaves, and all the trappings and symbols of proprietorship that had always been present when one was extending to the guest the full resources of his household. The act of hospitality could now be transferred to a public place where one's responsibilities, and perhaps prestige, as host were more limited. This would imply a subtle shift in the relationship of host and guest, and a break, if only symbolic, with old values. There, in the coffeehouse, one could play host for relatively little outlay, and the "sport" seeking a reputation for magnanimity could, for a trifling sum, even show his generosity to those who were not originally members of his party:

> When someone is in a coffeehouse, and he sees people whom he knows come in, if he is in the least ways civil, he will tell the proprietor not to take any money from them. All this is done by a single word, for when they are served with their coffee, he merely cries "giaba" [Turkish: *caba*], that is to say, "Gratis! "[18]

Such substitute hospitality must have seemed, to some, a rather sham and ridiculous way for the tightwad to flaunt his generosity. An Ottoman visitor to Cairo at the end of the sixteenth century wrote:

> When *jundis* [soldiers] go, for instance, in a coffeehouse and there have to get change for a gold coin, they will definitely spend it all. They regard it as improper to put the change in their pocket and leave. In other words, this is their manner of showing their grandiosity to the common people. But their grand patronage consists of treating each other to a cup of coffee, of impressing their friends with one [cup] of something four cups of which costs one *para*.[19]

Whether the advent of the coffeehouse meant the demise of the dinner party or not, it certainly does seem, in this period, to have become something of the center of such

social contact among males as had to do with neither business nor religion.[20] Later we shall explore more deeply the long-term social implications of this fact, but here it is appropriate first to describe the nature and quality of social activities in the coffeehouse.

Conversation

Aside from the more formal pastimes and diversions that will be discussed below, the coffeehouse was above all a place for talk: serious or trivial, high-minded or base, that place more than any other seemed to lend itself to the art of conversation. Amid the relaxing surroundings and atmosphere of leisure afforded by the grand metropolitan coffeehouse, caffeine-stimulated talk thrived, perhaps even more than it did on the mats and carpets of the mosque. Quite often the talk was of the light, frivolous kind, the work of the coffeehouse wit hauling out the often-told tale for the consumption of new listeners. Dufour tells us that men would divert themselves with vague conversations "about nothing in particular, or with humorous tales." The Elizabethan clergyman, William Biddulph, reports mainly "idle and Alehouse talke" in the coffeehouses of Aleppo.[21] Such harmless banter was probably not, on the whole, considered particularly impious. Some of those more rigid in their views of how people ought to spend their time, however, did find in such activities the suggestion of a certain laxity of moral character. Among them, paradoxically, was Jazīrī, who complains of the seriousness of the *dhikr* being replaced in the practice of coffee drinking by jests and the telling of tall tales.[22] The expression of this opinion, however, may have been intended to emphasize the pious applications of the drink and to combat the arguments of those who opposed coffee altogether.

The loose banter of the coffeehouse was sometimes viewed as far from harmless. The patrons of the coffeehouse, it seems, were not immune to the temptation often to disregard the strict letter of the truth when relating stories about others, particularly about women. A writer who was otherwise favorably disposed to coffee was particularly indignant about this aspect of coffeehouse life:

> [Among the abominable practices in coffeehouses is that patrons] will really extend themselves in slander, defamation, and throwing doubt on the reputations of virtuous women. What they come up with are generally the most frightful fabrications, things without a grain of truth in them.[23]

Making false accusations (*qadhf*) about the sexual propriety of a chaste woman (*muḥṣan*) is indeed contrary to the *sharī'a*: it is a corporal offense, punishable with eighty lashes.[24] Otherwise, the habit of telling tales about others is not punishable, but is regarded as distasteful in the extreme.

Coffeehouse conversation was not entirely jejune. Peçevi describes the often intense literary activity among the patrons.[25] As was to happen later in Europe, the coffeehouse became something of a literary forum; poets and writers would submit their latest compositions for the assessment of a critical public. In other corners of the coffeehouse, there might be heated discussions on art, the sciences or literature.[26] Again, there would seem little in such activity to provoke censure, although the secular, worldly subject matter might in itself be enough to leave the participants open to attack.

The introduction of certain other topics for discussion was inevitably to lead to direct attacks from the politically powerful. Public affairs furnished much of the fuel for comment and criticism among coffeehouse patrons.[27] In place of newspapers or public forums, the coffeehouse quickly became the place of exchange of information, where news of the palace or Porte was spread by word of mouth. Per-

haps, in those places where men of some position were to be found, the ancient and revered institution of the news "leak" was not unknown. One wishing to hear the latest news—or, more likely, the freshest rumors—needed only to station himself in the coffeehouse for a short time. "Young idlers," says D'Ohsson, "spend whole hours in them, smoking, playing draughts or chess and discussing affairs of the day."[28]

A forum for the public ventilation of news, views, and grievances concerning the state possessed the potential for becoming a political "clubhouse" from which concerted action might be taken by those with a common distaste for the regime. As such, it could not help but appear a bit suspicious to those in authority. In fact, there is much to suggest that often the patrons were not merely proponents of free speech, but were more the type for whom words alone would not suffice. More than one coup d'état has been launched from, or at least plotted in, a coffeehouse. D'Ohsson attributes the most energetic and complete closing of coffeehouses in Istanbul to just such a problem. By the time of the sultanate of Murat IV (1623–40), coffeehouses had become "meeting places of the people, and of mutinous soldiers."[29] Murat was neither the sort of man to risk the same fate Osman II (r. 1618–22) had suffered a decade earlier, nor the sort of man to take half-measures when he chose to deal with a problem.[30] In 1633, on the pretext of preventing the disastrous fires that sometimes got started in coffeehouses, he ordered them torn down, and coffee, as well as tobacco and opium, banned. Several decades later, coffeehouses in Istanbul were still closed, "desolate as the heart of the ignorant," though they were to reopen in the last quarter of the century.[31]

In dealing with the problem of sedition in the coffeehouse, not all governments employed such heavy-handed

methods. With a bit of applied creativity some even found that they could turn the situation to their own advantage. In the nineteenth century, Muḥammad 'Alī's government had a rather sophisticated way of dealing with factious elements in Cairene coffeehouses. Realizing that such public forums for loose talk could easily be exploited, police spies were often planted in coffeehouses to gather information to which the government otherwise might not have been privy until the mischief of the seditious had been effected.[32]

Gaming

As early as the Meccan incident reported by Jazīrī, games, as well as talk, were a vital part of coffeehouse life: "People gather in the places where [coffee] is sold and play chess and *manqala* and other [games] for stakes."[33] It is hardly surprising that such diversions were seen in the earliest coffeehouses, since it would seem that they were among features adopted from the tavern.[34] Chess became quite popular in the coffeehouses in Turkey.[35] Backgammon (*nard*), which was already known, must have quickly become a favorite: it is perhaps to this that D'Ohsson refers when he speaks of the Turks playing "draughts," although we cannot rule out the possibility of some other game. It is unclear whether card games, so often seen in the modern coffeehouse, were in use in early times. They are not mentioned in early sources, and it is possible that they were introduced later from Europe, although some evidence exists for their use in this and earlier centuries.[36]

There is some doubt as well concerning the prevalence of gambling connected with these games. On one level, there is no mention of hard-core dicing games. Chess, however, was played at times for stakes,[37] and Jazīrī's description, or rather that of the official report concerning the 1511 incident in Mecca, would lead one to believe that gambling was something of the rule in coffeehouses in the