

Sipping Culture: Coffee and Public Space in Japan and in Israel

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Coffee is a global commodity with a high market value¹ and a unique historical background, through which entire national histories can be traced. However, one of the most fascinating aspects of coffee is the space in which it has been consumed for centuries – the coffee shop. The history of coffee-drinking, from the street stalls of Istanbul to the latest ultra-modern cafés, has established a strong link between coffee shops and the public sphere. Since the 16th century, coffee shops have been functioning as social institutions, offering their patrons not only the caffeinated beverage but also an accessible space and opportunities for exercising sociability and asserting cultural identities.

The role of coffee shops in shaping the European urban public space² was determined, among other things, by their ability to translate novel social and cultural experiences into an everyday reality, nonetheless leaving a sufficient space for ritual and fantasy. For a social scientist, therefore, coffee shops represent public sites which accommodate several important practices, such as exercising individual and communal rituals, enacting cultural fantasies, demarking social boundaries, and developing cultural tastes. As rituals, fantasies, boundaries, and tastes vary considerably across cultures, examining coffee shops in different cultural settings can shed light on the broader social and cultural processes. In other words, the way people drink coffee reflects distinctive features of the local milieu.

The grounds for drawing a comparison between Israel and Japan in this context can be summarized in a number of points. To begin with, both in Israel and Japan coffee occupies a significant niche in import volume and everyday consumption. In both countries the coffee culture took its shape during the same turbulent period in the beginning of the 20th century, when Japan was becoming a modern state, and the land of Israel was becoming a destination for groups who set the base for the modern Israeli state. Furthermore, both countries'

cultural milieus and lifestyles were shaped in the process of extensive cultural borrowing and indigenizing. Lastly, the two countries' highly urbanized landscapes have produced a similar spatial need in the so-called "third places", i.e. neutral public spaces which are neither home nor work. The cafés, with their legacy of "ideal public spaces" (Habermas 1962), played an essential role in these transformations.

Coffee shops in Japan: from symbols of modernity to "third places"

Coffee shops in early modern Japanese history served as symbols of modernity and channels of Westernization. The first cafés were established during the Meiji period, and drew inspiration directly from their European counterparts. The coffee shops provided a channel through which new (for the most part, Western) ideas, styles and trends entered Japan, providing a figurative "window on the world" (Richie, quoted in White 2012). For many Japanese contemporaries, the café was not merely *one* symbol, but in fact *the* symbol of modernity, as it symbolized the spirit of liberation and as such ranked in significance with the establishment of the Diet. It was claimed that the coffee shops were even more significant than the Diet - while the Diet represented the enlightenment of the older generations, the café represented the future (Tipton 2000).

The space offered by the coffee shops was a novel kind of space, which invited new modes of sociability. The clientele of the early Japanese cafés were mostly urban artists and intellectuals. Sitting at tables, sipping coffee and tasting Western dishes from Western tableware served by waitresses wearing white aprons, they could engage in rituals associated with the new modern-cum-Western lifestyle. The first cafes opened in the fashionable Ginza district, which since its reconstruction in Meiji had been closely associated with modernity and Westernization.

The cafés kept on changing in a response to the changing urban life. Rapid urbanization and the consequent influx of workforce into the cities produced a demand for urban recreation sites for laborers, and a demand for working places for their wives and daughters. The cafés provided both, expanding their clientele and diversifying their styles. These spaces appealed to the growing new urban middle class, as they were an affordable way to participate in the modern life, increasingly influenced by American models of leisure and entertainment (Tipton 2002).

Women occupied an important place in this new urban scene as one manifestation of modernity, both as clients and as service providers. The figure

of a café waitress (*jokyū*) represents one of the controversial images of the late Taishō and early Shōwa eras.³ The role of *jokyū* provided the urban working class not only a new occupation, but also relative personal freedom, which working at factories did not allow. During the late 1920s, the waitress service was eroticized, and a certain type of the cafés came to resemble a cabaret more than the classic coffee shop. By the end of the 1920s, the number of *jokyū* leaped (reaching 15,500 in 1929), making them the object of scorn among conservative observers. The café was seen as an environment which undermined public morals; this was the justification for increasing restrictions on cafés and the *jokyū* in the late 1930s (Tipton 2002).

The *jokyū* were the working class' embodiment of the "modern girl", a key ideological construct in Japan's early phases of modern transformation (Silverberg 2006). The café clientele represented the middle class embodiment of this modernity. The coffee shops provided one of the few public settings for "moga" and "mobo", modern girls and boys, to meet and mingle socially – in other words, to display their new social identities. The presence of female patrons in what had previously been almost an exclusively masculine space was another indication of modernity.

The coffee shops served as a backstage space for political and ideological groups. Free-minded intellectuals and activists used them for meetings in the era of growing suppression. Largely associated with American culture, coffee shops became themselves objects of suppression, and by the mid-1930s the political activity was largely abolished. In 1938, the import of coffee stopped, and coffee shops almost disappeared from the national scene until after the war.

Postwar cafés also provided a stage for political debate; in the 1960s they hosted trends as diverse as artistic avant-garde, protests against the Security Treaty, and the sexual revolution. One of the most prominent trends of the post-war era were jazz cafés (*jazu kissa*). The main function of *jazu kissa* was to provide a space for listening to jazz music; the owner functioned as a Guru, introducing customers to the tunes of his choice. Coffee was the least important element in this setting; most evidences state that its quality and taste were rather poor (Derschmidt 1998). Jazz was an American cultural product, and listening to it was a part of a wider trend of fascination with the foreign culture embraced by the younger generation. There was also a close association between free jazz and the student movement of the 1960s. The popularity of the *jazu kissa* peaked in the 1960s and declined during the 1980s, when the young generation discovered other sources of cultural allure.

The jazz cafés exemplify yet another role of the coffee shops – that of education. The cultured space of the Japanese café appears to have been particularly suitable for instilling its patrons with cultural tastes and know-how. In the Meiji era, the cafés taught their clients how to be modern; as tastes diversified, so did the educational functions of the cafés, which encompassed food, music, décor, and, of course, coffee. Despite the diversity and sophistication of contemporary Japanese coffee culture, this role is still relevant. The so-called "coffee masters," representing "an embodiment of the desire for the ultimate coffee experience" (White 2012:66) provide a good example. The master is a café owner who is responsible for every aspect of conceiving, creating and delivering the coffee experience to the customer. Often, his (or, more rarely, her) relationship with the customer resembles a teacher-student scheme, and implies devotion and responsibility on the part of the master, and reverence and reliance on the part of the customer. In exchange to the product of the master's expertise, the customer must be willing to learn his role and adhere to it (White 2012:70). This relationship implies not only mutual trust, but also mutual agreement on the seriousness of the process and its edifying nature.

Today, coffee shops are an integral part of the Japanese urban life, providing experiences which range from an unpretentious "morning service"⁴ (*mōningu sābisu*) to a highly sophisticated and ritualized experience provided by the coffee masters or *jazu kissa* "gurus". The cafés cater to various customers, from *salarymen* sipping black coffee with a cigarette before commuting to work, to fashionable housewives resting from their shopping routine. They offer spaces as diverse as their clientele: from smoky and dim neighborhood *kissa* to ultra-trendy espresso bars; from manga café to *jazu* or *meikyoku* (classical music) *kissa*; from ubiquitous coffee chain stores to Akihabara's "maid café". The diversity of styles of the coffee places corresponds with the diverse needs produced by the local conditions. The cafés help patrons manage their daily schedules, offer a space for demonstrating lifestyle choices, and provide a setting for various consumer groups to exercise their freedoms and resources. Single women, investing in their careers rather than in home-making; young adults, residing with their parents and postponing marriage, and other new consumer groups often adopt cafés as their "third place".

The Japanese coffee shops themselves evolved in response to these circumstances. As a result, some of their styles came to differ from the imported format, while still often preserving the foreign "cultural odor" of the coffee experience. These distinctive creations, along with the variety of the cafés and the

ritualization of the coffee experience, represent the unique features of the Japanese coffee culture.

Coffee shops in Israel: exploring the link between coffee and national imagination

The opening scene of *Altneuland*, the utopian novel by Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, takes place in a coffee shop in Vienna. This choice of location suggests a certain analogy with Herzl's vision of Israel as a society incorporating European cultural habits, among which coffee shops historically occupied an important place. Although not all the fantasies of Herzl were realized, his supposed vision concerning coffee shops was carried out already by the first immigrants to the Holy Land.

Israel's coffee culture is a function of its geography, history, and social diversity. Israel is situated in the region where coffee culture started taking its shape from the sixteenth century onwards.⁵ The first coffee shops on the territory of Israel opened in Jerusalem around the 1500s. The British colonial rule (1917-1947) did not contribute much in terms of coffee (in England, by the nineteenth century coffee as a prevalent social beverage was already replaced by tea); however, the coffee-drinking habits rooted in local Arab and Bedouin tradition were thriving.

The social and cultural role of the Israeli coffee shops as modern urban institutions can be traced to the period prior to the foundation of the state. Already during that era, the cafe started shaping a new type of urban middle-class leisure and sociability. The pre-existing habit of coffee-drinking and novel lifestyles brought by immigrants from Europe, promoted this trend. In the early 1900s, first coffee shops opened in Tel Aviv along with the establishment of the first Jewish neighborhoods. In the 1930s, there were already dozens of coffee shops, mostly along the coastline. "Lucky are you, Tel Aviv" wrote the Israeli poet Avraham Shlonsky in the 1930s, "that everywhere you look, coffee shops beckon" (Naor 2006:33). During the 1930s-40s, the coffee shops hosted literary parties and lectures, and became closely associated with progressive artistic and political circles.

Some of these places became associated also with the hope for the realization of the dream of a new Jewish state. As A.S. Lirick, a journalist visiting in Tel Aviv in the 1930s wrote on one of the most celebrated local coffee shops of the period, Café Rezki: "When I saw Café Rezki, I believed in the future of Tel Aviv" (Naor 2006:30). Another famous Tel Aviv coffee shop was Kassit, which was established in 1944, served as a hub for the Israeli bohemia for several

decades, and was commemorated in poems, movies, songs, and of course photos. Everyone who wanted to be "someone" in Tel Aviv, came to Kassit to either participate or listen to heated debates between the celebrated figures whose names later became synonyms for Israeli culture.⁶

The importance of the cafés can be seen from a petition filed in 1931 by hundreds of customers of a café called "Snow of Lebanon" (*Sheleg Levanon*) to the local authorities. The petition asked to extend the opening hours of the café, complaining that everyone is busy during the day, and can only engage in meetings in the evening. The people claimed that meetings at the café were essential not only for the sake of their social life, but also for their work, as they helped generating creativity and motivation.

In a symbolic sense, the cafés provided two kinds of "glances". The glance backwards sent the viewer to the past homelands. Aharon Appelfeld describes how coffee shops in Jerusalem in the 1950s "retained something of the aromas and manners of the European cafes" and served as "a home away from home" for the immigrants from the European Diaspora (Appelfeld 2005:3). The glance forward corresponded with the hope for the future of the young Israeli state, and the realization of the Zionist dream. Like the Japanese cafés of the early modernization era, the Israeli coffee shops were associated with vibrant and free sociability, political debate, and artistic spirit.

Today, Israel prides itself on having developed a sophisticated palate for coffee. Coffee came to be regarded as a national drink; moreover, it has become a national institution. As such, it is appropriated as a product which is local, "ours." The coffee shop sector is extremely sensitive to consumption fads, constantly introducing new elements and styles. Sometimes sophistication and novelty take the place of the common sense, as happened when the celebrated "Café Kiilu" ("As If Café") opened in 1998 in a fashionable area in Tel Aviv, serving a conceptual nothing in the form of empty cups and plates.

The coffee shops provide their patrons with a framework in which interaction is carried out and informal networks, based on personal tastes and neighborhood affiliations, are created. These places are therefore not necessarily about coffee, but about a social ritual epitomized by it. Various manifestations of this ritual have become part of the everyday urban fabric. The "coffee-and-newspaper" practice is a good example. Apart from providing information on the ever-changing circumstances of the wellbeing of the Israeli state, this simple daily ritual constitutes a means to claim communal membership. While the physical presence in a café indicates belonging to a certain group or a

neighborhood, the newspaper marks association with wider circles of national participation.

Coffee shops: the place in public

The specific meanings attached to coffee as a cultural commodity in Israel and Japan, as well as the conditions that shaped these meanings, differ considerably. The concrete forms that the coffee shop experience took in both countries also vary. However, the nature of the space that the coffee shops offer and the social need they address bear insightful similarities, pointing at the fact that the long-standing connection between coffee and the public space still holds relevance.

On the rhetorical level, in both contexts the café epitomized the visions of the national future in the times of large-scale social and political change. On the practical level, in the course of the last century the cafés provided a dynamic space allowing for the demonstration of social connections, identities and lifestyle choices; accommodated individual and collective rituals, and addressed the growing need in accessible "third places." This need has been repeatedly verified by the statistical data collected by international coffee chains,⁷ indicating that both the Israeli and Japanese coffee-drinkers tend to spend inside coffee shops much longer hours than their American counterparts.

The central place that coffee shops occupy in both the Japanese and Israeli social scene illustrates the power that the everyday practices acquire in shaping the public space in local contexts. This power also explains the ongoing relevance of these spaces across generations, in spite of the changing needs and conditions of each period.

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¹ The value of coffee on the world market is surpassed only by oil.

² Described by J. Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962).

³ The image of the *jokyū* was used by Tanizaki Junichiro in his novel "Naomi": the heroine, an attractive and flamboyant café waitress, epitomizes both the dangers and the seductive appeal of the Western civilization.

⁴ A "morning service" is typically comprised of a toast, an egg, and coffee.

⁵ The first coffee shops in history were established in the Ottoman Empire, and from there the coffee habit found its way to Europe.

⁶ Although Tel Aviv was the center of the new coffee shop culture, there were a number of cafés outside of it as well, such as "Taamon" and "Atara", which were established in Jerusalem in the 1930s.

⁷ The Starbucks coffee chain in Japan, and Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf chain in Israel